

1 Is this for you? The social entrepreneur's journey

The greatest mystery of life, is who we truly are

Alexandre Dumas, French novelist and playwright
(1802-1870)

'Is this for you?' Only by answering this question honestly can you really go ahead. The demands of social entrepreneurship are such that you've got to really want to do it. I mean *really* want to do it. For you're not only giving up a job, assuming you have one, you're also giving up a lifestyle – that of the employee and regular person.

Instead, you're looking at long hours and putting the rest of your life on hold for at least a couple of years until your venture is established. All in pursuit of a cause you believe in. In short, the list of sacrifices is long and the risks, particularly to your reputation, are high. You'll live with uncertainty and total responsibility for your venture. There will be no safety net. So, ask yourself, 'Is this for me?' Remember, it is much braver to admit it isn't than push ahead with something when you're less than 100% sure of your desire. If you're in any doubt about your desire, I would say 'hold back for now'. The challenges ahead can only be tackled from a position of total commitment.

What's your motivation?

I wanted to be an editor or a journalist, I wasn't really interested in being an entrepreneur, but I soon found I had to become an entrepreneur in order to keep my magazine going.

Sir Richard Branson, founder of Virgin

So before you start, it is worth getting one thing clear: 'Why do I want to do this?' A study into successful UK social entrepreneurs by Chambers and Edwards-Stuart (2007),¹ shows that social entrepreneurs see unmet need and feel compelled to do something. They are disillusioned with conventional approaches to problems and seek new solutions. But, unlike most people, social entrepreneurs act. What separates them from the crowd is that they have the drive and energy to start shaping up a practical response to the problem. The decision to act is emotional as much as intellectual. Drawing on the legend of King Arthur, the authors call this an 'Excalibur moment'.

Does this sound at all like you? Do you feel compelled to act? My Excalibur moment came when I arrived in Cambridge in my mid-twenties. I had just spent two years doing confidence-building work among learning-disabled adults in the north of England. This work had touched my heart. I had also been a care worker and seen with my own eyes what better lives people had

¹ Charlotte Chambers and Fiona Edwards-Stuart (2007), 'Leadership in the Social Economy', School for Social Entrepreneurs.

when they were supported in making choices. I knew from then that my long-term future lay in supporting people to have a voice and gain control of their own lives. To my surprise, when I arrived, nothing like this existed in Cambridgeshire. I made a snap decision. I would make it happen.

Then the real work began. In my spare time, I started to network locally and develop the early organisation. This was well before I quit my job to develop the organisation full time. My motivation was a realisation that if I didn't do this, no-one else would. I knew that if I could pull it off, Speaking Up would be, in a sense, my personal contribution. I sensed too, in quite an overwhelming way, that this was my life's work, what I was here to do.

What followed was probably the hardest five years of my life – hardest because I made some horrendous mistakes. Hardest because I worked like a horse for five years, surviving on Silk Cut, Pot Noodles and Red Bull.

But it was also the best. Best because the sheer thrill of developing a successful new organisation has to rank as one of the best there is. Best because I saw life-transforming changes in the people with whom we worked. Best because of the pure joy of building something in which we all believed.

I know I'm not alone in feeling this way. When I asked a group of social entrepreneurs for their best and worst experiences, their answers seemed very familiar to me. Steve Ralf, of Focus to Work, told me that, 'The reward of seeing change in people on a daily basis is the best. The worst is the long hours and poor work/life balance!' The comments of TACT's Bob Rhodes seemed to echo this: 'The best include freedom to express oneself, create, and make a big difference; the worst is the impact of this over-riding obsession on those you love. Later it can be managed, but in the early years long hours and total focus seem to be unavoidable.'



Karen Mattison, of Women Like Us, told me a story about watching a woman who had been low in confidence, isolated and desperate for some local part-time work, actually get a great job that she could fit around her children. 'Watching her transformation makes everything worthwhile.'

For Tim West, of *Social Enterprise Magazine*, 'Best: freedom to take risks. Worst: freedom to take risks.' It's a similar feeling for Stephen Sears of the ECT Group: 'The best thing is the freedom, the worst is the insecurity – you can't have one without the other.'

Views from the social entrepreneurs...

Why did you take the plunge and set up on your own?

- **'It's the attraction of feeling like a pioneer in a new land, doing something new, setting your own course whilst doing things you feel passionately about.'** (Owen Jarvis, Aspire Support UK)
- **'The time had come to be free from the constraints of local authority systems and controls as they had started to hinder development and delivery rather than help.'** (Doug Cresswell, Pure Innovations)
- **'An overwhelming need that felt difficult to ignore.'** (Julie Stokes, Winston's Wish)
- **'I felt compelled to share the freedom and empowerment our talking software has given us with others who can't see.'** (Roger Wilson-Hinds, Screenreader)
- **'Because I was so frustrated at not being able to get anything done in a charity and any decision made by a local authority.'** (Steve Ralf, Focus to Work)

In my experience, the 'bests' outnumber the 'worsts'. But each 'best' and 'worst' is an extreme. Life as a social entrepreneur feels much more intense than when you're just in a job. The best bits of becoming a social entrepreneur will surpass anything you have ever experienced at work. Equally, the worst bits are truly dreadful. I remember, many times, opening envelopes thinking 'If this isn't good news, we are finished'. Jobs lost, three years of my life down the drain. People saying 'Told you so!'

