

SAMPLE Q&A

PAUL SHOEMAKER, AUTHOR OF *TAKING CHARGE OF CHANGE*

Q. How did you get to this leadership concept of “rebuilders”—because I understand this wasn’t the book you set out to write?

A. No, I didn’t start out here. This wasn’t the plan. I started by researching effective social change. Social impact. I wanted to identify what enabled certain organizations or initiatives to achieve great success on social issues while others floundered, even if trying to address the same issue. I was originally looking for best practices or model solutions. I’d been inspired by Jim Collins’s book, *Good to Great*, so I began by applying a similar model of research and questioning, only in my case centered on civic issues and social change. Although I couldn’t apply perhaps the same extent of analysis that I believe Collins did, I studied leading organizations, did loads of qualitative interviews, compiled spreadsheets, and made probably way too many Venn diagrams. This was in addition to the unique, real-world, on-the-street perspective I’ve enjoyed for two decades: prior to my consulting work, I was Exec. Dir. of Social Venture Partners, Seattle, and the Founding President of SVP International—the world’s largest philanthropic network with offices in 40 cities and 8 countries that connects social innovators, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, and business and community leaders.

As I studied this question of what drives the most successful social impact, I began noticing that the stellar cases were led by people who approached leadership *very intentionally*. And they happen to possess some strikingly similar traits. Five key traits, in fact. And even though I looked for some other “secret sauce”—like a specific organizational structure or a certain solution being applied—I kept coming back to the realization that the most important factor was this emerging type of leadership that is uniquely poised to meet the challenges we’re facing in America today. The decade ahead poses radically different challenges than even a generation ago, including near-critical levels of inequity, silos, division, and resource scarcity.

So my conclusion: it’s *great leaders*. Even more than a certain set of programs or strategies. I know leadership as a key lever isn’t a new idea, but these leaders are unique—especially for the times we are living in.

I didn't set out to write a leadership book. This wasn't what I *planned* to write—it was the book in the end I *had* to write.

Q: There are lots of books in the marketplace on leadership. What makes yours unique?

A: First off, the book is focused on people who want to create change on a social issue, civic matter, or some large-scale concern affecting society—whether they're operating in the private, public, or non-profit sector. I mean, there are some for-profit CEOs now that you would say part of their job is to be social impact leaders. So basically, “socially conscious and civically-active leaders.” If you're seeking greater impact for your efforts and you want to know what *really* works—this book's for you.

Second—and perhaps *most counterintuitive*—I'm not preaching “innovate, innovate, innovate,” which, if you get down to it, is the core message of so many leadership books of the past two decades. Not everyone is built to found a unicorn startup or create the killer app or invent the next greatest thing on earth. That too easily leads to chasing the bright, shiny object—when what we need now is to roll up our sleeves and get stuff done. In the 2020s, we're facing unprecedented challenges with limited resources and time; we have to do more with what we already have. Reuse. Recycle. Rethink. Reinvent. Refurbish. Rebuild. As I say in the book, innovation is great—but there's a deeper message here about what REALLY works to move the needle on hard change.

It's also important to understand that I'm not just writing for people who have the job title of a leader. The message around Rebuilders is also very much for “organization-less leaders,” a term used by one of the model change agents I write about in the book, Richard Woo. What he means is that the leaders that matter more now are not always at the top or even inside an organization; they are going to show up in different ways and places than we are used to.

Lastly, I don't believe any others have really done the legwork to identify the common, key traits of highly successful change agents and how they fit together for this new decade. As we've discussed, the decade is the most challenging America is going to face since at least the 1940s and WW2. Some principles of leadership are timeless, but we also need to update our thinking and lens on what makes great leaders today and what will make them great Rebuilders for the 2020s.

Q. Explain to me this analogy of “American bridges” and “rebuilders” that's at the center of the book.

A: When I was a grade-schooler growing up in Fort Dodge, Iowa, I liked to walk through the nearby Snell-Crawford Park to a small, simple arch bridge with a road running over the creek there. I'd sit underneath that bridge and wait for cars to go rumbling over. I was sort of fascinated by how a structure could hold up a whole concrete street with cars speeding across. The parts of any bridge are interrelated and form a cohesive whole. A bridge stays in place because all the forces acting on it are in balance. Today, bridges in the United States are deteriorating. A recent study shows almost 40 percent need some sort of repair and nearly 8 percent are deemed “structurally deficient” and need urgent rebuilding. The state of our deteriorating, structurally deficient bridges in 2021 is an evocative metaphor for the nation we are living in right now. The social, economic, and health

structures underlying our country have weakened. And it's getting to a critical point. Just as our deteriorating bridges will require significant resources and commitment before they can be repaired or rebuilt, America will require a unique generation of leaders to truly begin to repair and rebuild our civil society.

