Getting to the heart of social innovation

Money is fairly easy to give; you just write a cheque. Talking about marginalisation and change is easy too. “The harder thing to do is giving your time and yourself to the cause. And that,” says Pamela Hartigan, “is what is critical to social innovation.”

She recounts how 20 years ago, when living in Washington DC, she was active in the community on the issues of homelessness. Dinner table conversations with her family often focused on the plight of the homeless in the city. Some eight months into her community role, her seven-year-old son came home with a homeless man who lived up their street in a tent. “Mum, I brought home one of your favourite people,” he announced.

Smelling ‘horribly’ and standing at the door, Hartigan had to put her money where her mouth was and invite the homeless man into her home. She had him sit down, cooked a meal for him and had a conversation with him.

“It was one of the most uncomfortable situations I had lived through in a while,” Hartigan recalled at the Global Social Innovators Forum held recently in Singapore. “I realised how easy it is for us to talk about marginalisation and change, and how difficult it is when we are actually faced with it. To go from discussing it to actually living it, is to face a very different situation as it hits you in the guts. That is our challenge. It’s not just about mindset; it is actually overcoming a completely different way of looking at the world.”

A change taking place

“We see a change in actual philanthropy today. As more young people come into massive wealth, they don’t want to just give money. They want to become engaged in the cause; take it as part of their growing and learning experience,” she told INSEAD Knowledge on the sidelines of the forum.

Hartigan, who is about to become the director of the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship at Oxford’s Said Business School, says that in her work with some of the top MBA students in the world, she discovered that they are desperate to find ways of combining markets and meaning, not just focus on padding their pockets. “That is not just about doing good and just about doing well, but actually
combining the two so that you don’t have to live a dichotomous life where, from nine to five, you get your money and thereafter you do good.”

Meeting needs

There are many enterprises around the world that need the kind of talent and experience that business people have, to work with social entrepreneurs and learn what it is like to run an enterprise that has a social purpose, Hartigan says.

“The business community has all kinds of talents to offer – typical things that are part of a company’s mainstream business such as human resource, marketing, auditing, communications, IT, monitoring and evaluation. Some of these skills, for example, can help organisations learn how to better collect data so that they can then go out and show what it is they are doing,” she proposes.

Economic downturn creates opportunities

With the economic downturn, presumably people are not going to be giving as much of their time and money. However, Hartigan says the opposite is true. The paradox is that many companies are all the more interested in social innovation. As they downsize, they don’t want to let the good employees go. Since they can’t utilise them right now, they look for options to foster the employees’ leadership development and their talents and give them a different sort of experience, while collecting market intelligence. She says it’s a good time for people to take advantage and do something that they, perhaps, would never do.

“I see the present economic situation as a huge opportunity to recreate what it is that we want; how we want our markets and society to look. There is a new way forward. Let’s not waste this opportunity,” she urges. “Let’s not intellectualise too much, because in the end it’s going to hit us where our gut is and not just where our heads are.”

Charities will have to think entrepreneurially

What about charities? Will they still be able to do well in the economic downturn? Hartigan doesn’t think so. She believes they are going to have to think more entrepreneurially as there will be less money coming in. They have to be more creative in the way they pursue their objectives. Part of that is learning how to bring in human talent to help them keep going and build their efforts when charitable dollars go down.

Controversially, she hopes some charities and social ventures will shut down when they run out of money. “We don’t have a rating system in the social world. But there are many organisations out there that are simply not doing what they should be doing nor doing it well, and spending a lot of money while they do it,” she argues. “I hope we will see more mergers in the social world instead of everyone doing the same thing. Combining efforts is the only way to move forward.”

Pamela Hartigan took part in the Global Social Innovators Forum held recently in Singapore.

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