What are the common features of successful social entrepreneurs?

Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.

Helen Keller, deafblind American author

What do successful social entrepreneurs look like? While they come in all shapes and sizes, there is, I believe, a 'DNA' (albeit one that can be acquired!) which all entrepreneurs possess. I agree strongly with Chambers and Edwards-Stuart's work on this. Interestingly, all these traits have a potential downside, too.

1. They use their gut as much as their brain

Upside: social entrepreneurs tend to be intuitive rather than analytical. They 'feel' as much as 'think' when making decisions. They are imaginative, good at seeing trends and painting pictures of the future. When they get it right, social entrepreneurs can generate solutions which are fresh and compelling.

Downside: they are prone to building ‘castles in the air’, which stay there if they don’t have the ability to follow-through.

2. They have unusual drive

Upside: social entrepreneurs have a high drive for achievement. This is grounded either in their personal ‘Excalibur moment’ or something in their own background. This gives them the will to overcome huge hurdles and persist long after many would have given up.

Downside: channelled the wrong way, this can lead to tunnel vision and rigid thinking that stops them adapting to new circumstances.

3. Powerful values

Upside: successful people in social enterprise are highly principled, have a strong internal moral compass that guides them and an ability to embed these values into an organisation.

Downside: some people let their principles lead them to decisions which feel morally right but in fact lead to the demise of their organisation – and its good work.

4. Focus

Upside: social entrepreneurs are able to settle on a handful of big-ticket goals for the short and medium terms while also keeping in mind the long-term horizon.

Downside: an inability to retune their radar to new and shifting situations.

5. Self-confidence

Upside: social entrepreneurs display high levels of self-belief. They are aware of their own strengths and are realistic too about their limitations. This self-belief is particularly helpful in securing early support.

Downside: played the wrong way, the sense of self can result in the organisation appearing to be an extension of the social entrepreneur’s ego.

6. Fantastic communication skills

Upside: social entrepreneurs tend to be affable and charming communicators who can adapt themselves to working with people from all walks of life.

Downside: they can appear to be insubstantial in character and, in the words of one of my own staff when she first met me, ‘all charm, no trousers’ ...

7. Emotional intelligence

Upside: social entrepreneurs are excellent at assessing the emotional needs and potential contributions of key players. They are emotionally intelligent people who connect with people’s core values. They have the people skills to build the necessary coalitions required to take a venture to its next stage. **Downside:** social entrepreneurs can come across as overwhelming and too single-minded – which can be a turn-off.

8. First-class networking skills

Upside: successful social entrepreneurs are consummate networkers. They are alive to the potential of every contact and use networking in a strategic way to scan the horizon, line up allies and understand the political landscape. They are particularly skilled at linking people together from different parts of their network to create new possibilities.

Downside: they can potentially be chameleon-like, appealing to every network for strategic reasons but not always meaning it.

9. Stewardship

Upside: really successful social entrepreneurs view themselves as stewards, not owners, of an organisation.

Downside: they may not recognise that, while their personal contribution will always be important, it is equally vital that they either change with the organisation or prepare it for their departure.

10. Natural leaders

Upside: successful social entrepreneurs are good at creating an exciting and energetic atmosphere in the workplace. They are, on the whole, good people-managers and understand the importance of a positive organisational culture.

Downside: they need to take care not to create a 'cult of personality' around themselves which results in the organisation falling over when they leave.

Does any of this sound like you? Upsides or downsides? If you're planning to become a social entrepreneur, it is worth gauging yourself honestly against this list – or asking somebody to do it with you.

The people I interviewed for this book have some interesting views about what makes for a successful social entrepreneur. Miles Hanson said it was about 'Real belief in their idea, no fear of selling and a good business mind'. On a similar note, Tom Savage of Bright Green Talents believes that 'successful entrepreneurs have a willingness to constantly improve themselves'. Nick Temple of School for Social Entrepreneurs points to 'Vision, passion, persistence, pragmatism, relationship-building and self-awareness', while Luljeta Nuzi of Shpresa simply says that the very best social entrepreneurs 'don't take no for an answer'.

Born or made?

Nobody talks of entrepreneurship as survival, but that's exactly what it is and what nurtures creative thinking.

Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop

While there are *born* social entrepreneurs – this doesn't mean they cannot be *made*. I certainly don't see myself as a born entrepreneur. For every story of a lifelong social entrepreneur who has been leading since they were in the

playground, there are many more for whom social entrepreneurship has been a response to the world as they have found it, rather than an inborn drive or predisposition.

