

Cheryl Dorsey

President, Echoing Green

Cheryl L. Dorsey is a trailblazer in the social entrepreneurship movement and the president of Echoing Green, a global nonprofit that supports emerging social entrepreneurs and invests deeply in their ideas and leadership. Before joining Echoing Green in 2002, Cheryl received an Echoing Green Fellowship in 1992 to help launch The Family Van, a community-based mobile health unit, leveraging her medical and public policy training to address racial health disparities in Boston.

As a leader in the social entrepreneurship movement, Cheryl believes that social innovation is key to driving social change in a world in which structural inequities are so entrenched—and that they require an equally powerful approach to dismantle the status quo. Here, she shares her thoughts on the role entrepreneurship plays in social change and how this moment could allow us to pivot in profound ways.

Current Focus

Echoing Green is trying to tell the world that the status quo isn't working for people of color and marginalized groups. Across the 20th century, society saw tremendous success using approaches such as rights-based movements, community organizing, and advocacy as powerful tools for driving social change. Today, while it's clear that those approaches are still necessary, we need additional tactics to advance the kind of change we need to drive. That's where I see social innovation helping to drive progress farther faster.

Why Social Innovation?

Social innovation is predicated on the notion that structural inequities are so entrenched and powerful that you need to use another equally powerful approach, such as entrepreneurship, which is all about creative destruction that allows you to dismantle some of these systems. Social innovation can also lead to leaping over some of these inequities to build toward a more equitable and sustainable

world. For Echoing Green, that looks like doubling down on a social innovation approach that raises up, identifies, and invests in disruptive solutions while also bringing racial equity to the lens to center leaders of color and support them as they build power to do this work. Identifying organizations by and for people of color and providing them with the resources they need to scale and impact: that's what we're doing.

A Pivotal Moment

We're in a particular moment. Historian Frank Snowden, whose specialty is pandemics across history, talks about how pandemic impacts amplify distinct structural inequities and how they can provide a moment for potential transformation. Both of these are true in this moment, with the additional overlay of the racial uprisings following George Floyd's murder being captured on camera. You have the combination of the disproportionate incidence and death rates of people of color with COVID-19 and the visual representation of state-sanctioned violence on black bodies that, for many people, made structural racism tangible for the first time. Perhaps you're in your suburban enclave and nobody you know is impacted—suddenly, you're looking at communities that are decimated because they're living in crowded spaces or don't have access to healthcare. These issues are front and center in a way they haven't been in a long time. Pandemics open us up to make sweeping changes. As illustrated through Frank Snowden's work, pandemics create societal dualities: on the one hand, you may witness the demons in all of us rise up in the treatment or victimization of certain groups, while on the other, profoundly positive impacts have come out of pandemics, such as public health infrastructure after the bubonic plague.

A lot of things that come out of this moment could allow us to pivot in profound ways. There's a decision that needs to be made collectively: can we make this a positive transformational moment, or will we revert to our worst instincts?

Division of Power

The work Echoing Green does is to have a trenchant analysis around power. Social movements are all about shifting power. I break it down into four realms: institutional power, influencer power, people power, and narrative power. These types of power work better in concert. For example, we can't only double down on narrative power—we need influencer power, too. Who are the key players that, if you can shift their mindset, can help move the needle in terms of how resources are deployed and how policy is made? How do you leverage different groups of power until change is achieved?

Business's Role in Social Change

I got engaged in social innovation to find answers at the root of its very definition, which is the blurring of sectoral boundaries: how do you bring together the state, civil society, and the market to create new and shared value? Recognizing that business has to be an ally and champion in this work, the model of mission-driven businesses in these areas can't be understated. I joined the board of a mission-driven business called Oak Street Health, a primary care network for Medicare Advantage seniors. They're scaling rapidly, and their health outcomes are spectacular. Determining how to scale enterprises to deliver lower-cost quality care at scale is part of the work industry has to do. What are the business models for the 21st century that will allow us to reduce the longevity gap? That is number one. There is also the recognition of how you shift capital flows and align them to bring more resources to fund this work to make sure philanthropic dollars and debt-equity are getting aligned to the best solutions and leaders in that space.