On embracing Eldership and the formation of
A Council of Elders
Aix-en-Provence
18th to 20th September 2019

Summary
Ten social entrepreneurs from the global Ashoka Fellowship gathered near Aix-en-Provence at the iconic structure TheCamp “a base camp for exploring the future”. With over 490 years of combined work experience the Fellows in fact explored a future where their wisdom born of experience would be greatly valued. In short, they embraced Eldership and to this end co-created and signed a proclamation announcing the Council of Elders. An Elders Working Group was agreed and this body will focus on how the Council will operate, how all older Fellows will be invited to play a role within the Council, and, indeed, how the Council can be a force for good in the Ashoka community and beyond.

Background
It all started with three Fellows, Andrea Coleman, Mel Young and Chris Underhill, meeting some two years ago for dinner to discuss the question of growing old as a Social Entrepreneur. The matter was raised with Ashoka staff and in time they began to organise to support a meeting. Nancy Mortifee, of the Wellbeing Project, was very encouraging as were friends from the company Steelcase who, in turn, became the sponsors of the meeting. Jonathan Livingston was hired as the facilitator and members of the Ashoka Fellowship Europe Wellbeing Team became the staff support, namely: Clémentine van Hamme, Michela Fenech and Florian Rutsch. Tamara Tischler joined us to provide Hungarian / English translation for the two Hungarian Fellows attending the meeting.

Ashoka at other levels has also been thinking about the phenomenon of the older Fellow. The meeting was joined by Mark Cheng, a member of the Ashoka Leadership Group who is responsible for the East Asia and Greater China region. He is part of the Ashoka initiative NextNow, being a new Ashoka collaborative to work with Partners and Fellows looking at what it means to be an Elder in Society and creating an empowering vision of what it is like to be a Senior Changemaker. Mark was welcomed with great pleasure to the meeting thus aligning several strands of Ashoka community thinking on aging and eldership.

Fellows attending
Andrea Coleman | Riders for Health | UK
Agnes Gereb | Alternatal Foundation | Hungary
Kathryn Hall-Trujillo | the Birthing Project | US
Horst Krumbach | Generationsbrücke | Germany
The business of the retreat

There were several themes running through the retreat. Firstly what it means to become older, secondly the practical matters of transitioning the organisation that the SE had founded, thirdly what it is to be an “Elder”, fourthly the creation of a Council of Elders and what it might “do” or offer and, finally, fifthly, how to look after oneself.

Getting older

Folk were in different places when it came to the matter of getting older. All felt that they still had “something to offer” and all felt that they were physically able but, at the same time, either slowing down or looking forwards to slowing down...a bit! The conversation often came down to “looking or working smarter”.

Transition

Some participants had already transitioned their organisation, certainly the one that they were running at the time of Ashoka recognition, and others were contemplating this move. Different “models” of moving on were shared and it was felt that some of these ways of moving on could be written up in case study form for other Ashoka Fellows to review. This preparing and sharing might be one of the functions of the Council of Elders? Some SE’s founded one outfit and then managed it for many years. Others had founded several outfits and had moved on from one organisation to the other after succession had taken place. The more stories that were shared the more ways to carry out transition were noted.

On being an Elder

The idea or notion of being an “Elder” relates to the introspection carried out both at the retreat and, often, before whereby older social entrepreneurs don’t really buy into the social norms of being old or retiring. Without wishing to impose there is a strong and united feeling that they definitely have something to offer their own organisations, other SE’s who are thinking over their transitions, other bodies who need the leadership and of older practitioners and so the thought process continues onwards. When it comes to offering knowledge back to their own outfit there is often an assumption that another more energetic person has taking on the full-time management of the organisation. The founder then looks to offer advice as a Special Advisor or sits on the board and there are other solutions besides. It is not necessary for all elders to offer the same model of transition. Often the model of transition is determined by local context and the situation of the founder including financial position. The point is that at least one Elder would have taken a position similar to the decision being newly considered by a younger SE and can then advise on the pros and cons as actually wisdom experienced.
The Council of Elders

The idea then that a Council be formed flows relatively naturally from the consideration of what an Elder is and, when working together, what an Elder could offer as part of a great collective. The fact that this also aligns with ideas being considered anyway by Ashoka gives extra momentum and strength. The declaration that was then created, agreed to and signed up to by all ten participants, reads as follows:

The Aix-en-Provence declaration 2019

“We, the elders from the Ashoka Fellowship, pledge to work together to establish a Council of Elders to represent and support social entrepreneurs (in Ashoka) in every phase of transition.

We will then appoint a working group to create the constitution and working practices of this council by 31st March 2020”.

The whole of those attending signed the above and Andrea Coleman, Chris Underhill, Mel Young, Elżbieta Pomaska and Kathryn Hall-Trujillo were appointed to the working group. The working group in the first instance will report their progress back to the remaining five participants of the retreat.

Self-care

As can be imagined there were many ideas put forward to the subject of looking after one’s self. These varied from meditation, diet to physical fitness. The consensus seemed to collect around the concept of a state of mind being the most single important feature of wellness in older age.

Steps forward

The work of the retreat having been achieved, it is now time to meet the requirements of the declaration by creating a constitution, etc. Equally, others within Ashoka may well want to play a part and this will be considered. Presentations, papers and further discussion within the Ashoka community will flow naturally from these decisions. The staff of Ashoka are also thinking about this matter and so alignment is an important feature going forwards.

Chris Underhill MBE, September 2019

The Elders after signing the Council of Elders declaration