Change Community and Your Company (Transcript)

(S1:E8)



Chris Congdon: Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. Today we're talking about changemakers – and how creating positive change in our communities can lead to positive change in our companies.

Kenny Clewett joins us from Spain where he's a leader with Ashoka. Ashoka's mission is to mobilize everyone to become a changemaker. And it turns out, being a changemaker can help people and organizations have a better experience at work.

After hearing from Kenny, my colleague Kinga Pakucs joins us from Munich. She is a learning consultant at Steelcase and has led community projects through the Steelcase Changemakers global program. So stay with us for a valuable perspective on how to apply these ideas to the workplace.

Chris Congdon
So welcome. Ashoka describes its mission like this: Together we mobilize and accelerate a movement to build a world where everyone is a changemaker and we wanted to talk to you about this notion of everyone being a changemaker. Because it really connected with us and we wondered if being a changemaker can also help make our work more meaningful, ultimately better. Ashoka is based in 80 countries and Kenny you're joining us from Spain. Thanks for being here with us today.

Kenny Clewett
It’s a privilege to be here and an honor.

Chris Congdon
Thank you. Can you just start by telling us a little bit more about Ashoka and what your role is there.

Kenny Clewett
Thank you so much for having me. At Ashoka we describe our vision as a world where everyone is a changemaker so it really is about activating changemakers all around the world and primarily what we do is, we select, we support, we walk alongside change leaders. At the core of this our foundation or what drives us has been selecting what we call fellows so these are leading social entrepreneurs from all around the world who are solving the world’s problems through innovative systemic solutions. These are folks like Mohammed Yunus in Bangladesh who created micro loans or Jeroo Billimoria in India who created Childline, a free telephone helpline for children on the street run by children from the street. Or folks like Jimmy Wales that many of us know, founder of Wikipedia, who revolutionized access to information for all. The core is selecting these fellows and in addition to fellows we also select young social entrepreneurs, what we call Ashoka young changemakers at different stages, even business leaders and companies that are dedicated to improve their changemaking trying to figure out how do we build this changemakers world. Together and with them sometimes you build thematic centered initiatives. I lead the selection of these social entrepreneurs in Europe — what we call venture and that’s that’s my primary role and I also do a lot of leadership in areas like DEI or Hello Europe and Hello World which is our migration initiative.

Chris Congdon
Kenny, we wanted to talk to you because this idea of using business as a force for good is commonly accepted by a whole lot of organizations but not every organization has really thought about it and it also feels like organizations and their employees have an opportunity to impact their global community and so I wanted just to probe a little bit more about why organizations like business organizations choose to work with Ashoka. You bring together organizations like Steelcase and other governments or nonprofits to kind of tackle these big systemic issues. Can you talk a little bit about that.

Kenny Clewett
Great question. I think there's two avenues here or two reasonings. One of the reasons we call these leaders social entrepreneurs was because back in the day we realized when we were analyzing the people that make change happen at large scale, their core skills on how they function is a lot like an entrepreneur, like a business entrepreneur. Rather than building a company to make money which is very important for a business entrepreneur, their aim is to solve a social problem. That's why it's a social entrepreneur. And I think on the one hand that really attracts successful businesses that have innovation at their heart and entrepreneurialism because they understand if you invest in powerful entrepreneurs solving problems, things can really change. I think that's one of the angles that attracts. I think at their core, businesses should have a function of serving their community. This is a primary aim, right? When companies lose this, often they end up losing their bottom line as well. Employees increasingly demand purpose with their work. So I think increasingly it's not really an option not to think about social issues for companies. What we find is there are certain kinds of companies that don't just want to have a social program or a CSR program. They really start understanding and grasping the passion of what if we could actually make a dent in a social problem. What if we could change something and that's where we get excited right? How do we activate changemakers within your world to actually create some of these changes? How do we connect you with some of these important social entrepreneurs around the world? I think that's where some magic starts happening.

Chris Congdon
Let's talk about that a little bit more. If a company is not already engaged in this kind of work or maybe they are just doing some basics, what is the benefit not only to the organization but the people within the organization to take part in this kind of work?

