

# FOREWORD TO TEAMKRACHT MET PROSOCIAL

ProSocial is a community and a method that is built upon three core ideas: the critical importance of psychological flexibility for creating and sustaining human thriving, Ostrom's ideas regarding the commons, and evolutionary science. Since the first Prosocial book by myself, David Sloan Wilson and Steven C Hayes was published in 2019, the ProSocial method has been adopted globally. As of the time of this writing, the not-for-profit organization ProSocial World has trained over 800 facilitators, and ProSocial is being used in hundreds, if not thousands of groups globally. We are seeing discussion of ProSocial springing up in numerous academic articles and chapters, and we are hard at work building a global ecosystem of 'communities as field sites' practicing the approach and sharing best practice.

For me, the best part of this work is getting to meet people like Jenny and Matthijs, who are wonderful practitioners with deep passion and skills for helping people to organize in ways that support human thriving, and the intellectual interests and capabilities to organize their ideas clearly to teach others. That is why I am so delighted to have been asked to write this foreword for their new book on ProSocial.

As Jenny and Matthijs make beautifully clear, ProSocial is about balancing individual and collective interests. In this time of deep divisions politically, socially, and economically, it is hard to imagine a more important topic. It is so critical that I often wonder why it is not taught as a central topic in schools. How can we get along with one another in a way that acknowledges our individual passions and choices, but also creates opportunities for collective action? If we are to address this question, I believe we need to get a lot better at bringing awareness to the ways we organize and collaborate.

ProSocial World's **purpose** is **"to consciously evolve a world that works for all"**. We do this by building individual and collective capacity for collaboration through research, facilitation, and experiential learning. This book is an important part of that effort for the Dutch-speaking community. Let's consider some of the elements of this purpose statement.

## **Building Individual and Collective Capacity for Collaboration**

This book can be seen as a course in leadership. But not leadership in the sense of a position of leadership or at least a role where one is telling others what to do. We want groups to be "leaderful" in the sense that we are all leading, as much of the time as possible. For me, leadership is a behavior – specifically the rather complex behavior of sensing and communicating what needs to change while also mobilizing people to work together to achieve that change. When many people in a group behave as leaders in this sense, the group can rapidly find a shared purpose and the means to achieve that purpose.

This is what I hope this book can help to do – help people learn to do a kind of facilitative, 'servant' leadership that relies upon a host of other capabilities: systemic sensemaking, listening, dialogue, visioning, authentic expression, courage, imagination, and love. In my view, if we genuinely empower enough people to dream of the futures they want, and to boldly take action in a way that honors both their own and others' dreams, then we will shift the needle toward a world that works better for all.

I believe ProSocial is also making a cultural contribution 'top-down' by helping to change our collective narrative regarding what is, and what might be possible. We aim to question how individualism has crept into every facet of our lives and honor human beings as both whole and complete in themselves but also parts of larger wholes that discourage pure self-interest and encourage collaboration. And we aim to demonstrate that humans can be remarkably cooperative when we create favorable conditions for cooperation to occur.

In some ways, this work is even more powerful than the bottom-up work of enhancing facilitative leadership. Work done by the Common Cause organization in the United Kingdom makes it clear that the stories we tell about the nature of humanity matter. Our identities shape our actions. When we believe others are selfish, we act more selfishly ourselves. And when we believe others are more benevolent, we act more compassionately and cooperatively. Of course, we are not naive. Human beings can be incredibly cruel and selfish. But despite what corporate and social media might have you believe, most human relations are civil, amiable, and constructive.

And, if we bring the facilitative leadership skills that this book helps to foster: listening for needs and values, finding shared vision and purpose, and mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges together, we know we can increase the frequency of civil, and decrease the frequency of uncivil, behaviors. Let's now consider what it means to create a world that works for all.

## **Creating a World That Works for All**

What might 'a world that works for all' look like? Of course, we don't have in mind a world where everybody is always happy. Life is simply not like that. As you will learn from the chapters on psychological flexibility in this book, suffering is built into human existence. As soon as we care for anything, we care about failing to attain it, or losing it. We project fearful futures and regret mistakes we have made in the past.