Those I've dubbed "Rebuilders" in this book are committed, individual, highly successful leaders who have a combination of qualities and skill sets that enable them to effectively address the unprecedented challenges we face in this decade. Particularly, the accelerating economic, social, and health disparities across an increasingly uneven, divided, and siloed America. In the book, among other things, I present a distillation of the 5 Traits of Rebuilders and how they each show up and how the combination is definitely greater than the sum of the parts.

Taking Charge of Change is filled with stories. Thirty-eight, real world, rubber-hits-the-road stories of Rebuilders. I'm a connector and a storyteller at heart—and these people are exemplars of the kind of leadership we desperately need.

Q. Some people might hear the word *rebuilders* and think you're talking about some return to the past or way things used to be. Is that your intent?

A. Nope. The book is forward thinking. My point of view is prospective, not retrospective. As I explain in the Introduction, the aspiration is "to see the complex challenges facing us in the future and the unique traits leaders will need to effectively respond." Toward the end of the book, I offer three case studies, because I want readers to have a holistic view of some real-world applications, not just see this in its parts—and even there, one is retrospective, one current, and a third prospective, aspirational scenario.

Q. Are you saying programs and strategies don't matter?

A: No, of course they matter. Just perhaps not as much as people think. There are now *proven* solutions to some of humanity's biggest problems. We KNOW how to crack some of this stuff. Things we thought were unsolvable just a few generations ago. Things like chronic homelessness, mass poverty, and sustainability. So why aren't we solving these things everywhere? One answer is, of course, that we don't have unlimited resources. But the other answer is that without the right people leading the way, the best program in the world will still likely fail—or at least fail to realize its expected impact. Also, in the 2020s, the landscape around these problems is radically shifting, too. So leaders with the traits and tools to navigate these strategies and that terrain matter even more.

Q. You say that today—even with all our connective technology & social media—America is *less* connected and *more* siloed than ever. What do you mean by that?

A. Economic, social, and health inequities in this country—after being on a generally positive or at least flat trajectory for decades—have accelerated in the past twenty years. And 2020, as we all know, just accentuated those inequities in an even more severe way and made the mountain for leaders to climb that much steeper. Our society is more fragmented and divided than ever in my lifetime. Media, technology, and COVID have been amplifiers of this. For example, all this tech

sounded great in the 90s...now we're seeing it's kind of a mixed bag, right? With all our customizations, niches, and filtering, today it's possible to enter an echo chamber of like-minded people and completely tune out facts and the experiences of other groups. That's siloed. And the complexity of these issues is off the charts. So this context is making solving social problems much harder. It's making leadership much harder. It's raising the stakes for leadership that much more.

If we're going to come out of this decade better than we came in, leaders are going to HAVE to show up big—and in lots of different places. If we only have traditional leaders in traditional places, we won't turn the tide. I predict these leaders will show up, though. As I state in the book, "I am worried about America in the dark of night, but fundamentally optimistic in the light of day." However, I also predict these Rebuilders are not always going to look like what we think a leader looks like...and they're not going to have the job titles we expected them to...and there not going to turn up in the places—like an MBA textbook—where we're used to seeing them. Just like we saw in 2020, important leaders are going to show up in new ways in new places, sometimes unexpectedly.

Q: Could you share a few favorite stories of Rebuilders that exemplify one or two of these 5 common traits?

A: I'm not sure I'd call them my favorites, because all the leaders I profiled are such rock stars at affecting change, but here are a few timely examples given what's been going on in our country. Let me focus on two of the five traits briefly, *24-7 Authenticity* and *Complexity Capacity*.

24-7 Authenticity sort of sits at the intersection of radical transparency and media-as-amplifier. To be effective, you *need* to be authentic and open before you *have* to be. It's not as if it's optional or variable in today's world anymore. A leader needs to start from that as a grounding principle. 24-7 also implies a proactive quality. Not just responsively authentic, but leaning in, pushing your edge on authenticity.

