

Change Agency Interview #1: Sense-Making

My change agent interviewee is Cyndy Andela, CEO of Andela Product, Sioneer, and Ruby Lake Glass which are all glass processing and recycling companies. I became interested in learning more about Cyndy's journey since our first meeting at the Goodwill Industries International Sustainability Summit in August. She is doing amazing and impactful work, clearly brilliant, but so understated, humble and grounded. Learning how Cyndy entered into this space, has been able to grow and succeed in a non-traditional sector for women has lived up to expectations. I feel fortunate to share her story capturing her unconscious competence as a change agent and found that her entire journey has been one of being a constant change agent. This observation is supported by the fact she chose an engineering path - at the time only 10% of women were represented - to becoming an entrepreneur developing patented products, to taking on large corporations in order to make a statement that change can be achieved. Please join me in learning more about this incredible individual.

While at the University of Michigan, Cyndy elected to embark upon a technical engineering degree. One of her professors was adamant that each student focus on an engineering path that would change the industry and positively impact the world. As a direct result of this challenge, she volunteered at a recycling center during undergrad which became the spark that ignited her passion to find a better way to reuse recycled materials. She also learned very quickly that she loved to solve problems and upon finishing her degree at University of Michigan, she went to worked for GE in aerospace engineering. What she learned and absorbed while at GE was invaluable and typically very hierarchical in nature. During our discussion, she identified her first squiggle moment as a change agent was her need to abandon the corporate world and follow her true passion of finding a way to change the world through recycling. What a move considering the financial upside of continuing at GE versus leaving that stability behind to follow

her passion. This pivot was likely driven by her parallel journey of obtaining her MBA at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI). After researching this university, it became clear Cyndy was destined to be a change agent. RPI's charter is to "make a world-changing difference" and their call to action to attract students is to "join a legacy of changemakers confronting the most pressing problems facing humanity and our planet". (Source: <https://www.rpi.edu/about>)

During our discussion, Cyndy recalled a pivotal moment in her life where she was discussing her future with her parents and realized the corporate world was not for her. They challenged her to follow her passion, setting the tone and fostering an adaptive approach to change. Parent/child relationships, even when beyond a child's teen years, tend toward a hierarchical framework but it was interesting to note from a theoretical perspective that Cyndy was likely raised in an adaptive environment. I want to explore this more during our second interview. I have a theory that being raised in an environment like Cyndy's fostered her success as a change agent. Why? I would like to explore the possibility that the psychologically safe environment formulated by her parents is what allowed Cyndy to challenge status quo and embrace change with the tenacity to power through any friction she faced and still faces today. Definitely a topic I want to delve into more deeply during our next discussion.

Foundationally, Cyndy's journey has been one of continual change initiatives versus one significant example. As a CEO and business owner, she manages three different companies with anywhere from 12-15 employees. Her key objectives are providing direction, strategy, and leadership. On a daily basis, Cyndy finds herself torn between engineering tendencies and her enjoyment of being a people person. She summed up these two tendencies as a "blessing and a curse" which she stated her brain battles on a continual basis. I thought this was an interesting comment and exemplified traditional engineering characteristics (hierarchical) compared to acknowledgement of being a people person (adaptive). What

this leads me to believe that Cyndy has organically managed to balance these two leadership styles effectively.

Cyndy's passion and main objective is to take on recycling glass via pulverization techniques and turning it into something to make something else. When sharing this journey of pioneering new technologies to pulverize glass into sand, Cyndy recalled just diving in and structured her creation of these products in a very logical, methodical fashion. This was not surprising considering her engineering background. She spoke about not being focused on comparable technologies, rather tackling how she would design a solution to recycle glass and create circular uses from the recycled product. As a result of this approach, Cyndy took on all roles from designing, creating, and launching a new product. She learned quickly that the waste industry was very entrenched in traditional ways versus embracing new approaches. Yet she continued to press forward and find ways to achieve her goals. Her journey has been a constant squiggle, full of many pivots, and pioneering new ways of thinking on solving the glass waste problem. Being flexible was key and what she recalled as "being the voice in the wilderness". What I heard from our discussion was one of grit and perseverance and not backing down no matter the friction which was frequent.