Kenny Clewett
I think it depends on the company and who their employees are. What we find a lot is just meeting and spending time with some of these social entrepreneurs creates a certain kind of transformation because so often the way we look at social problems is as problems — big issues that are impossible to solve. It's a political thing or it's education. You know we have these big labels on them and then we meet someone who says actually here's how I got to the root issue and here's how we're solving it. And so often what we find with these social entrepreneurs is they ask why about six times more than normal people, to get to the root of the problem and then solutions are so simple at that level. They're not of course — it took all this work but suddenly it kind of inspires you to say, "Wow. Something can actually be done." If we go to the root, if we look at this I think there's a huge inspiration factor.

Then there’s another thing that I find a lot working with different companies like Steelcase and others. They constantly say we want the social entrepreneurship energy into our organization to help us solve stuff because there’s a way of thinking that breaks barriers, breaks down problems, looks at things from a different angle, figures out how to work with people that we would have never thought we could work with to change problems and that’s attractive. Not just to employees, because they’re touching on something new, but also some of the leaders of the organizations because it’s helping them to think out of the box in different ways. So it’s really interesting in that sense when we bring together these different stakeholders with leading social entrepreneurs — there’s inspiration, a rethinking, a collective work that starts happening.

Chris Congdon
That’s really interesting what you were just saying about social entrepreneurs. Asking why more often. It feels like you know there’s skills to be gathered by working in this new and different way, which is really important right now.

Kenny Clewett
Just to add to that, I think we have these lists of skills for changemaking and all this stuff, but as I read through the profiles of the 40 or so fellows that we’ve selected over the last two years in Europe looking for trends I saw two things that were just so interesting. Just in the last two years social entrepreneurs have found new resources or people that are involved in something but aren’t considered as resources and activate them as resources for a social problem. We have a fellow that’s training teachers to see the education system and how it can be changed and networking them to actually activate teachers as a resource for education reform not just for teaching. So there’s this activation element that happened and then there’s another thing that we see them doing which is working with groups of people that you wouldn’t have expected would be interested in the problem. There’s an example of a social entrepreneur working to clean the oceans right? So what? You normally do a campaign of protests and stuff and that’s really important but he realized we have to convince the captains of other ships and we have to convince the companies that work in the ocean to change their practices. They need to see that they’re part of this. She starts working with fishing companies and petrol companies — people that we’d consider the enemies of any kind of social or climate change issue. Involving them as key actors within the system. They’re almost wired differently to think this way and that brings a lot of value to people who hang out with them.

Chris Congdon
I always feel sometimes when you look at all the issues that an organization could possibly decide to tackle, as you said a moment ago, it can feel overwhelming. It can feel like there’s so many things that you don’t even know where to start. So I’m just curious, how does a leader or how does an organization decide what to tackle?

Kenny Clewett

I've been thinking about this question and it brought me back to the days when I worked with young social entrepreneurs and changemakers, 12-to-18-year olds. The advice we'd give them I think is the same advice we should give to the CEOs and companies that want to work with this. We say, first, think of the issues that make you angry. You know what makes you angrier or sad mostly as we get older? It's more anger I think, right? List those issues and then assess the skills and passions you have, maybe the competencies or the skills the company has and see where they connect. And you know it sounds like real simplistic advice and often you have to create a huge process for this in large companies to get the right leaders involved. You have to identify the company's feelings and match those issues with what they're passionate about and what they're actually good at. Stuff starts coming together and you start realizing the need to bring other people into this. There's other steps to that. But you realize where your core competence is and I think that's the shift too from a traditional CSR policy where you're supporting something to really making a social change core at your business or at your organization. It's figuring out where that intersection happens.

Chris Congdon

You guys are really good at building these changemaking communities and building your fellowship program. How do you go about building a global community and why is it better to do that together as opposed to going it alone and saying well just figure this out within my own organization?

