

Setting a new youth trend

When Bernd Gebert looks to get a renovation project underway in a school in Hamburg for the first time, the pupils often look at him with suspicion.

“They size me up and are sceptical about my intentions for doing this project,” Gebert says. “However, half an hour into the programme, the situation changes completely.”

The pupils begin to work as a team, treat each other with respect and Gebert gains their trust.

“This phenomenon happens every single time,” Gebert says. “The impetus that brings about the change of attitude is very simple – they were given a task that they could do. This gave them self-confidence and their interaction with their peers became a positive one.”

After more than 20 years as a marketing communications consultant, Gebert, who was 50 at the time, gave up a lucrative business in 2006 to start Das macht Schule in Hamburg.

“Core values in Germany were lost during the economic boom after the Second World War. Germans often refer to this period as the ‘Economic Miracle,’” Gebert explains. “Values such as the willingness to assume personal responsibility, taking initiative and having a worldview that includes others in society were sorely missing.”

“Rampant corruption and increased violence in youth crimes are evidence of the moral decay,”

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Gebert continues. There has been a 45 per cent drop in the number of self-employed since 1950, revealing an increasing lack of self-confidence, of an optimistic ‘can do’ attitude.

Gebert says that young people are disillusioned about life and feel they have no control over their destiny. The low morale is reflected in poor grades and high school drop-out rates.

A modest start

Burdened by the passivity and pessimism of the generation who would be future leaders, Gebert’s vision for Das macht Schule is to motivate young people to take charge of their lives, be proactive and become responsible, caring citizens. He figures that if they were given simple tasks that they could do, they would gradually gain confidence, take ownership of their lives and go on to achieve greater things.

Gebert started modestly by organising simple renovation activities such as painting the classroom. He linked the pupils with professionals such as DIY experts who would advise them on technical and practical know-how, or an architect when they needed specialised advice. If the class did not have funds to pay for professional services and materials, he would teach them how to raise money for the

project. Subsequently, the class became advisors to the next class which signed up for the project.

Das macht Schule literally means 'this makes school.' The expression has a dual meaning: one makes reference to the school context of the project; the other hand alludes to being a trend-setter.

The power to influence

Gebert believes that you can change society through young people because they have the power to influence. "Do you know that your children influence which brand you buy? That is why they are the targets of marketing efforts," says the former marketing communications consultant.

His theory has proven to be true in many instances where the young people apply the philosophy of Das macht Schule in their own homes. Having enjoyed a pleasant bright classroom, the pupils go home and persuade family members to work on the peeling wallpaper or replace it with a coat of paint so that they would have a nice environment to live in. They organise the projects themselves using the checklist they obtained from school and proceed to measure the wall, choose the paint, etc, and see it to completion.

The impact and the plans

In its first year of operations in 2007, Das macht Schule worked in 150 schools, touching the lives of 10,000 young people – a remarkable achievement, considering it was just one man alone working together with a couple of volunteers. Gebert was elected an Ashoka Fellow the same year. His goal is to reach one million students in the first three years. Having seen the organisation through one year since inception, he admits it might be a far stretch with some 20 new projects in the pipeline.

"I am applying every corporate skill that I've ever learned in Das macht Schule – management, leadership, marketing, communications," he says. "I

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take risks."

Currently the organisation is fully funded by sponsors. In order to scale up the initiative, he's looking for more sponsors and government funding. He aims to make Das macht Schule a social enterprise with a sustainable business plan but that probably won't happen for another five years. Two consultants from McKinsey are working with him on their own time to achieve that goal through activities such as strategic partnering, where he first identifies a potential project and then seeks potential sponsors who would be willing to pay for the organisation's services.

Among the plans, a move to Web 2.0 from the organisation's current web platform which is maintained by volunteers. "With Web 2.0 we will be able to facilitate creativity, collaboration and sharing among users, and improve the online self-help programmes which are very popular with the young people," Gebert says.

Another website project would be to add a tool developed by fellow Ashoka Fellow (2007) Johannes Hengstenberg, which enables young people to monitor CO2 reductions at school in a tangible way.

The dream

Gebert's dream is to reach all the schools in Germany – some 14 million students between the ages of six and 21 – and to create a national Das macht Schule movement whereby young people are inspired to become agents of change. "Imagine a Das macht Schule poster at every bus stop!" Gebert says.

And the verdict on the past two years? "It's been so exciting!" he says, "I never thought I would learn so many new things and everything is happening so fast at the moment. However, it's not happening fast enough for me!"

Bernd Gebert recently took part in the INSEAD Social Entrepreneurship Programme at the school's Europe campus in Fontainebleau.

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