

Becoming a Social Entrepreneur

Starting Out, Scaling Up and Staying True

Michael Gordon



Becoming a Social Entrepreneur

What's it like to be a social entrepreneur – not a textbook social entrepreneur but one on the ground? This book offers an explanation. Michael Gordon, leading Social Entrepreneurship expert from the University of Michigan, spoke with more than one hundred social entrepreneurs – from six continents, young and old, just starting out to several decades in, addressing seemingly every societal problem of the day.

This book uses their words and experiences to provide a kaleidoscopic description of what it means to become a social entrepreneur. It ranges from the personal and emotional challenges they often face to the grand impact many hope to produce. It touches on the sublime but focuses on the everyday, highlighting the mistakes that have been made, the lessons learned and, especially, what advice they would give to those wanting to start a social venture.

This book presents the truth, not the varnish, and is ideal for use in the classroom with students studying social entrepreneurship, and for all new and experienced social entrepreneurs seeking real-life examples of how to overcome challenges. For anyone else, it offers a penetrating portrait of the lives of those committed to changing the world.

Michael Gordon is the Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of Social Entrepreneurship at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan. He is the faculty director of the Center for Social Impact, the seat of social entrepreneurship at the Ross School with connections throughout the University of Michigan.

“Michael Gordon’s research is informed by his many years of deep engagement with Ashoka’s extended team of teams. This book provides broad, and nuanced, guidance to social entrepreneurs and deepens our knowledge of how they envision, enable and ensure new patterns of change. And more importantly, how their deepest impact is to help countless others to be changemakers.”

*Diana Wells, President Emerita,
Leadership Team Member, Ashoka.*

“The title says it all: *Becoming a Social Entrepreneur: Starting Out, Scaling Up and Staying True* is the manual I wish I had at the start of my social venture journey. Over the years, I came to realize that the best advice came from my peers – fellow entrepreneurs who generously shared their wisdom, passion, frustration and success stories. Michael has done an amazing job of capturing the firsthand experience of a wide variety of changemakers, synthesizing lessons learned and translating their individual experiences into practical points of reference. This book is a must-read for every social entrepreneur, ecosystem partners who support their amazing work, and anyone who is curious about what makes a social entrepreneur ‘tick.’”

Cynthia Koenig, Founder and CEO, Wello.

“An exhaustive, intimate survey of social entrepreneurs with varied, textured experience by one of the keenest observers of the field. A great read for anyone in the space and a must read for anyone aspiring to enter.”

*Fred de Sam Lazaro, Agents for Change correspondent,
PBS NewsHour, Director, Under-Told Stories Project.*

“This book is a tour de force! It’s an amazing resource for people who aspire to make the world a better place. Michael Gordon has succeeded in bringing together insights and wisdom from more than a hundred of the most inspiring individuals – social entrepreneurs who have overcome adversity and hardship to dedicate themselves to improving the common good.”

*Scott Sherman, Senior Director, Kravis Lab for Social Impact,
Claremont McKenna College, Founder,
Transformative Action Institute.*

“A must-read book for aspiring and practicing social entrepreneurs. And an important read for everyone else. Prof. Michael Gordon deftly blends history, journalism, management and computer science, even rap music counseling to help readers better understand the past, present and future for social entrepreneurship. Demystifying first-hand accounts of really inconvenient truths to unparalleled positive social change accomplishments. Given our new change-defined era of increasing inequality, social fragmentation and global catastrophic risks, there’s plenty of rich data and insights here to help us all see how everyone can and must be contributors to a better world through social entrepreneurship.”

Bob Spoer, Chief Entrepreneur for People/Search, Ashoka.

“Michael’s book stands out due to its breadth. Based on interviews from more than 100 practitioners, each of whom addresses unique societal problems across the globe, it may well be the most comprehensive study on social entrepreneurship to date. Though no two experiences are alike, together their perspectives let us know what it is actually like to be a social entrepreneur – both in the challenges they face, and, most importantly, how they rise above them.”

