

David Cohen

Doing Something About It

Change is an amorphous concept. Everyone wants it in some form; few know how to bring it about. It's a word that represents untold millions of ideas, proposals, and possibilities. It's a word so encompassing and so daunting, that almost no one takes the time or energy to define exactly what "change" would look like, and even fewer push the limits of their ability to implement it. Instead we tend to fall into complacency and passive complaint, angry because change is too big, too scary, and too impossible to take on.

David Cohen, on the other hand, has spent every day of his career taking on the world's most ambiguous and ambitious task: improving the state of humanity. Since his teen years, he's been identifying problems, defining goals, and building practical solutions, all in the face of a widespread defeatism that so often cripples ability. As a teenager, David was no stranger to such defeatism. The adults in his community, including his parents, often railed against politicians and policies, but these opinions were accompanied by a decided lack of action. "I noticed that a lot of people were very opinionated about politics and complained a lot, but never really did anything about it," David remembers. "I got the feeling that, if you're going to complain, you should learn about what you're complaining about and do something about it." This realization would shape the course of his career, and indeed, his entire life.

As a senior in high school, David was elected President of the student body. Right away, he began challenging the notion that change was out of reach for the little guy. Car washes and bake sales didn't hold much appeal; instead he looked into Florida State education laws and took up a cause. It was well into the 1970s, and the Red Scare still loomed across textbooks and classrooms. In fact, the political education in Florida at the time

was pure propaganda. "The law said that schools had to teach Americanism versus Communism," David recalls. "It said that Communism had to be taught as everything evil, while our capitalist free enterprise system had to be taught as everything wonderful. But I thought we're smarter than that."

Certain that the young people of Florida were capable of drawing their own conclusions, David worked with the student council to draft a revised version of the law. They sent their proposal to the State Legislature in Tallahassee, where it was received by Bob Graham and Bill Nelson, two then little-known members who both went on to become United States Senators. The following April, during the legislative session, David got a call. He was invited to Tallahassee to testify in support of his initiative.

David was a high school kid with no experience and few connections, but that didn't stop him from trying to impact his community. His success taught him

a lesson he lives by to this day: to get something done, all you need is a good idea, a little ingenuity, and a lot of passion. Today he runs David Cohen Consulting, where he provides a wide range of services to NGOs, governments, businesses, and other groups related to food security and agricultural development. The company's services, abilities, and accomplishments are so vast and varied that they cannot be reduced to a sound bite. They write and edit proposals, provide strategies for business development, facilitate public-private partnerships, work with governments, and handle communications for an array of clients. David Cohen Consulting is present in every aspect of project development, implementation, and analysis, on both the private and public sides, and its clients have included USAID and the Department of Agriculture, as well as the Alliance to End Hunger, Shelter for Life International,



Counterpart International, ICF International, and Relief International.

With over thirty years of experience in agricultural policy and international development, David is well-positioned to help these groups achieve their various goals. Currently, he's working with Cooperative Resources International in Wisconsin to manage USAID grants in South Africa and Nicaragua. He's also in talks with the Philippines Ambassador to the U.S. to introduce more sustainable methodologies in the region's marine aquarium export trade. In Minneapolis, he worked with an NGO on an initiative to take "crop residue" in Uganda—everything left on the field after it's been farmed—and use it to produce construction materials. The UN estimates the total value of discarded crop residue to be around \$2 billion—just one example of the waste and inefficiency of current structures. He's travelled to more than fifty countries with as many distinct needs, but across the spectrum, he's noticed a commonality in the human spirit. "The thing I've learned is that no matter where you go in the world, human beings are a lot more connected than apart," he remarks now. "We speak different languages, have different color skin, and worship differently, but at the end of the day, we share a spirit of innovation and ingenuity, and we want the same things, like protection for our families. We share stories and have fun together. And we want change together. Humanity is connected."

In a world increasingly beset by environmental problems, agricultural practices all across the globe are ripe for reform. "Everything in international development starts with agriculture," David explains. "People have to eat, so communities have to grow food." Over the last few years, he's focused on creating economic engines through market-oriented solutions to development, which translates to business-led, sustainable development. Where older, charity-based models fall apart in the long-term, the newer models provide mutual gain and are able to sustain themselves. David has been at the forefront of this movement, constantly seeking out innovative and improved solutions for the world's seemingly intractable problems.

