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Exclusive Interview: Jack Lowe on Why Ashoka’s Next Leap Depends on Execution, Fundraising Systems—and Learning by Doing

In a moment when social innovation is being tested by geopolitical turbulence and tighter funding climates, [Jack Lowe](#)—an 84-year-old entrepreneur and investor, former McKinsey & Company leader in Japan, and the founder of [Fit for Life](#), a longevity-focused foundation—argues that Ashoka’s next leap will depend on something deceptively simple: sharper execution, stronger fundraising systems, and a more “business-trained” way of learning—by doing, failing, and iterating. In this conversation with Yuliya Koroleva, Lowe reflects on what business can teach social entrepreneurship (and vice versa), how AI can modernize fundraising, why longevity is a powerful entry point for systems change, and what he would prioritize if he had a “magic wand” to accelerate Ashoka’s impact.

Fit for Life, longevity, and why this became personal

How did you become involved with Ashoka, and how did Fit for Life begin?

I didn’t know Ashoka for that long, actually. I was briefly connected to the support group in Geneva some years ago, and was later invited to a meeting in Bilbao.. The big new project being discussed was longevity. I have a foundation built around that—Fit for Life—so I went. I was struck by what people believed they could do. I was asked to be part of it, and I said yes, because this is what I know: how to build programs, how to take care of yourself over time, how to set things up so they work in real life.

Why did you create your own foundation rather than only partnering with existing NGOs?

I sold one of my companies, so I had funding and wanted to give it back in a structured way. A foundation is one of the best ways to do that. But it’s not always easy—there’s a lot of bureaucracy, especially in Switzerland. We also created a prize process to identify and support strong operators. Between 2021 and 2024, we selected 12 “laureates”—organizations with proven impact in healthy aging. One example is [Siel Bleu](#), led by Ashoka Fellow Jean-Michel Ricard, co-founder of the movement and one of the largest initiatives in Europe focused on older people’s health. During COVID, as much of the available funding shifted toward emergency response, it highlighted the growing importance of private philanthropy for many NGOs. Our initiative remained largely self-funded..

What is the link between Ashoka and Fit for Life?

My foundation does not have a direct organizational link with Ashoka. I’m a partner, and I try to use my experience to help Ashoka be more modern in how it does things: how it plans, how it builds processes, and how it thinks about scale. One area I care about is getting more people—especially children—into sport and lifelong healthy habits. Ashoka has already initiated work like this in the United Kingdom. Sport makes people healthier, but it also teaches teamwork, resilience, and how to grow through challenge. Those habits matter for life—and for leadership. I also simply enjoy working with this community. There’s a high level of intellectual ability, but what impresses me even more is the ability to deal with the public across countries, cultures, and languages. That is real capability.



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“Ashoka needs modern fundraising, and AI can help”

What is your partnership with Ashoka actually about?

Ashoka has its own history and objectives. I’m a partner, I try to contribute experience: practical planning, modernizing fundraising, and using AI to raise money more systematically. For example, with AI you can map philanthropic infrastructure country by country; who the public offices are, who runs them, where they are, how to reach them. Historically, fundraising has been more ad hoc: pharma sponsorships like Boehringer Ingelheim, family foundations, and so on. But it hasn’t always been built as a repeatable process with trained fundraisers and clear procedures.

Sports as a system-change tool

You’ve spoken about sport as part of your vision. Why does it matter so much?

Because sport keeps people healthy over a lifetime, and it teaches teamwork, discipline, how to win and lose. Losing teaches you more than winning. One thing I’m keen to support is getting children in public schools more involved in sport — football, swimming, cycling. Ashoka has work in this area already in England, spearheaded by Kelly Davies. I spent much of my life organizing teams — basketball, cycling — so I know how to build that kind of structure.

To be included as a side note: [Home | Ashoka Sport for Changemaking](#)

From Stanford to Tokyo to Switzerland: a business life in phases

Your career spans many worlds: consulting, Japan, venture capital, franchises. What shaped your approach?