*Kyle Westaway, Managing Partner at Westaway Law,
Lecturer on Law at Harvard Law School,
author of Profit & Purpose.*

“Michael, my friend and ally, and long-term OC Delegate, has penned this volume in the same way any successful social entrepreneur approaches their work: by practicing deep listening, by understanding the complexity and nuance of the issues at hand, and by providing true, concrete, incontrovertible value. As a result, *Becoming a Social Entrepreneur: Starting Out, Scaling Up and Staying True* stands alone in an ever-expanding milieu of books on the field of social entrepreneurship, beckoning forth future change-agents with clear, pragmatic and collective wisdom.”

*Topher Wilkins, CEO, Opportunity Collaboration,
Founder, Conveners.org.*

“What do you need to know to be a social entrepreneur? Michael Gordon spent five years interviewing dozens of social entrepreneurs around the world to gain their insights and shape them into a broad and comprehensive how-to guide. It is both systematic and lively, full of rich examples that provides a roadmap for social entrepreneurs at any point in their journey.”

*Jerry Davis, Associate Dean for Business+Impact,
Michigan Ross School of Business.*

“Carefully researched and packed with examples from over 100 social entrepreneurs, *Becoming a Social Entrepreneur: Starting Out, Scaling Up and Staying True* conveys what it takes to succeed as a social entrepreneur, creates a pathway for future research, and provides an engaging account for anyone curious about how to create a better world through enterprise.”

*Stuart L. Hart, University of Vermont,
author of Capitalism at the Crossroads.*

“An essential handbook for aspiring social entrepreneurs and those who seek to partner with and support social enterprises. Filled with pragmatic advice and lessons learned from over 100 in-depth interviews with social change leaders. A must read!”

*Ron Cordes and Marty Cordes, Co-Founders,
Cordes Foundation.*

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3 Before they were social entrepreneurs

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to be a successful social entrepreneur without genuine immersion. This might come from the circumstances you are born into, or it may be more intentional and planned, as when one becomes obsessed with confronting an injustice that is occurring halfway around the globe. As educated as you are, you cannot *know* your way into immersion: immersion is lived – and deeply. What separates the social entrepreneur is the meaning she ascribes to her experience: an interpretation mixing humility with a desire to learn, empathy and respect, and an abiding attitude to act and make a difference.

Immerse yourself

SANGA MOSES'S UPBRINGING IMMERSED HIM IN POVERTY; it was an inevitability of his birth. Jerry White's youth prepared him to work for social justice and organizing for action; this was part his nature, part upbringing. Zachary D. Kaufman, a white American, became immersed in post-genocide Rwanda as a young man. Through his scholarship but, more importantly, his direct contact with victims and perpetrators of atrocities, he was called to action as a social entrepreneur.

While their backgrounds and the social problems they address differ in so many ways, it is not at all a coincidence that meaningful experiences laid down a path that led them – as well as other social entrepreneurs we'll meet, and, truly, all successful social entrepreneurs – to become social entrepreneurs.

The importance of an immersive relationship is borne out, in fact, in many ways. Marina Kim is executive director of AshokaU and its co-founder along with Erin Krampetz. Ashoka, its parent organization, has been at the forefront of social entrepreneurship for more than 30 years, and no other organization has done as much to bring attention to, develop, and expand the field. Ashoka literally coined the phrase "social entrepreneur." As Ashoka has evolved, it has recognized the need to impart changemaking skills and attitudes (it also coined the term "changemaker") to those in all walks of life: parents, teachers, health care workers, and us all.

AshokaU is one of Ashoka's "everyone a changemaker" initiatives, focusing on colleges and universities. Marina has worked with students, professors, and

We [the family she lived with] had a Kumasi ventilated improved pit latrine, a KVIP, that was actually in really good shape. It was the dual pit. But that was my first time ever using a pit latrine and we had to walk, I don't know, four minutes, five minutes to the well to get water.

During that first visit to Ghana, she taught biology and chemistry at a high school. That experience, while also new, had less impact on her than the problems she saw everywhere with sanitation – from open sewers, to toilet owners paying to have their toilets emptied (lest they become unusable), to round-the-clock dumping of human feces into the sea:

It was that exposure to sanitation [in Anfoega] and the times I was in Accra [the capital city], seeing how bad urban sanitation was. The confluence of science – the biology and chemistry – were intellectually stimulating. I consider bad sanitation the biggest environmental problem we face as a global society today, and I knew I wanted a career in environmental protection.