David was always ambitious, but he could hardly have imagined the extent of his future success while growing up in rural Easton, Maryland. His parents were both first-generation Americans, each born of immigrants fleeing

Eastern Europe and Czarist Russia. His father's father left Ukraine at age twelve with nothing more than fifty rubles and his own two feet. He began walking west, bribed his way across the Prussian border with cigarettes, spent a year working on a dairy farm in Holland, and made his way to London. From there, he saved enough money to book passage on a ship to Canada, where he stayed with a relative in Toronto. For a few more years, he wandered, working the docks in Chicago, meeting up with his brother in Philadelphia, and finally ending up on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, where the family settled. There, David's grandfather founded a scrap metal business, which his father reluctantly but dutifully took over. "He hated it, but that's how it was," David explains. "My father was born in 1912, so he was in his twenties—his prime years—during the Great Depression." Although he disliked the business, David's father worked hard to provide for David and his two older sisters. His mother, too, worked to keep the family business afloat, and David attributes his work ethic to the strong example set by both parents.

Just before he entered his junior year of high school, David's parents moved the family down to Florida, marking one of the hardest experiences of his young life. In Maryland, he had a life and friends, and had already been elected Junior Class President. True to form, he had persuaded the school to hold elections early, because he wanted to get a jumpstart on his term by organizing and planning over the summer. "After moving to Florida, I remember thinking I might hop on a bus and find my way back to Maryland," he says. "I was devastated for a while."

But inevitabilities never kept David down for long. Soon after settling in his new community, he set to work rebuilding. He proposed a reading program that encouraged independent learning by allotting 30 minutes a day for private reading. The administrators and students embraced the idea, and, buoyed by his initial success, he again petitioned to move the student council elections from fall to the proceeding spring. A mere nine months after arriving in Florida, David was elected Student Body President. During his term that year, his experience with the state legislature vividly illustrated the power of a single voice. "Why did that happen?" he reflects. "Because nobody told me I couldn't do it. I took that experience, and

when I went on to college I became a lobbyist for the student body.”

The University of Florida sent David to Tallahassee three years in a row to represent the 120,000 students attending all of Florida's public universities. His work there installed a new student member on the State Board of Regents and gave the student population a voice on a range of issues, including tuition costs. His achievements were hardly the norm; he was a college student, surrounded by a lot of young people searching for meaningful experiences—some in all the wrong places. “I started getting into these leadership positions and thought, ‘This is kind of fun!’ Now, I wasn’t a total nerd,” he laughs, “but not everyone was as driven as I was, and I liked accomplishing things where I could see a positive impact. At a young age, I learned that self-esteem comes from overcoming adversity to achieve success.” David’s productive time in Gainesville only reinforced what he’d already begun to recognize back in high school: that the only real limitations in life are those we imagine for ourselves.

Fresh off of earning his Bachelor’s Degree in Political Science, David headed to Washington, D.C. to pursue his Master’s of Public Administration at American University. The degree comprised an internship, and David, as usual, went above and beyond what was expected. For a year, he interned as a Congressional Affairs Specialist for the Farm Credit Administration while at AU, where he helped found the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies and helped design and implement government relations seminars for IBM and USPS executives. His accomplishments stood out, and in 1980, the year he graduated, David interviewed to work for Ed Jaenke, a former governor of the FCA. Jaenke was a prominent public official who’d been shortlisted to serve as the Secretary of Agriculture under President Carter. When Nixon came into office, he moved over to the private sector and founded E. A. Jaenke & Associates, a consulting firm that worked with governments, agricultural trade associations, commodity groups, cooperatives, and virtually every other player in the field.

For fourteen years, David worked closely with Jaenke, who became a close friend, mentor, and father figure. Together, they successfully lobbied to save the National Cooperative Bank and the Farm Credit System from legislative assaults. They advised the Japan International Agricultural

Council on policy, helped launch the Citizen’s Network NGO, and undertook countless other projects in the name of sound agricultural policy. And in that time, David learned firsthand how to build a business on the back of one’s values. “That job defined my career,” he says. “We got to do the most interesting things. We picked what we wanted to participate in and didn’t do what we didn’t want to do. Jaenke was a rainmaker type who knew lots of people. And I got the echo of that, which created everything for me. He believed in me, and I believed in him. He was loyal, and I was loyal. I knew the only way I could pay him back was to pay it forward. A former young staffer and I have almost the same kind of relationship today.” The people David met and the relationships he built while working with Jaenke continue to serve him well to this day.

