

Social Innovations Tidbits

Caroline Ridgway 10 May 2010

Each quarter, this section of the *Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal* brings you a selection of recent news reports and other publications featuring topics and trends related to social innovation, disruptive innovation and social entrepreneurship. These "tidbits" offer brief summaries of stories and articles from around the country and the world, and fall under themes such as social media, technology, leadership, "what works," evolving trends, philanthropy and others. If you come across something you think is worth highlighting here, please send it to Caroline Ridgway at caroline@philasocialinnovations.org.

Education

Why We Must Fire Bad Teachers

(Evan Thomas and Pat Wingert, *Newsweek*, March 15, 2010)

The premise of this article is that declining student performances in U.S. schools is due not as much to unwieldy class sizes or outdated textbooks or disjointed curricula as to inferior teaching, exacerbated by a near total lack of accountability within the profession. The authors cite a review by the consulting firm McKinsey &

Co. showing “that most schoolteachers are recruited from the bottom third of college-bound high-school students.” Once in the classroom, these teachers are subject to minimal accountability for the quality of the instruction they provide. Bad teachers are rarely fired, and, owing in part to very influential teachers’ unions, there has been little opportunity to shift the status quo. It is no real wonder why the system has a hard time attracting talented people; teaching is low on pay and appreciation, and high on stress and burnout. Increasing pay and recognition for American schoolteachers, similar to the levels afforded their counterparts in many other countries, would likely bring more qualified individuals to the profession. But, according to the authors, real change in the system in terms of quality won’t come without a concerted effort by politicians and administrators to introduce greater answerability.

Building a Better Teacher

(Elizabeth Green, *New York Times*, March 7, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/magazine/07Teachers-t.html?ref=magazine>).

There is an expanding focus within some circles of education reformers on systematically uncovering the components of a good teacher. Data consistently demonstrate that the quality of the instruction itself contributes to the success of a student’s education, and it seems superficially clear that some teachers are simply

better than others. But less clear is what, precisely, are the ingredients of good teaching. Doug Lemov, educator and education consultant, has created what fans of his work affectionately call "Lemov's Taxonomy," but which is forthcoming in publication under the more formal title *Teach Like a Champion: The 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College*. The techniques he highlights include "What to Do," "Positive Framing," "The J-Factor" ("J" stands for "joy") and "Cold Call," which borrows the Socratic questioning technique often employed in business and law schools. The essence of the work done by Lemov and others is that better teaching can itself be taught; while naturally skilled teachers do exist, promotion of more hands-on instruction of teachers, and the recognition that teaching, even of elementary school classes, is very specialized and skills-based, could help raise the bar for both how we think about the teaching profession and the results our teachers are able to achieve in the classroom.

What Works

Merging Wisely

(David La Piana, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2010, www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/1572/).

Nonprofit organizations considering merger or other formal affiliation, such as a management service contract,

joint venture or parent-subsidiary, are wise to weigh all of the potential benefits and drawbacks before entering into such an arrangement. For some groups, merger makes a lot of sense, but for others, it might cause more trouble than good. An increasing urging by some funders that nonprofits join up has created somewhat of a merger fervor, but the author of this article lays out reasons why this might not be a good, or necessary, direction for the nonprofit world. Principally, the author posits that there are not, as some assume, too many nonprofits; rather, there are actually simply too few dollars to adequately support these organizations. The vast majority of nonprofits are very small organizations with specific missions that were founded to address precise community challenges. For these groups, a merger would only dilute their function with no apparent countervailing benefit. For the most part, a successful merger will not deplete duplicative services—because these actually demonstrate a need for, if anything, more focus in an area—but will lend greater efficiency in institutional infrastructure. Moreover, though the merger itself should not be viewed as a means to cost-savings, it may ultimately help an organization achieve better long-term solvency. Strategic alliances, collaborations and partnerships are less formal mechanisms by which two or more entities can join forces, and may be good alternatives if legal, contractual interventions are infeasible or inadvisable.

All Entrepreneurship Is Social

(Carl Schramm, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring

2010, www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/1571/).