Kenny Clewett

There's two questions there I think that are connected. I think as far as building the community we've done a lot and we're also learning a lot. We've been talking a lot within Ashoka about what is the difference between groups, networks, communities, ecosystems — these are all different types of relationships and you have to address them differently and sometimes I think we talk about a community and it's actually a network. There's different engagements, but as we think of our primary community these fellows and the worlds around them and our staff connect as nominators — what we call the Ashoka Support Network. We focus on finding people whose changemaking is kind of wired the same way. They don't look for people that have the same culture because that would be boring, but they might also lower the impact of people from very different backgrounds. Very different cultures. There's an aspect here that we could talk about later. We're really trying to find people that go about change similarly and that creates magic connections. We use five criteria to select fellows. And the same criteria applies to how we select staff or even other members of our community. We talked about a new idea. We talk about people that are innovative, entrepreneurial. These are people that have a background in creating stuff. Not necessarily the standard entrepreneurial track. Maybe they started a newspaper as a child or did something else but they're used to doing things. These are people that are creative in how they think about solving things and that includes involving new people in the network. They aim towards social impact and they have unquestionable ethical fiber, people that you can trust. These selection processors are long and painful. What I do in Europe is supervise this. When you bring those people together, like a lot of the barriers that you tend to have in networks to build trust that they're already broken so you can create trust and create partnerships a lot more quickly across lines.

Chris Congdon
Okay, so let’s go to the second part of that question which is why is it better to do it as part of a community as opposed to going it alone?

Kenny Clewett
That’s a good question. Let me give you an example in the field of migration which is where a lot of my work has been done. You know what we found when we started working in the field of migration, working with different social entrepreneurs? We realized the big nonprofits like big organizations like the Red Cross — folks that have done really good work, but we talk to the leaders of these different organizations and everyone had an impression that if they did their work right and everyone else did their work right, things would be solved. We had the privilege of talking to all of them. We realized that’s not true because we don’t even have the same problem in mind. We haven’t even looked at the problem together so we brought a bunch of organizations of these leaders together, we selected them — the kind of people that are ready for change, brought them together and spent a whole day just looking at the root of the problem. And there was this moment you could almost feel it where people suddenly said, “Oh that’s why nothing’s working!” We need to work with each other because we can’t change this. You know the government can’t do this alone. There’s a theory called wicked problems or systemic issues. What they basically say is that these are complex problems that require multiple perspectives just to figure out what the root causes are and then how to solve them together. Most of the problems we’re looking at, social problems or whatever our wicked problems, they’re complex problems and they require people coming together from different backgrounds to look at it. So I think it’s not so much why is it better … it’s going alone just doesn’t work. You don’t even know what you’re solving at times.

Chris Congdon
It feels like there’s some parallels for those of us in the corporate world. They may be different kinds of wicked problems, but it does feel like we’re often dealing with issues that are really complex. And we need to be working with a group of people, a diverse group of people if we’re even going to figure out what is the root cause of that and how do we begin to solve that. Which leads me to ask about the part of your mission about everyone being a changemaker and with special emphasis on the everyone part of that and how can we be intentional and how are you guys intentional about making sure that diverse perspectives are included.

Kenny Clewett

A really good question and something that for Ashoka this is something where we're basically doing open heart surgery on ourselves and showing it to the sector in many ways because we realized a few years ago different people realize this in many different ways. We started seeing even though we started as an organization saying we need to find innovations in communities around the world, connect them, we have built hidden criteria into this that excludes different people. It could be hidden criteria literally, like when you're interviewing candidates you know that there's been times when we've required written emails and someone doesn't have access to email. They're excluded from the process right. Whereas there might be an amazing innovation that we're missing out on because of that. We're not intentionally concentrating on certain communities that have been excluded or we're not looking or we're using words that mean something different in different societies – like when you talk about innovation or entrepreneurship. If you bring that to indigenous communities those words tend to have very negative feelings. It normally means what white people have done to steal our stuff and sell it elsewhere. That's certainly not what we're wanting to say right? We have to think, "Okay, what does it look like in these communities?" How do we reevaluate a lot of our criteria as we're doing that? One of the reasons I work in venture in particular in the search and selection of social entrepreneurs is because where venture goes. Ashoka follows the kind of fellows we select to really determine where the organization is going because we look to them for a lot of leadership.