An example of this was her major competitors are corporations who own landfills mainly because hauling glass is big money. Waste management and recycling companies can move significant amounts of glass since it does not fill a lot of space, but glass is heavy and pays well since trucks transporting glass are paid per ton. Further stunting glass recycling is the misnomer that allowing glass to accumulate in landfills is not as damaging as other waste since glass does not create methane. This becomes the enemy of good since the waste management and recycling industry creates a narrative that feeds into consumers not being concerned about glass recycling.

Given this challenge, Cyndy launched her products internationally as this market was more open to an adaptive approach to recycling. Her intent on designing equipment that is simple and easy to maintain paid off with this pivot. This strategy allowed her to scale quickly and more efficiently when dealing with multiple international locations where she could leverage her products. She relied heavily on local partners to facilitate communication in country, launch her recycling initiatives and become the eyes, ears and feet on the ground to install and train companies who purchase her equipment. I found her strategy to be an interesting pivot which allowed her to gain traction with her product while continuing to educate and work through the forensic mapping process of gaining traction in the United States.

One concept I picked up on quickly was Cyndy's desire to start local and stay local. She is focused on creating a circular approach to recycling. Her passion is one of education and dispersing info on how to use the material to create commerce and opportunity where previously the glass would have been left sitting untouched, effectively squandering the opportunity to make something useless into something useful.

An example of her commitment is her involvement with Caltech, a local company committed to revitalizing Timor-Leste. Their founder is committed to creating an environment that embraces the circular approach to waste recycling knowing the island is constrained to obtain resources but also to remove waste. The island has found ways to how to recycle food and steel, but plastics and glass are either too mixed or too heavy. This is where Cyndy has helped solve the glass recycling issue through her product that pulverizes glass and can be reused in construction, landscaping and restoring beaches. She is so encouraged seeing what is happening with Timor-Leste that she wants to see similar approaches deployed island by island and community by community. She is not daunted by the large corporations such as Pepsi and others who profit from selling their product but miss the opportunity to be part of the change agency through delivering solutions and financing to recycle materials locally. She continues to

advocate to get the message across that recycling glass is not a bottle-to-bottle solution but can be a bottle to sand solution. Even though she continues to face traditional mindsets, she is determined to convey the message to think differently to solve problems. She finds people get overwhelmed with the enormity of where to begin. Her charter from the beginning has been to start in your community and make the circularity happen there in order to gain traction and broaden your impact.

Change Agency - Final Interview Review

Further Review of Cyndy's Story

My second interview with Cyndy Andela was more enjoyable than the first which was a treat. I was so curious about an exchange from our first interview related to a passing comment she made regarding her parents, their parenting approach and wanted to explore further. Luckily for me, Cyndy was gracious and shared background on her childhood, upbringing, and how she believes her parents shaped her to become the change agent she is today. With that, let me share her story which defines her success, humble, unconscious competent approach and her impact on Sustainability.

Cyndy is of Dutch heritage – the second oldest of eight children and first daughter. She spoke in a very matter-of-fact tone of her childhood which constituted parents who did not hover – this was a key takeaway. She recalled her parents providing guidelines and principles which fostered a safe environment. Cyndy was encouraged to follow what she thought needed to be done to address issues. Through this approach, she was raised in a household that has yielded a family of entrepreneurs and natural risk takers. Learning how to solve problems “on the fly” became second nature, not something that was overwhelming or daunting. This psychologically safe environment fostered a fierce sense of risk taking with no fear in doing so. As she stated, her parents encouraged the mindset of trying everything and to take the risk. If it did not work at first, keep trying and persevering. Through this upbringing, she learned persistence and grit from early days. She recalled having the space and freedom to be whatever her passion was and to open the doors to pursue that passion.

This upbringing led to her leaving GE to stay true to herself given she did not love the corporate environment. She knew climbing the corporate ladder and jockeying to sustain professional growth was not her future. Her next chapter became one of following her passion, so she pivoted to a life of poverty (said lovingly) to pursue a life of meaning and purpose. While this was a big risk due to no guarantees of income or

security all while recently starting a family, she had no fear because she had confidence in her curiosity and passion to forge the path she was destined to follow.

That pivot led to creating and growing the equipment manufacturing sector related to glass recycling along with continually pursuing expanded uses for the recycling byproduct. She committed to starting small and growing at a rate that was sustainable which has created an environment of stability and organic expansion. Her success is a testament to the adaptive environment her parents cultivated, instilling a change agent mindset which characterizes her success.