- **Alisha Valavanis** is the GM and CEO of the Seattle Storm, the local WNBA franchise. They own the distinction of being three-time WNBA World Champions, most recently 2018. Valavanis is a leadership junkie. She talks to her team constantly about being authentic. Because of her workplace, Valavanis has to think about authenticity from a team standpoint from the get-go. The team is the product. In that context, she believes the "greatest competitive advantage is to be you" and "authenticity is your only shot at truly leading." That enables the team to have an identity as a team but also each teammate to stand on her own. In Valavanis's mindset, individual authenticity leads to optimal team capacity. Unless each person is fully authentic to who they are, you won't maximize all the now-well-known benefits of diverse people, thinking, and talents on a team. That goes for sports, at work, in your community.
- Coming out of college, **Michael McAfee** was a "rising star." After a few years, he was being fast-tracked at one of the country's top community foundations. He was given greater responsibility and in the course of his work, particularly in the area of youth development, he became reacquainted with some of the inequities he had known as a young boy of color growing up in Oakland. McAfee eventually approached his bosses and laid out what he thought was wrong, broken, and needed to change. Not what they wanted to hear from their rising star. He could have easily remained quiet and stayed in good graces, but 24-7

Authenticity demanded he champion the issues he saw and press for change. By doing so, he went from being viewed as a “rising star” to an “angry black man.” So 24-7 Authenticity is not always easy and it’s not free.

McAfee later moved to Chicago and spent the next several years at the US Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). He was successful and flourished. But after some time, a valued mentor challenged him on where he was taking his career. He could have stayed in his role at HUD and been “comfortable” (Michael’s word), but he chose to move on to the next challenge. Part of 24-7 Authenticity is not running in place when it’s the easier thing to do. Today McAfee is CEO of Policy Link, a premier national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity.

Given the sheer breadth and depth of challenges future leaders must grapple with, the Capacity for Complexity is also an absolute need. Especially now in a Covid-19 world. Complexity Capacity means you not only have to be able to take in the many variables at play, but also interpret and communicate. This trait requires using both sides of your brain.

- Complexity—true complexity—is being homeless with three young sons. And then navigating your way back—all the way back—to where you are a leader “committed to making sure other parents see and exercise their power from their position and place.” That is **Erica Valliant’s** definition and life experience of complexity. She doesn’t have the title (yet) of CEO or Executive Director or Mayor, so you won’t usually see her in books on leadership. But she is exactly the kind of leader that has the capacity for complexity that we are going to need in the 2020s.

Valliant said it has made her more patient with people and able to hear and see multiple perspectives on all sides of an issue. She likes looking at things from a human-centered lens, always making sure to step back and take in the whole picture. And also making sure the right conversations happen. Here’s maybe the most important value of a leader like Erica—oftentimes, she’s the one in the room with the broadest range of life experiences, quite frequently not easy ones and outside the norm. She’s a great translator of experience and interpreter of complexity for others. Today she is the “Whole Family Systems Manager” at People Serving People, Inc. in St Paul, Minnesota. And we need more like her at the table.

Q: Does *Taking Charge of Change* take a political stance on these social issues or on the leadership of our country?

A: Certainly not directly. Although every author has their biases that will sometimes seep in, I tried to make the book as apolitical as possible. With the exception of one paragraph—which I call out explicitly in the book—I’m not addressing leadership or the 5 Traits through a political prism. I didn’t do so because: 1) I’m not qualified to talk politics—that’s not my bailiwick, and 2) part of the work of Rebuilders is to reconnect and rebuild bridges between people that have been so fractured; I didn’t want to feed that divisive narrative.

Q. You wrote this book in mid-2020. How do you think the sociopolitical events of the past few months have affected and relate to its message, if at all?

A. First, I believe there are far more private sector leaders who *genuinely, authentically* see themselves and their role within a wider, more critical sociopolitical perspective now. This was already happening before 2021. You've probably heard the expression "from 'shareholder' to 'stakeholder capitalism,'" right? While the primary role of for-profit businesses remains to make money, I think there's swiftly increasing awareness and sense of responsibility among for-profit leaders that goes beyond merely accounting for externalities. These leaders are seeing that their companies can bring about change on society's problems in some cases as effectively as nonprofit organizations can. They see that as good for their bottom line AND sincerely want to support these efforts. Take climate change. The private sector has as good a chance of making a positive impact on climate change as the public sector does. And companies that do in the future are not faking it. Because they know that in this new landscape, if they fake it, they're going to get their you-know-what kicked. So this shift in how business leaders view their roles was already happening.