So we've been looking very closely at our criteria. The way we communicated our processes of how we invite people to join in the process, deferring a lot to one-on-one conversations to going to places where people are, to not asking them about their solution in our boxes but asking folks to tell us in their terms and try to learn their terms rather than have them adapt to our terms. To be able to essentially select this kind of diversity, you must select people from communities that have been traditionally excluded. A lot of work that we've done has been internally connecting people in groups and dealing with our unconscious biases trying to figure out what they are, creating spaces where employees can connect with each other and learn about resources and talk through stuff, not as much to change the organization immediately but to change themselves. To figure out how can I be more inclusive and finally that's also led us to look at a lot of our practices and even the way when we receive funding how it goes to different places. What does equity look like there? How do we, to use a strong term, decolonize the way we allocate funding. We have a really cool function that we're getting funding from different organizations and companies and a lot of that goes to social entrepreneurs, etc. What's the process there? Are we really allowing this to be equitable? What does that look like? That's a lot of questions and I don't know if I have many answers but we're definitely asking ourselves a lot of questions these days.

Chris Congdon

Even that is just a healthy place to start to ask those questions and be willing to do the open heart surgery on yourselves, which is tough. You had mentioned earlier and I wanted to talk more about one of the major initiatives that you're working on is related to migration and refugees. I'm wondering how you've been able to scale social innovation to have a larger impact on what feels like such a daunting issue.

Kenny Clewett

Absolutely. Although there's a lot we could talk about, Hello Europe started the initiative around migration in 2016 and it's a unique initiative within Ashoka because it started from the staff saying we have to do something about what's going on. In Europe in 2016 a pretty large number of migrants were making their way into Europe and the systems to receive them were not up to par. We needed social innovation very quickly. So the first thing we did was to say let's look around the world to see where the best innovations to some of the issues emerging are, and then scale them to Europe. We identified 150 fellows and many other organizations around the world that were doing great work and we selected a bunch and invited them to scale to Europe, connecting them with partners, to funding and resources so that they could scale their impact. The first thing that we realize is in the social sector we need more scaling mechanisms.

Companies very quickly scale. There's consultants. There's all kinds of resources to scale your company to a new city and the social sector. The second piece we realized has to do with multi-stakeholders. We realized that public policy was a huge issue in migration — how paperwork works and what policy is decided, especially in Europe, to create a policy unit to connect social entrepreneurs and their solutions with policy changemakers. Because there are changemakers in the policy realm believe it or not and they started creating conversations with people that were on the front lines getting stuff done. We're connecting with these folks in the offices trying to figure out how do we turn this into policy and that created some really interesting relationships that's now led us to some other pieces. I'd say the third piece as we did this, we realized the majority of our social entrepreneurs were quite White and quite European to receive migrants right? There's nothing wrong about someone White and European wanting to to help or to welcome migrants but we realized if we say that everyone is a changemaker that one piece we need to figure out is how this fits into this. So we started mapping and really looking into and questioning ourselves and even our hiring practices. When we looked at statistics we realized that in 2016 – 2017 arrival of migrants entrepreneurship in Europe skyrocketed not just because migrants were entrepreneurial but also because they inspired other inspirations. This is literally changemaking coming to us bringing new solutions. How do we move out of the way so that a lot of the narrative becomes migrant-led and that's been quite an adventure trying to figure out how do we shift our practices. It's led us to look at Ashoka globally and how we select social entrepreneurs. When we launched Hola America, our Hello Europe work in Latin America, it started with that premise and it's been a completely different story, basically identifying, activating and recognizing migrant entrepreneurship across the continent. That has been really powerful because when you think of changemaking it's kind of two aspects. One is the skills to be a changemaker, there's certain kind of leadership skills connecting with people, empathy, etc., but the other is the confidence and being given permission to do that. And so that was something we realized we have all these people that are changemakers: they're investing their lives in new communities, whether they're refugees, whether it was forced. It doesn't matter when people move, changemaking happens and it has to happen. So how do we lift them up? How do we create a platform? How do we give them voice? How do we move out of the way? How do we change that discourse? That's a lot of what we're thinking about now. Of course that goes back to us to say well who's actually leading these initiatives. Do we have migrant background leaders within the organization? Are they leading this? How do we get them on board? That's been quite an adventure and there's a lot more going on there.

