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From Feel Good to Real Good

by Kathleen Kelly Janus August 20, 2018

We need to equip the next generation with the tools they need to deliver on good intentions.

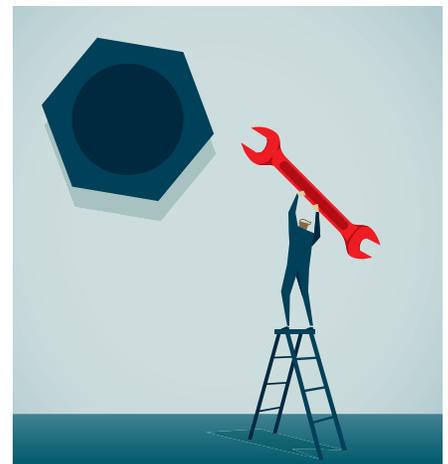
If there is one trend that sums up the next generation, it is that they want to make a difference in the world. For example, 66 percent of teens [say they want their jobs](#) to impact the world, and 26 percent of 16- to 19-year-olds are already volunteering. But despite caring more than ever before, so many young people remain ill-equipped to effectively do anything about the problems they see.

A couple of years ago, a junior at Stanford University was getting ready for the campus pitch competition when she approached me about her idea. She wanted to launch a nonprofit to help people in the slums of Cape Town. When I asked her how often she goes to South Africa, she responded, “Oh, I’ve never been, but I hope to go one day!” She had developed a solution without doing the work to gain a deep understanding of the problem. And she’s not alone.

Last fall, when the Northern California fires ravaged my hometown of Napa, California, thousands of well-meaning Bay Area residents wanted to help, but their efforts were often misguided. [Puertas Abiertas](#), a nonprofit that does outreach to the Latino community, received a mountain of dog food from donors despite the fact that their community didn’t have dogs. And in Newtown, Connecticut, when a gunman killed 20 children and 6 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, the community had to rent a warehouse to fit 67,000 stuffed animals donated from across the country, most of which residents had to send away.

People get so obsessed with the idea of “helping” that they often fail to stand back and consider if what they’re doing is effective.

In my years of research on what makes a social startup successful, I poured over thousands of survey results and conducted hundreds of interviews with some of the top changemakers of our time. I kept expecting people to tell me that a truly remarkable idea or the charisma of the founder is what drives success, but no one did. Not one. This isn’t to say that factors like charisma and grit, along with a brilliant idea, don’t contribute significantly to success. Of course they do. But, I found that the strategies behind successful social change initiatives—things like innovation, fundraising, effective leadership, and measuring impact—are teachable. The problem is, we aren’t teaching them.



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Higher-education institutions like Stanford's [Haas Center for Public Service](#), which houses the Stanford Program on Social Entrepreneurship where I teach, have increased community-engaged learning offerings—pairing more students to work with nonprofits through classroom projects—over the past few years. This means students are graduating with more skills-based experiences under their belts. Meanwhile, university-based social entrepreneurship programs are booming, with 148 social entrepreneurship programs in the United States alone.

This is all good news, but by the time kids get to college, we've already missed a huge opportunity. We must start seeding effective social change at younger ages than ever before. In the wake of this year's school shooting in Parkland, Florida, the world marveled at how well-spoken and prepared the students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School were as they took on Congress and sparked a national youth movement on gun control. But what many people don't know is that Broward County, where the school is located, is home to one of the largest debate programs in the United States. All the high schools, middle schools, and even some of their elementary schools in the county are teaching students how to argue both sides of an issue, digest differing viewpoints, and plead their case. Imagine a world where all young people got training on how to advocate for causes that they care about.

Parents and teachers shouldn't just ask students, "What matters to you?" and "What are you prepared to do about it?" We must teach them to evaluate social causes for impact, and ensure that their efforts are both rich in both practical skills and of real value to partner organizations. Any teacher or parent can instill ownership over problem-solving in our children's lives by ensuring our kids are involved not just in feel-good, but real-good, service learning projects, and the onus is on nonprofits to ensure that they are facilitating meaningful relationships in return. For example, the [Scott Center for Social Entrepreneurship](#) at the Hillbrook School in Los Gatos, California, provides a JK-8 educational experience with social entrepreneurship programs that help kids learn how to effectively address social challenges they talk about in class. Last summer, after meeting with the microlending organization Kiva and discovering how it helps small businesses get off the ground, students launched a Kiva Lending Club. Club members practice real skills like how to fundraise and evaluate different business models, and reflect on the systems that give access to capital in the Silicon Valley. If it weren't for Kiva's willingness to work with these students, they wouldn't have been able to learn these important lessons. Funders can also take the lead to help educate the next generation of changemakers. San Francisco-based funder [Tipping Point Community](#), which focuses on alleviating Bay Area poverty, has developed a curriculum for families to talk with their children about the importance of giving back. Its workbook offers discussion questions about family values and strengths, and provides ideas for tangible ways to get involved with the community, such as hosting a donation drive, raising money to fight poverty, or volunteering with local organizations as a family.

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Volunteering should be more than a plus on college applications; policymakers should make it a mandatory requirement for high school graduation. Instead of scattering light-touch efforts throughout the community, funders and nonprofits should support teachers and parents to build long-term relationships with their organizations. Everyone should learn the nuts and bolts of successful fundraising. And most importantly, no matter how smart, educated, and well-resourced you are, when it comes to problem-solving, nothing can replace the power of lived experience. Social sector leaders must help teach young people how to responsibly engage with communities in need as co-designers of solutions.

Today, that Stanford student who wanted to start her own organization is working for a social impact company, learning lessons that will serve her throughout her career. But I've talked to countless nonprofit CEO's who spent 20 years learning practical skills on the job that we could be teaching right now. The problems we face are simply too big to wait.

As millions of young people across the country go back to school this month, we have an incredible opportunity to maximize their potential to create social change. Let's give the next generation the tools they need to truly deliver on their intentions to do good.

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