Ashley adds with a sense of guilty pleasure that the path that *The Backdoor Guide* has led her on through Africa, China, and elsewhere has been as adventure-some as promised: “[An added benefit of all this] is more selfish. Getting to live and work abroad – that is really appealing.”

Knowing versus understanding

ZACHARY D. KAUFMAN WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL IN PITTSBURGH IN 1994 when the Rwandan genocide took place halfway around the world, where an estimated one-seventh of the country exterminated another seventh: one million people exterminating another million, entirely based on ethnicity. Even at that age, Zachary was attuned to atrocities:

My family is Jewish and several of our relatives were killed in the Holocaust. So, growing up, I learned a lot about the genocide against my own people and about the struggles of other victims of oppression and discrimination. I learned at an early age that it is vital to combat myths, misinformation, and misperceptions that lead to persecutions.

Zachary had a connection to the African continent as well. His mother was born and raised in South Africa, and, when Zachary was born, Nelson Mandela was in prison. Mandela was released in 1990 and three years later won the Nobel Peace prize, along with President F. W. de Klerk, just four months before the Rwandan extermination began:

The genocide in Rwanda raged for about 100 days, from April to July of 1994. At the time, I was in high school. Because of my mother's

background, I was particularly interested in developments in Africa. Coupled with my family's experience in another genocide, I felt a visceral reaction to what was happening in Rwanda.

Zachary enrolled at Yale in 1996, taking courses related to human rights, the Holocaust, and the Rwandan genocide as he pursued a degree in political science. In his junior year, he studied human rights in the field, receiving a fellowship from a nonprofit organization, Humanity in Action, devoted to serving students' interests in human rights, which placed him in Denmark. As part of his application for his first job after college, he submitted a writing sample about a failed prosecution before the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

It doesn't take a great leap to conclude that this document must have been a convincing one, as he landed a job in the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, later moving to the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance, and Training. In these positions, he focused on issues of transitional justice in Rwanda, supporting efforts to bring criminal justice to the perpetrators of the country's genocide.

Despite his understanding of Rwanda from afar, nothing prepared him for what he would experience the first time he set foot in the country. When I ask him how important being on the ground was for him to get the inspiration for his social enterprise – a venture that would establish the country's first-ever public library – he responds:

For me, it was crucial to take that first trip and to have traveled many times since to Rwanda. During the initial trip, the very first Rwandan I met, Ancilla, had survived the genocide. Her entire family was killed in front of her and Ancilla herself was hacked with a machete and left for dead. After she regained consciousness, she hid in the marshes for three months. After meeting Ancilla, I've spent a lot of time speaking with survivors and perpetrators of the genocide, combing through archives, and paying my respects at genocide sites around the country, where the smashed skulls, torn clothes, and blood stains of adult and child victims have been preserved.

It's one thing to study something from afar. It's another thing to meet the people involved and see the carnage. Doing so has profoundly impacted me.

Zachary's social enterprise worked for more than a decade to help launch the Kigali Public Library, an undertaking to create a new culture of intellectual honesty and openness in a country where information has been used in the worst possible ways, as evidenced by the hate propaganda and the kill-lists that had fueled Rwanda's genocide.

Unflinching

ZACHARY D. KAUFMAN'S EXPERIENCES ON THE GROUND in Rwanda further extended his understanding of the country's genocide, and the challenges to its recovery:

I started interviewing suspected perpetrators to learn why they had committed the horrors of which they were accused. The ones who admitted their crimes offered a variety of reasons. But genocide, of course, could never be justified.

Though the genocide occurred in mid-1994, its effects have been far-reaching:

The direct victims—those who were killed and the ones who survived—were just the beginning of those who have suffered as a result of the genocide. Rape had been used as a deliberate tool of the genocide, and so I would argue that there was a second wave of the genocide a few years later, when women started dying from HIV and AIDS. Some of their children also contracted the disease *in utero*. Secondary effects of the genocide have thus included disease and orphans.

Rwanda has also had to deal with the enormous number of perpetrators of the genocide, a problem with ramifications touching almost every aspect of society:

Some estimates hold that as many people killed as were killed during the genocide. If that's true, there were around a million perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda. The enormous number of both victims and perpetrators affected everything: economic development, political stability, social cohesion, the justice system, health care. The prisons weren't large enough to hold all of the perpetrators. Even if they were, if you kept such a massive amount of people in prison, they wouldn't be in the labor pool. How does a poor, tiny country, about the size of Maryland, address such gargantuan challenges? These are just some of the onerous and painful questions Rwanda faced.