All good things, however, must come to an end, and in 1994, Jaenke announced his imminent retirement. Although he had hoped David would take over the business, the offer was declined. “I knew what I couldn’t do,” David explains. “I could run it day-to-day, but I wasn’t the guy to bring in new business. I didn’t have the stature.” Jaenke sold E.A. Jaenke & Associates to what was then the largest agriculture consulting firm in the country, Sparks Companies. David went with it as the key executive and was given the title of Vice President of Policy Monitoring and Analysis. He could easily have stayed in the position for life, but two years later, he found himself unhappy with the vastly different culture of the firm. True to form, he decided to do something about it—even though that “something” meant taking a huge risk. His wife, Michele, was pregnant, and he had no new job waiting, but he believed deeply in himself, his ideas, and his abilities. That year, in 1996, he founded his first consulting business, David Cohen and Associates.

David began consulting for a range of clients, including many he’d worked with before on the agricultural side, as well as groups like the Foundation for Democracy in Africa and Women for Women International. During his first year of independent consulting, he began hearing more and more about the then-nascent concept of using business, rather than charity, to create development. One group doing such work was the Citizens’ Network for Foreign Affairs, and David wasted no time hitching his wagon to their train. As usual, his methods were simple and direct. “I

knew the CEO from years earlier, so I walked in and basically said, 'Hey, I like what you're doing here.' A week later, I started working there."

The organization created a position for him, and David began working with agri-business firms, drumming up enterprise-led development partnerships in countries in Eastern Europe and Russia. He held a full-time job at the Citizen's Network for Foreign Affairs for the next three years, all the while also consulting through David Cohen & Associates. Then, in 2000, one of his major clients, Counterpart International, asked him to come onboard as Director of their Program Development unit. He accepted, and for five years, he improved proposal writing and win rates, and was promoted to Vice President in 2005.

By 2007, David's work with Counterpart was more than a full-time job. He had been promoted to Vice President of Food Security and Nutrition, choosing to give up his private consulting for the time being. Under David's stewardship, Counterpart's handful of projects in Senegal grew to an array of projects across the region. Business overall grew by 130 percent, and the proposal win-rate climbed to an unprecedented 77 percent. The projects themselves were hardly typical; the group was already working on impact investment, getting capital into impoverished economies, and consistently anticipating international needs. "In Niger, we partnered with the U.S. Geological Survey to work on climate change issues with the Minister of Environment," he says. "Even though the way things are run can be focused and narrow, we were looking for innovation."

David spent four more years with Counterpart before deciding it was time to move on. Work, to him, had always been about the pursuit and achievement of progress, and he had come to feel he could best accomplish this vision by re-starting David Cohen Consulting to regain flexibility and agility. Since 2011, he has remained steadfast in his self-guided pursuit of meaningful projects. "I've been very fortunate that I've gotten to do the things I believe are important and that truly make a contribution," he says today. "I want to leave the world a better place than when I got here." Of course, it's more than good fortune that

got him here- he can also thank his hard work, talent, and continual innovation.

As a leader, David believes that success is built not only through one's hard work, knowledge, and creativity, but also through the team that surrounds you. "I think the most important position in a company is HR," he asserts. "People are everything. You have to find people who are compatible, and you have to treat them with dignity and respect." To young people hoping to someday achieve success, he advises boldness. "Don't ever say no to an opportunity," he says. "Don't play it safe. Be passionate, because if you follow that passion, you'll be successful at whatever you do. You'll have fun, you'll love doing it, and you'll make a difference. And never give up. Be tenacious about everything."

Beyond this, he echoes the refrain of his favorite story, *Fiddler on the Roof*, which, at its heart, is an anthem of change and survival that underpins all enduring success. In a world that remains in a constant state of flux, rigidity guarantees failure. "You can stay true to your principles, but you have to be willing to adapt," he says. "Change is constant. It's the story of life. Success takes many paths, so don't stay stuck in one place. You have to be willing to change and evolve, and you have to be willing to do something about it, whatever 'it' may be."

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