

Creative Collaborations

The Necessary Revolution: How individuals and organizations are working together to create a sustainable world; Peter Senge, Bryan Smith, Nina Kruschwitz, Joe Laur, Sara Schley
(New York: Doubleday, 2008, \$29.95, 416 pp)

REVIEWED BY JOSEPH REIMER

Primarily about promoting sustainability, *Necessary Revolution* offers much more. Peter Senge and his co-authors use the platform of sustainability to offer a compelling guide for how any committed group can intelligently initiate significant social change. This call to action is both wildly idealistic and yet soberly pragmatic about the steps needed to galvanize lasting social change.

Of the many critical ideas this book offers, I will focus on two that have particular relevance for Jewish communal life: First, “creating” versus “problem solving” and second, “collaborating” versus “alliance building.”

Problem solving is about making what you don’t want, go away. Creating involves bringing something you care about into reality (p. 50).

Senge and colleagues believe in the power of vision and desire. The good has to be envisioned before it can be embodied. When we censor our vision because it seems unrealistic, we undermine our powers to create. So, we often focus on problems we can solve and end up fighting what we can stop: pollution, terrorism, hunger, etc.

What is surprising about this book on sustainability is that not one page is devoted to curbing pollution or regulating polluters. Those are the solutions of problem-solvers — those who see the world in terms of danger and containing dangers. Senge claims there is a price to be paid for that worldview. Rather than curbing behaviors we find threatening, “creating” would envision and pursue possibilities that attract more attention and capital investment.

Jewish communities seem to be drawn to problem solving. We focus on numerous problems to solve and enemies to combat; a crisis a moment. Reading this volume is an invitation to ask ourselves: Why do we continue to believe this worldview and does it serve our true needs? Why do we devote so little energy to envisioning the world we wish to create?

When we focus on creating, we realize that no one group can construct meaningful change. There is an urgent need to work across organizational boundaries. Our first impulse is to build alliances — to seek out other individuals or groups most like us to bring about change. Our

alliances become ideological and soon we fall into the traps of problem solving.

The alternative strategy is collaborating or developing partnerships among organizations that are not similar and do not initially share worldviews. Much of this book details surprising collaborations for sustainability. Who knew that Coca-Cola worked with World Wildlife Fund on water sustainability and together they have both significantly reduced the amount of water that Coke plants use and helped rural communities in India and China to better manage the water resources available to them? While such collaborations take time and skill to develop, they create significant social change. They allow smart people who would never work together— Coke executives and WWF activists — to devise new solutions that neither alone could imagine or implement.

Senge points to a little-noted development — that while the Bush administration dallied and our earth grew warmer, innovators assembled collaborations to build greener and less wasteful ways of doing business. The lesson for the Jewish community seems clear. Where there is vision for creating positive change, opportunities for collaboration abound. And yet we have not learned how to collaborate well, which is distinct from building alliances or merging organizations.

Here is an example from Jewish education. Jewish schools and summer camps share numerous goals and serve many of the same families. Yet schools and camps do not tend to see themselves as partners for building educational alliances. They do not know how to appraise their respective resources and envision the smart ways they could hinge their efforts, which would cut costs and maximize efficiency. They have yet to learn the lessons this book offers. Our current hard times might be the lever for many such Jewish organizations to look around and ask: How can we grow smarter about working across boundaries to accomplish shared goals? Finding partners is but a first step toward developing collaboration; but with skill, patience, and imagination, collaborative possibilities can become grounds for new social change.

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