Chris Congdon
Thank you for sharing that. It feels like right now we're at a time that there have been so many studies talking about decreasing levels of trust across the board, whether it's trust in government organizations, trust in employers, trust between one another as human beings. I'm just wondering if all of the work that Ashoka and other changemaking organizations are doing is a way to help build a sense of connectedness between people.

Kenny Clewett
The short answer is yes. What we find is two things when you look at entrepreneurial skills. Looking at the roots that underlie the problem suddenly things get a little simpler. They get less messy because like there's something going on here. The second thing that we found is when you look at it from a solutions lens, a changemaking lens there's hope. Conversations versus just a stalemate and of course there's people that don't want to participate in this conversation. You know that's fine. But those that do when you select the right people that actually want to create a change that magic of trust building starts happening and that gives me a lot of hope right now. We're building these things called Ecosystem Accelerators within the migration initiative where we bring together different stakeholders to do precisely that. With a social entrepreneur leading it with that energy of relentlessness, optimism and seeking solutions we're finding that trust is being rebuilt in many ways.

Chris Congdon
Well, that's an interesting thing for organizations and business leaders to think about and we are speaking to business leaders today. Before I let you go Kenny, I would just like to know what would be your message to them?

Kenny Clewett
I think my message to business leaders is let change happen. With a lot of conversations I've had with business leaders, there's a fear of losing control or letting employees have the freedom to carry out the crazy ideas they often have and I think if they're able to create the channels and the spaces and the resources for a lot of those crazy ideas to actually happen for that. changemaking energy to be released through the organization, especially from what we'd often call the margin or people that normally haven't been at the center. The results are going to be very surprising. Employees will probably perform better and companies are going to come into completely new areas of innovation. So I think losing that fear and creating spaces where innovation and changemaking can happen is a game changer for companies and those that do it will thrive and those that don't probably won't.

Chris Congdon
Well I think that's a really good message for us to wrap on today. So I really appreciate you being here with us today and thank you so much for all the insights about what you've learned and what Ashoka has learned in your process of changemaking. Thank you Kenny.

Kenny Clewett
Thank you so much. I was delighted to be here.

Chris Congdon
Welcome to Kinga Pakucs who joins us from the Steelcase Learning and Innovation Center in Munich. Kinga is a learning consultant in our learning and development team and before relocating to Munich she was based in Cluj, Romania. She has led community projects throughout the Steelcase changemakers global program, as well as DEI initiatives within the company. So thanks for joining me, Kinga. I really appreciate you being here and I'm curious to get your perspective about how you see organizations being more willing to think about and actually take action on social issues.

Kinga Pakucs
Thanks Chris very happy to be here. I can definitely see a sort of heightened sensitivity towards social issues and even a form of consciousness within organizations about the role they play in the world and who they serve beyond their shareholders. This is not a new thing. But I think it has been accentuated by the importance that companies have placed on their culture, which essentially meant they were listening to their employees and it became increasingly obvious as Kenny pointed out that people demand this sense of purpose. Organizations are sort of acknowledging that social issues are not outside their doors, so the realm of nonprofits or public policy but they're very much present in the hearts and minds of people walking through those doors every day showing up for work. And I completely agree with Kenny that organizations can no longer ignore social issues and community needs and some organizations are leading so they're making community impact a part of their strategy, some maybe not so much. But the more they infuse this in their strategy the more they have to gain. Employees stay longer with the company and they will see their work as being more purposeful and making a positive impact.

Chris Congdon
So what are some of the things that you've been a part of that could inspire other organizations, Kinga?