I started in California at Stanford University, working closely with a finance professor and writing about how large organizations are run. I was immersed in a business school environment, but I also wanted an active life — surfing near Santa Cruz, just 45 minutes away, was part of why I chose that path. After completing my MBA, I wanted to work in Japan. I joined Caltex, where I worked on crude oil supply planning across regions including the Middle East and Indonesia. I lived in Tokyo, learned Japanese, and had a very strong personal and professional experience there. Later, I joined McKinsey & Company and eventually became president in Japan, covering the Far East and helping build teams and presence across multiple markets. During that period, one of our children became seriously ill and needed specialized treatment at the University of California Hospital, which led us to return to the United States and then relocate permanently to Switzerland. In Switzerland, I set up several businesses moved into venture capital — strongly influenced by networks and thinking from Palo Alto — which was very successful. I later set up a private equity firm, which proved more challenging, as existing companies are often complex to assess and transform. After that, I built and managed franchise businesses, including automotive services and fast-food operations. At the age of 78, I sold those businesses. That liquidity allowed me to create the Fit for Life foundation and to focus more intentionally on longevity, health, and impact—investing my time and resources in work that truly matters.



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Social entrepreneurship and venture capital: where they meet

What should social entrepreneurs and venture capital learn from each other?

Many social entrepreneurs should do more for-profit activity — when possible — because it gives them fuel to expand and protect their mission long-term. Not everything can be monetized. But many models can. I gave an example of one of our laureates, Mission for Vision, which works to eradicate blindness by providing eye care to the disadvantaged in India. A portion of patients pay full cost, others pay what they can, and the rest is subsidized by a foundation, so the system sustains itself and scales. Those kinds of hybrid models are powerful. It also creates a discipline: you build systems that can operate over time, not only through grants. My practical priority for the field is: improve the fundraising system and train people who can do it well —and, where it fits — build models that generate some surplus to reinvest in scale.

The documentary: proving performance after 50

Tell me about your documentary [Dare to Dream](#), which has just been released. What message are you bringing into the world, and for whom?

[Fit for Life - Dare to Dream Trailer](#)

I wanted to show that staying fit — especially after 50 — is possible and transformative. We organized a cycling challenge modelled on the climbs of the Tour de France: seven days, 11 mountain passes, steep gradients. Everyone was over 50. No professionals. We filmed it with a very skilled cameraman. We submitted it to three streaming services, and it was accepted by all three. We recently reached a major milestone, with the film now available in many regions on Amazon Prime Video . The point is simple: if you keep working at it, improving, learning what you didn't know before, you can do far more than you think — even at my age.

Note: watch the film at [Prime Video: Fit for Life - Dare to Dream](#)

“Modernization starts at the top”

If you could modernize one thing in Ashoka, what would it be?

Probably governance. Ashoka's board has offered remarkable continuity and commitment over the years, and that stability has served the organization well. At the same time, I think we've reached a moment where a gentle renewal could bring real added value.

What I would love to see is an expansion of the board with a few complementary profiles; for example:

- someone with very strong fundraising expertise,
- someone who can design and drive business plans with clear objectives and timelines, and



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- someone with recognized credibility in the health and longevity space who can help elevate our visibility and build trust with new partners.

This is not about questioning what exists; it's about equipping Ashoka for the challenges ahead. If we want initiatives like the longevity program to accelerate, we need governance that can combine strategic thinking, operational agility and disciplined execution.

More broadly, I'd love to see more social-impact organizations — including Ashoka — adopt governance models that help them navigate volatility and scale what works. Good ideas shouldn't stay small simply because the structure around them can't move fast enough.

So, with a “magic wand,” would you prioritize attracting and retaining young talent?

Change matters, but not reckless change. Ongoing renewal, more specialization, clearer roles. Not everyone on a board is there for the right reason; you want people who can carry real responsibility.

What Ashoka changed in you

After engaging with Ashoka, what has changed for you personally?

It changed me. I've met so many people, been to many meetings, worked closely with several fellows. It made me feel I haven't seen everything, and maybe there's still a contribution I can make. I'm happy with that. It's also made me realize I haven't seen everything and that, even at my age, there are still areas where I can help build something that lasts.

Interview conducted by Yuliya Koroleva, ASN Global Communication Manager, for Ashoka's ASN Series.