THIS DEEP UNDERSTANDING prompted Zachary to respond emotionally in a personal, authentic way:

I was overwhelmed with all sorts of feelings and just the enormity of the challenges that Rwanda faced in its post-genocide era. I looked around and it seemed like there was no limit on need ...

[And] nobody was working on the library. People had prioritized other needs and other kinds of assistance work. It just seemed like a no-brainer [for me]. ... As someone with a very deep academic background

and academic focus, libraries have always been my sanctuaries and my playgrounds.

American Friends of the Kigali Public Library, the nonprofit he founded, helped build Rwanda's first public library, in its capital city. The decade-long project created a bridge from the past to the future, both for Rwanda and Zachary himself:

Because my work for the U.S. government focused on Rwanda's perpetrators – on criminal justice, which also meant Rwanda's past – I really welcomed the opportunity to work on a project with – and focused on – Rwanda's survivors, Rwanda's youth, and Rwanda's future.

Real life

PATRICK DONOHUE WOKE UP ONE NIGHT TO A RAGING FIRE consuming nearby dwellings during his home stay in Kibera, the world's second largest slum, a section of Nairobi, Kenya, but with none of the capital city's modern trappings. He was a member of a team working at the base-of-the-pyramid to create a business jointly owned by a major U.S. corporation and Kiberan slum dwellers. The fire and its aftermath taught him how resilient Kiberan residents were:

The experience was a positive for me just to see how the community came together and rebuilt. [Like the residents,] I wish it hadn't happened, but it was definitely a focusing experience.

Charlie Cavell would wake up every morning in an apartment with bars on the windows when he was a student at Wayne State University in Detroit. He explains that his neighbors were all on welfare or Supplemental Security Income. These circumstances impelled him to develop an innovative workforce development program for young, low-income Detroit residents, called Pay It Forward.

Fire or bars – what we wake up to is less important than being alerted to our circumstances and roused to action.

Experienced with meaning

IMMERSION DOESN'T NEED TO INVOLVE DRAMA, DESTITUTION, OR ATROCITY. But it must be meaningful. Lisa Ballantine, her husband, their children, and their closest friends went on a missionary trip for a year to the Dominican Republic. During this time away, they offered spiritual assistance and started a number of churches. But the experience had a secular impact, too:

I just saw the need for practical assistance. It was great to give spiritual assistance also, but I just saw so many physical needs that the people had that

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EFFECTIVE SOCIAL ENTERPRISES ENLIST employees' hearts and minds. Effective social enterprises engender trust and prize cognitive and emotional diversity. Effective social enterprises take a long view, helping sow their employees' future, while reaping the benefits of that support today.

Organizational software

ORG CHARTS = HARDWARE.

CULTURE = SOFTWARE.

While roles and responsibilities may be wired in, it is personal connections, relationships, and attitudes that determine whether an organization reaches its potential. Keeping people happy and engaged – creating a workforce held together by a sense of connection, contribution, and meaning – is even more important to a social enterprise than to a traditional enterprise, where greater perks and salaries can be strong bonds.

Zachary D. Kaufman (Chapter 3, “Immerse yourself”) certainly understood this. At the organization he founded, American Friends of the Kigali Public Library (AFKPL), no one has ever been paid, and no one is full-time. What binds them into a workforce is largely Zachary himself. In a ten-year period during which he founded his enterprise, he was keeping busy: working full-time for the U.S. government; moving to Oxford for a doctorate; working part-time for three war crime tribunals; getting a law degree; and writing his first book (about Rwanda). “All of this about the library was on the side,” he says. Yet Zachary still created a high-touch organization where he was the focal point:

The organizations that I'd been involved in before starting AFKPL were quite hierarchal. ... What I learned from this experience was that people didn't want that.

Everybody who was involved wanted to be in touch with me directly. They wanted to have conversations. If they wanted to have a briefing

about Rwanda, they usually wanted that to come from me. They wanted to get feedback from me on their work product.