A singular focus on social entrepreneurship, per se, discounts the contributions made by regular entrepreneurs to social good and well-being. This author points out that, to a degree, all entrepreneurship could be considered to be social, by creating jobs, stimulating the economy, enhancing goods or services available to consumers, and—ultimately, perhaps—helping to raise the standard of living within a community or population. For instance, the advent of a nationwide railway system in the United States, while not necessarily devised as a means to spread social good, and certainly behind some of the largest personal financial fortunes in American history, did have a tremendous impact on the welfare of the national populace by ensuring a steady supply of food and other necessities to previously isolated groups of people. A modern corollary is the rapidly expanding availability of cell phones, even in developing countries. Though the link between cell phone use and public benefit might seem tenuous, research has shown that “a 10 percent increase in cell phone penetration in developing countries would increase the annual growth rate of per capita gross domestic product (GDP) by nearly 1 percentage point.” This seemingly negligible benefit translates into enormous

economic and, subsequently, social benefit.

Social Media

Finding a Kidney Donor on Facebook

(Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, *Wall Street Journal* Blogs, Digits: Technology News and Insights, April 8, 2010, <http://blogs.wsj.com/digits/2010/04/08/finding-a-kidney-donor-on-facebook/>).

A new book, *Facebook Fairytales*, chronicles the more-often-than-you-might-think phenomenon of social media contributing to organ donations between relative strangers, and other extraordinary tales. Emily Liebert, the book's author, posits that Facebook and Twitter are having the ancillary effect of enhancing second- or third-degree social connections to the extent that, "Even if you're not directly connected to the person, you feel connected to them..." The ongoing exchange of personal stories through these media, and users' reliance upon the presence of shared interpersonal relationships, may help establish feelings of trust and empathy. In effect, we may internalize the plights of those we don't even know because we are secondarily privy to their personal circumstances, ultimately influencing our own decisions and actions, and raising the concept of "social networking" to a whole new level.

Leadership

Leadership Lessons from India

(Peter Cappelli, Harbir Singh, Jitendra V. Singh, and Michael Useem, *Harvard Business Review*, March 2010, 90–97).

There is a unique leadership culture emerging in India, evident in some of the country's most successful CEOs and entrepreneurs, which is proving very effective, and distinguishes them from their counterparts in the United States. As the authors of the article put it, Indian executives are more likely to practice "transformational" leadership (i.e., "leadership designed to encourage employees to care about the goals of the leader and the organization") as opposed to the (more common in America) "transactional" leadership style (i.e., "motivating employees to act in the interests of the business by striking deals with them"). These leaders take an active, daily role in monitoring progress, devising strategies, supporting the hiring of talented employees, and building corporate culture and mission, among other themes. In contrast, the authors observe that U.S. companies are typically minimally invested in employee development and training. The American corporate *modus operandi* is to maximize the benefit to the shareholder. The leaders profiled by these authors place a stronger emphasis on internal core development and human capital as opposed

to external pressures. The authors do, however, point out that unique economic circumstances in India have permitted such a culture to take root, and that the ways in which investment in the United States is practiced make it all but impossible to shuttle shareholders to the rear of the priority list. American executives could, though, and according to this article should, adopt some of the tactics around employee development and promotion of a social mission.

Fun Facts

Favorite Colors Test Shows CEOs Are Different

(Del Jones, USA

Today, http://www.usatoday.com/money/companies/management/2010-02-08-ceocolors08_ST_N.htm).

Aspiring CEOs might want to reconsider their career plans based on their color preferences. A brief assessment of color preferences rivals gold standard personality tests such as Myers-Briggs in the accuracy of matching test-takers to jobs based on their personalities and strengths. The profile of a person well-suited for a role in corporate management might also suggest suitability for work as a social worker, artist, teacher or administrative assistant. The test is appealing because, unlike verbal personality tests, it is difficult to manipulate or guess the "correct" responses; reactions are purely visceral and involve

nothing more complex than comparisons of personal preference to different colors. A personality test like this also has potentially wider applicability than a verbal test, because color preference transcends language. Some takers are skeptical of the test's purported validity, but many reported being struck by the accuracy of the assessment.