It is clear from the lives of the people I know that social entrepreneurs are often made as much as born. Many spent years in futile, pointless jobs before starting up. Several, like Roger Wilson-Hinds of Screenreader, came to it later in life. For some, including myself, social entrepreneurship was the only option if they wanted to achieve particular social goals.

I see myself as something of an accidental entrepreneur – made more than born. I happened on entrepreneurship through my social passion, not the other way round. And at no stage did anyone view me as remotely entrepreneurial as I was growing up – neither driven nor a consummate networker. All these traits followed the development of my social mission. Some of them I had to learn, such as the ability to build networks and sell what I was doing.

So when you read these long lists of what makes a great social entrepreneur, don't necessarily measure yourself against the person you have been up until now; nor against those who have already been successful. Instead ask yourself, could you *become* a social entrepreneur, if doing so helped you to pursue your social mission?

The four phases of life for a social enterprise

I lead my life by two theories: 'Tinkerbell', which holds that if you can get enough people to believe in something it will almost certainly happen, and 'Last Man Standing', which says that if you have a degree of charm and people know you won't go away, they will eventually pay you to do so.

Tim Smit, founder of the Eden Project

So what are you letting yourself in for? Your new venture will have a life-cycle of four phases it will inevitably go through. This book covers all of these, from conception right up to the point where you want to seriously grow and replicate your venture.

The four phases, adapted from Chambers and Edwards-Stuart, cover dreaming, acting, sustaining and scaling. Let me take you briefly through each.

Phase 1 – dreaming

This is the reflective period you're in now or were in not so long ago. You are getting together your ideas, researching the area, talking to a lot of different people, scoping approaches and working out a new 'space' you could move into. This is a time when the problem crystallises into a burning idea for a solution, something you find so compelling that you have to act. You may indeed be in this period now.

Phase 2 – acting

This is the frenetic year or two during which you'll be multi-tasking and developing contacts at a rapid rate. You'll be developing your supporter or customer-base, experimenting with your business model and getting some very basic structures and processes into place. In a typical day, you'll be engaged in every area of the organisation and having the time of your life – in every possible sense. At the end of this phase you'll have refined your vision, found some customers or users and have secured the resources to develop to the next phase.

Phase 3 – sustaining

This comes often after a couple of years. It involves building a solid infrastructure, and developing robust organisational systems and processes. This is where the pairing between you as social entrepreneur and a new recruit with stronger managerial skills becomes important. This is the part of the journey where you start to create a full-blown organisation and a proper team to take forward your vision. It is also inevitably a period when you will experience challenges around financial stability, governance and sustainability. Crucially, this is a time which many social entrepreneurs find difficult. Often there is a need to modify goals, revamp methods and accept new ways of doing things. This can feel like a betrayal of earlier times. Many social entrepreneurs start to think about how their venture might up-scale – or replicate. Many in the thick of all of this decide now to quit and hand the organisation over to somebody else...

Phase 4 – scaling

This is a difficult phase, one at which many social entrepreneurs start to encounter real problems. These arise firstly from the inherent challenge of up-scaling a business – finding finance, developing the organisation, maintaining the culture. Many social entrepreneurs experience difficulty in adapting to the new requirements of leading as a CEO. For this reason, this is often the hopping-off point for many. The truth of the matter is that the personal style, skill set and aptitude of the entrepreneur is not well suited to the demands of a growing company. However, this doesn't mean an entrepreneur has to quit. Many choose to upgrade their skills and stay. Faced with the challenge of growth, I decided to do an MBA and develop myself into a manager. But this phase does require the entrepreneur to make a big decision: to stay – and change – or to go.

What will it take to be successful?

The upside-down pyramid for getting rich

1. Commit or don't commit. No half-measures
2. Cut loose from all negative influences
3. Choose the right mountain
4. Fear nothing
5. Start now
6. Go

Felix Dennis, UK publishing magnate

Unlike Felix Dennis, you're probably not trying to get seriously rich, but you certainly want to succeed. In this respect, his advice is pretty near the mark. So too is what you'll hear from the social entrepreneurs interviewed as part of this book. All have all built their organisations to at least phase 3, sustaining, and many into phase 4, scaling, so it is worth listening carefully to what they have to say. Their messages, while all different, do provide clear pointers. I'll finish this chapter where I started, with another important question.

IS THIS FOR YOU?

Has this chapter been useful for you?

Are you clearer about whether this is a journey you want to take?

- If this is not for you, there is no shame in your decision – becoming a social entrepreneur is no worthier a role in life than becoming a brilliant teacher, nurse or architect.
- If this is for you, it's important that you're resourced and supported to do it.
- If this is for you, prepare for the time of your life!

Given a big enough 'why', people can bear almost any 'how'.

Friedrich Nietzsche, German philosopher