Adapting in Current Context

During our discussion, we spoke about a recycling conference Cyndy had attended the week prior and her bewilderment that there is still a struggle to achieve the change in thinking needed to elevate the importance of glass recycling. She believes that no matter how the next year(s) play out it will be more important than ever for individuals to drive sustainable practices. The need to elevate change agent's voices and positions will be more critical than ever. Cyndy believes that we need more people who will lead the charge without the support or push from the government to do so. She is enthusiastic about starting at home and finding circular approaches to fostering recycling efforts that address issues while benefiting communities and growing beyond to state and regional.

Course Content Parallels

Cyndy and I discussed several principles of the course such as hierarchical versus adaptive leadership styles, managing the squiggle and how to adapt when friction arises. We discussed how she manages her business which she credits her upbringing to her adaptive leadership style. She did state that she is overwhelmed by traditionalists who are reluctant to change and evolve while continuing to hold onto strict hierarchical methodologies. Cyndy believes there is a need for dependence and interdependence when managing and looking to grow businesses and accelerate sustainability initiatives. She used the example of

a flock of birds when making the comparison that growth is not linear and there needs to be recognition of interdependence like a flock of birds. She believes leadership styles need to take on the behavior patterns of a flock of birds. When a bird in the flock encounters an obstacle, perceived danger, or the need to change course, it breaks off from the flock. Organically, the rest of the flocks recognizes the pivot, trusts the decision and follows in the new direction. Cyndy's analogy was applicable to the approaches we have been learning throughout the course, simply put, traditional leadership and management needs to evolve and change.

Cyndy also talked about learning to fail forward quickly and pivot when appropriate in order to continue to ensure her companies are relevant in the recycling vertical. A good example is her desire to constantly find additional avenues in which the recycled glass byproduct can be used in other mediums and verticals. She is resolute in finding new uses for recycled glass and shift from the traditionalist mindset that recycled glass has to revert to recycled glass. Her charter is to evangelize that recycled glass can be repurposed into other uses such as sand for construction, landscaping and restoring eroding coastal areas. This is an excellent example of how Cyndy manages the squiggle as she navigates the friction of traditionalists in the space.

Recommendations

Cyndy is continually looking at new sources of glass that can be recycled. She is committed to expanding the provisions and solutions around recycled glass. Her mission is to develop a pathway to market applications for recycled glass and understands to needs to tell the story better – that glass to sand is circular – and open new markets for the recycled product. An example Cyndy highlighted was the admiration she has for Franziska Trautman who highlights her co-founded company, Glass Half Full, through social media - disrupting traditional lines of thinking when it comes to recycling glass. (Source: Andela Products, October 2024: <https://andelaproducts.com/blog/glass-half-full-founder-franziska-trautmans-ted-talk/>)

I would challenge Cyndy to lean into her market development efforts and continue to find business ventures and partners to help expand her reach. Expanding beyond being the lone evangelist in her company will be critical to expansion - either through partnerships with other social media influencers like Franziska or taking the leap and adding that component to her staff. One of the tag lines from Ruby Lake Glass, another company Cyndy owns, cites "What's Your Possible". (Source: <https://www.rubylakeglass.com/>) Touting this phrase seems to capture the essence of who Cyndy is, always pushing the limits to understand the next possible.

Patterns Distillation

Change agents require grit, perseverance and passion all the while with a foundation of deep empathy. The common denominator for me was each change agent's ability to empathize in order to connect with every individual that was critical to the path of change. Their passion is organic which enabled a vulnerability that laid the foundation for the ability to overcome obstacles through grace and authenticity.

Application to My Experiences

My interactions with Cyndy have simply inspired me. She may be the definition of unconscious competence and learning more about her journey - I believe being a change agent has been a part of her DNA, her destiny. Cyndy's commitment to methodically carving out relevance for glass recycling is a testament to formulating her passion into meaningful impact. She reminded me that following your passion and doing what is right is always the right path. Encountering friction is inevitable but not insurmountable. As she stated during our first interview, just start. Even if it is a small endeavor in your neighborhood, just start and work hard to realize the larger, scalable potential in your city, state and region. I do not think it is a coincidence that Cyndy is bound by grit, a key to her success and impact in the recycling industry. Grit can be defined by small loose particles of sand and in the same vein as courage, resolve, determination, and perseverance. These similarities feel like Cyndy's destiny and her ultimate success as a change agent.