Volunteers' preference to be connected to Zachary in their support of the library was not textbook-efficient, but it followed a strong logic:

I thought that we would be able to structure [the organization] more [hierarchically] with committees, committee chairs, and so forth, but I quickly learned that there was a limit to that. Part of it was because, among the people who joined, many of them were my own friends and family. And if people join an organization for those personal relationships, they often want to do it so that they can spend time with those people. So that made sense to me. It wasn't very efficient, but it did make sense.

Even as the project progressed, Zachary saw the need to keep these relationships front and center:

As we got larger and larger, I found that a higher and higher proportion of my time was spent on recruiting people, training people, reviewing their work, providing feedback, keeping them happy – all that stuff. Basically, if everybody is just in it as a volunteer, and as a part-time volunteer at that, morale is critical.

Zachary recognized that to keep morale high he also needed to spend a great deal of time sharing information:

not just the challenges that we were facing, but also obviously good news. People mostly wanted to hear it directly from me, and so I found that actually a huge proportion of my time – and I didn't anticipate how much – was spent on these efforts.

Like them. Trust them. Be yourself.

WHAT'S ONE WAY TO CREATE an engaged culture in your social enterprise?
Liking your team.

Listen to your gut: it matters. It helps you, especially when you're working with other people. If you have a feeling about another person and that feeling is a negative one or [gives you] a tinge of discomfort, don't do it. Work with people who excite you.

(Saul Garlick, ThinkImpact)

It's hard to have that excitement when there's a lack of trust (though hyper-vigilance and agitation may produce some excitement of the wrong kind).

Chapter 19, “Facets of support”

Chapter 19, “Menteeship”

Chapter 21, “You are not perfect”

Chapter 31, “Ninja management”

Gillian Henker

DIIME

Chapter 10, “Now, just a product”

Grace Hsia

Warmilu

Chapter 7, “Work intensity”

Chapter 7, “Misunderstood”

Chapter 10, “Climb with others”

Chapter 13, “Warm relationships”

Chapter 27, “Jazz”

Leticia Jáuregui Casanueva

CREA

Chapter 38, “Potatoes, large”

Van Jones

Green For All (now at Dream Corps)

Chapter 19, “Menteeship”

Wanjiru Kamau-Rutenberg

African Women in Agricultural Research and Development

Chapter 19, “Facets of support”

Zachary D. Kaufman

American Friends of the Kigali Public Library

Chapter 3, “Immerse yourself”

Chapter 3, “Knowing versus understanding”

Chapter 3, “Unflinching”

Chapter 18, “Organizational software”

Randall Kempner

Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs

Chapter 10, “Too cool for school?”

Chapter 42, “Through funders’ eyes”

Marina Kim

AshokaU

Chapter 3, “Immerse yourself”

Chapter 4, “Sludge”

Chapter 4, “Strong “number 2s””

Alan Webber

Fast Company

Chapter 6, “Joining the chorus”

Chapter 11, “It’s not about you”

Jerry White

Landmine Survivors Network (now at giStrat)

Chapter 3, “Survivor”

Chapter 4, “Recover, integrate, act”

Chapter 9, “Wisdom”

Chapter 18, “Emote different”

Chapter 44, “Now, move”

Chapter 45, “Seeing”

Chapter 45, “Liberation”

Chapter 45, “Cosmos”

Sandy Wiggins

Consilience LLC

Chapter 2, “Are you a social entrepreneur? (Take two)”

Chapter 15, “Compensation: Values”

Chapter 46, “Decide”

Barry Zuckerman

Health Leads

Chapter 10, “Seizing opportunity”

2. The organizations

American Friends of the Kigali Public Library

Chapter 18, “Organizational software”

Angaza

<https://www.angaza.com>

Chapter 8, “Flexibility”

Chapter 29, “Aspiration versus illumination”

Chapter 35, “Strings attached”

Chapter 36, “What’s the what?”

Chapter 41, “The market giveth and the market taketh away”

Ashoka, AshokaU

<https://www.ashoka.org>, <http://ashokau.org>

Chapter 2, “Are you a social entrepreneur? (Take two)”

Chapter 3, “Immerse yourself”

Chapter 10, “Soft skills”

Chapter 12, “Start together”

Chapter 18, “Emote different”