Kinga Pakucs
Throughout my years at Steelcase I've always seen this focus on community impact and what I love about it is that we have a global strategy of engaging with the community. But the real magic happens at a local level where employees are empowered to really implement that strategy and engage with local communities and nonprofits and there's two examples that come to mind of projects that I've been involved in in Romania. The first one is a youth empowerment camp where Steelcase employees engage in a week-long conversation and series of workshops with teenagers from rural under-resourced communities in Romania. They address topics like self confidence and gender equity and the need of teenagers to break gender normativity and really have their voices heard was what led to this project. Over 150 colleagues have been engaged in this project in the last seven years. Even our CEO joined the conversation this year and this project has been so impactful in so many ways but the dialogue between the employees and the teenagers is the really transformational part and it has changed my life personally and my life professionally. I've learned to engage in new ways with these colleagues and in 2016 when we started this project, the small prototype, we wouldn't have dreamt of where it leads. A second example that I'm thinking about is a bit different, is the activities that we've done during Pride month this year. That project came about as a result of the lived experiences of our employees in Cluj and I was one of them. LGBTQ rights are rarely a topic discussed in companies in Romania and identities that are outside the norm don't really have a place or a voice in companies. So we formed a team and put together a calendar of activities for our office during Pride month. And not only did we sponsor as a company the Pride March but the transformational part was the discussions that we had internally with our colleagues and the community about intersectionality and about lived identities.

Chris Congdon
So you know that work reminds me of what Kenny was talking about in terms of the skills of changemaking because it really is a skillset to to be a changemaker. I'm curious, what advice would you offer to organizations who want to apply the notion of changemaking to the work that they're doing and how can we achieve the kind of scale that Kenny was talking about?

Kinga Pakucs
I think when organizations allow employees to show up as their full selves, so people are so much more than their job description and organizations are so much more than a series of processes. It's about allowing people to express their values, to express their interests and to really allow that platform for conversation and community engagement. It's a skillset. I think it's when companies allow for curiosity and allow for collaboration outside of the traditional functional lines, I think that's where one thing leads to another. If organizations do not allow their employees to explore outside the realm of their job, they're never going to know that they're lying on a breadth of capability and of skills. Sometimes employees don't know it either. I can give you a very concrete example. When we were designing the Camps COVID hit and we had to pivot in two weeks. We had to transfer a full physical camp into an online environment. Did we know that we had the skills and the agility to do that in two weeks? We found out afterwards when we did it so we learned by having this common purpose and through experiential learning, but the company also allowed us. The the platform to do so and also the mandate to make mistakes in the process.

Chris Congdon
I loved what you were saying about work being more than just a series of processes and we think a lot in this podcast about how to make work better and so I'm curious what your thoughts are Kinga about how does supporting and activating changemakers actually help work be better?

Kinga Pakucs
I think looking back at my experience and the colleagues that I've worked with that the biggest thing that you unlock through community building and organizations is the relationships between people. So when you engage in a community project or when you engage in a cross-functional project with your colleagues you create new relationships like genuine ones. You meet people from other teams with whom you'd normally not come across during your work hours. And you find out that you share the same passion, then you transfer some of the things in your work. So you unlock that experiential learning that comes in an organic way. It's not at me as a learning consultant. You know there is no perfect learning path. There is no perfect training. There is no perfect workshop but the more I can encourage people to apply whatever they learn to their work that's when people start to grow and become their best selves. When you manage to find that sweet spot between work and purposeful community engagement, that's when the two meet. Skillbuilding happens almost organically, almost without people kind of realizing it, more so a lot of the times when we look at a community project. We look back and we review it and we realized how much we've evolved and how we created those bridges throughout the company.

Chris Congdon
That is such an important point — that we try and find that sweet spot as you said between purpose and bringing that to work. So I really appreciate you taking some time to come and talk with me. So. Thanks for joining us today, Kinga.

Kinga Pakucs
Thank you Chris, happy to have to have been here. And, thank you for your work on the Steelcase global changemakers program. It's really making an impact.
(pause)

Thank you for being here with us for this episode and this season of Work Better. If you enjoyed this conversation – please subscribe on your favorite podcast platform and visit us at steelcase.com/subscribe to sign up for weekly updates on research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox. We'd also really appreciate it if you would rate or review this podcast to help others find it.

If you missed any previous episodes – we must encourage you to go back and seek them out. We talked about the neuroscience of community, groupiness at work, being more human in the AI age and much much more.

Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.