Work as a reason for being

By Bart Weetjens. Transcript of a TEDx talk in Munich, Germany, 18 November 2018.

Hello everyone,

I carry the label of "social change leader" and I carry it because of an initiative I started 20 years ago: in response to the landmine detection problem, I started to train rats to save human lives by detecting landmines. What started this crazy research project became an international NGO with an incredible impact in the South. By now, more than a million subsistence farmers in the global South have been able to return to their villages, thanks to these lifesaving "Hero RATs".

But my story today is neither about rats, nor about landmines. It is about the social change leaders in general, about how we relate to ourselves, and how we engage in social change work.

Seen from a personal point of view, I went through a 20 year entrepreneurial "rollercoaster of a project", putting an enormous pressure on myself and on my team, wanting to succeed in developing an appropriate detection technology.

And even if we had the most peaceful intentions, that journey often felt like a fight. We worked under huge operational pressure, under permanent scarcity of funds, and we faced a big burden from staff turnover, lack of engagement and burn-out among our staff.

The social change field is all about innovation, strategy, impact, and scale, and it requires an almost supernatural 24/7 performance from the social change leaders. On top of the pressure for performance and scale, it is taken for granted that we are "obsessed" by our idea.

But isn't obsession a psychiatric syndrome?
Are we trying to solve the world's problems in the right way?
Would it be possible that we unconsciously carry our anger, our fears and our dark complexities into our real world actions and thereby, risk to propel what we desperately try to defeat?

In other words: what is the relationship between inner development and the quality and effectiveness of our actions in society?

A number of us in the field of social change noticed that there was a deep threat that needed to be addressed. It led one of us to engage himself with Ashoka, one of the key networks in social change, to begin to explore this problem. It led to interviews with 50 social change leaders around the world.

The research showed that the great majority of them had never made time for personal work on themselves. They had worked until exhaustion, while ignoring not only their personal needs, but also the needs of their family, and in some cases, they even ignored their organizational needs.

Most of them over-identified with their work. And quite often, there were narratives of heroism, sacrifice and martyrdom around these leaders. Their reason of being had become their work, and they would sacrifice their personal wellbeing to fill a hero-role on stage.

In many cases as well, there was a personal trauma that had ignited their entrepreneurial journey. And while the wide public was applauding their heroism, the innovation and its societal impact, on a personal level these leaders didn't learn healthy ways to work with trauma or to explore to their own personal vulnerability.

Though these trends were clear, they were also an insufficient data to serve as a basis for decision making in the sector, or to make the culture around social entrepreneurship healthier.

However, these trends triggered a keen interest in the sector to look deeper into the matter, and key spearheading organizations in social innovation, like Ashoka, the Impact Hub, Synergos, the Skoll Foundation, Fetzer Institute and Esalen Institute joined forces and co-created "The Wellbeing Project", in a sincere attempt to:

- Transform the culture in the field of social change to a more caring and compassionate one

- Give an answer to the huge need for personal support among social change leaders

- Research the relationship between inner work and social change

- Explore about a required infrastructure of support within the sector.

By doing so, The Wellbeing Project brought to life a different way to look at social change, one that works from the inside outwards, but definitely starting by addressing the inside.

80 experienced social entrepreneurs, ages ranging 35 to 65, were selected from 45 countries worldwide, for an 18 months high-value offer featuring 3 retreats with outstanding facilitators, a customized personal support program, wisdom teachers and peer learning. In 4 cohorts of 20, they went through this 1 and a half year program in which they gave priority to their inner journey.

In each cohort, researchers participated and collected data for a developmental evaluation study that explored the connection between personal development and the quality and effectiveness of social change.

By now, we have compelling evidences that there is indeed a strong relationship between the two. And by demonstrating that, The Wellbeing Project created the base for an entire new field of research.

There is so much more to learn. What we learned so far is that the shifts we have been seeing in the participant's personal and work environments have been extra-ordinary:

- Generally they became more balanced, they became more aware of and listened to their personal needs, and that made them happier and healthier persons

- They integrated this sensibility and approach in their relationship to their work, allowing for sufficient family and recovery time. -In their work environment, they learned to

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share leadership in more horizontal ways throughout the organizations, and built more trust in their colleagues.

- They were able to be more fully present to the situation, approachable and listening deeply.
- They embraced emergent learning, collaboration and holocratic models in their organizational culture.

As a result, there was more motivation among their employees, their staff was happier and the staff-turnover decreased, all this contributing to the sustainability of their impact.

Does real, lasting change perhaps begin within each and every single one of us?

Or to put it in the words of the Turkish Sufi poet Rumi:

"Yesterday, I was clever so I wanted to change the world.
Today, I am wise so I want to change myself".

The challenges that humanity faces today to be able to continue living in prosperity on a sustainable planet are many, they are complex and they are urgent. But we cannot afford to loose hope.

I would argue that a path towards inner wellbeing is the most effective approach to solve the world's pressing social and environmental issues …

Because Inner Wellbeing inspires Well Doing.