Recent events in 2020 and 2021 have been a force multiplier. You see that with how the private sector responded to Jan 6th even before government acted. I believe there's now much more heightened awareness, urgency, and authenticity around what had been a gradual shift. Again, we see it's taking a unique kind of leadership for the times we live in.

Also, more broadly speaking, I truly hope my message around the critical need for Rebuilders in the decade ahead—and the evidence that many are already out there showing the way—is an uplifting, positive one. A practical step in the right direction. Back in early January, I was preparing to start getting the word out about this book when the events on Jan 6th happened. I had a moment of uncertainty: *Is this the right time to be promoting a book?* But I was encouraged by many people—including my publisher HarperCollins Leadership—who were telling me that these concepts and this evidence was needed now more than ever. That it could be a positive influence and make a real impact. And ultimately, I'm super passionate about this stuff and its validity, so I went ahead.

Q. Let's say someone buys and reads *Taking Charge of Change*; what do you hope that person learns or does differently as a result?

A. I hope they do a few things. **As an individual**, that they'll look at the 5 Traits of Rebuilders and say, "Well, I'm good at A and B, but I've got to build this muscle for C." We're putting some free resources and links on my website, PaulShoemaker.org, for each of the 5 Traits—which will connect you with organizations and materials beyond what I have to offer—and I'll also personally make available podcast episodes, seminars, and online content that helps a person dive deeper on each trait. In short, I hope readers will take advantage of a menu of mediums, content, and services on each of these 5 leadership muscles they can strengthen. More generally speaking, I want change agents to think about leadership *intentionally*. There are many leaders who don't really think about leadership, they just do it; if they're lucky, they're good at it—but most of the time they aren't. So I hope this book introduces a purposefulness about how change agents approach leadership.

In terms of teams, I'd love it if team leaders and groups asked themselves, which of these qualities and skill sets are we strong in—versus which are we missing or do we need to build together? How do we help each other see what we're powerful at—or be a role model for a certain trait? And how do we enable and accelerate each other's development as leaders?

And I hope **for organizations and companies** that they are intentionally thinking about what kind of leaders and traits exist up and down their organization. Asking, how are we making sure powerful leadership that is attuned to the needs of the 2020s is distributed, vertically and horizontally, across our org chart? Not just bolted on or some separate department but interwoven into the whole fabric of leaders across organizations.

Q. When and where is the book available? And how can those interested get more involved?

A. ***Taking Charge of Change: How Rebuilders Solve Hard Problems*** will be released on March 16 by HarperCollins Leadership in paperback, audiobook, and e-book. Available at all major booksellers.

If you pre-order now, you can download from the publisher the first half of the book immediately.

I also launched in January a podcast, [Rebuilders: The Leaders We Need For The Decade Ahead](#). In each episode I discuss these issues with another Rebuilder or a counterpoint view, or someone else who brings new context or perspective to leadership for the future. I hope the podcast becomes a conversation with new leaders, citizens, and future thinkers. We need to look at different ways of showing up as leaders in our communities and companies. The guests on the podcast meet that bar; they know how to lead in the future because it's the way they are leading now. I hope people will listen, learn, reflect, and get inspired.

You'll find the podcast on my website, [Paul Shoemaker.org](#)—or you can listen on all the usual platforms, such as Apple Podcasts, etc. Also on my site are book support materials including a free **downloadable *Taking Charge of Change Discussion Guide*** (coming soon) for groups & book clubs, information about my online events, and a robust resource list for next steps. You can also learn about my first book—*Can't Not Do: The Compelling Social Drive that Changes Our World* (Wiley, 2015)—which inspires people to get involved, to get in the game, with whatever issue, organization, or institution they're passionate about. There's plenty to sink your teeth into.

I want to end by saying that I hope to hear back from *you*. From the community of change agents. What do you think about leadership in the 2020s? Do you see yourself as a Rebuilder? Do you want to connect with other Rebuilders? Do you think I'm full of bunk?... That sort of thing. This is my passion and my focus. I welcome it all.