A world that works for all is, in my view, a result of as many people as possible being alive to their own needs and the needs of others, moment to moment. By 'alive to', I mean not only sensing needs but striving as best they can to meet those needs.

And of course, this is continuing, ongoing work. Our needs exist in the relational space between ourselves and others, and they are continually evolving. I am suggesting that asking in almost every moment that allows, "What really matters most to me in this situation?" and "What really matters most to 'them' in this situation?" is the most simple but profound thing we can do toward co-creating a world that works for all.

I think this book will help you develop the skills to ask these questions productively in many different contexts.

## **Consciously Evolving**

This is perhaps the most challenging part of Prosocial World's purpose for many people, so I have tackled it last. You might think this is a vague, new-age way of speaking. But conscious evolution is at the heart of our vision and, ultimately, at the heart of this book.

Evolution isn't just about genetics and epigenetics; it is also about the processes of variation, selection, and retention of individual behaviors and ideas (memes if you like), and it is continuously unfolding at multiple levels. Individuals evolve, groups evolve, cultures evolve, and even, potentially, humanity can evolve in its behavior. When we say 'evolve', we don't just mean 'change'. We mean the Darwinian process of variation, selection, and retention of behaviors in context. Let's unpack this idea.

Variation simply refers to the repertoire of behavior. If we never try something, we can never learn if it is effective for our goals. So, generally, having a manageable amount of variation increases the rate of evolution. Variation is the raw material of evolution. Of course, just as in genetics, too much behavioral variation leads to chaos and dissolution. So the key is having just enough variation to produce adaptive change, while not so much that the system is overwhelmed and loses its integrity.

Selection of behavior is at the heart of our method. For organisms without cognition, selection processes are relatively 'blind' and simple in the sense that those species that behave in ways that increase the chances of surviving to reproductive age are selected and retained. For humans, with the capacity to use language to imagine possible futures and compare those futures to possible pasts, the process of behavioral selection becomes vastly more complex. For a start, there are an infinite number of selection targets. My behavior can be selected by my desire to finish this article, my desire to exercise, or any number of an infinitude of other possible things that might matter to me in this moment. So the 'conscious' part of 'conscious evolution' is the self-reflexive aspect of our awareness where we can observe what matters most to us by attending to the thoughts and feelings of our current experience. Some of us sense our goals for the moment and some into the sensations arising in our bodies. Either way, we 'connect with ourselves' in this moment, and we can bring our self-reflexive ability to choose into the moment. When we pause and ask ourselves 'What matters most to me in this moment' we can deliberately change the course of evolution of our behavior from an automatic reaction to a more deliberate choice.

Behaviors are retained when they work to achieve a valued outcome. We tend to keep on doing what works in context. This can sometimes look odd to outsiders. Consider a father who constantly checks on their child's whereabouts. He might do this out of a desire to keep the child safe and to express his care. For the child, this behavior may not work so well. It might feel controlling and might have the perverse outcome of making the child want to be even more distant from the father. But if the father's behavior is under the influence of the immediate burst of reassurance he feels when he learns where his child is, that reinforcement might outweigh the longer-term costs to the relationship.

This is why bringing 'consciousness' to our own evolution is so essential. Humans are unique in their capacity to go 'meta' on their processes of reinforcement. We can look at our own behavior and discover what 'turns us on' and what causes us to move away in fear. We can plan possible futures that are different and potentially more satisfying than our current environment.

Of course, this process is fraught, and when we exist in increasingly large groups as we do now, the impact of others' choices upon us can mean that we are constantly being thrown off what matters most to us. None of us has individually chosen to live in a world of increasing dread about the health of the planet and our capacity to survive as a species, but that is what we have achieved ... collectively ... together. We might blame executives who put profits before welfare or corrupt politicians, and certainly, such selfish individuals have been more influential in creating some of the crises we face. But no individual has the power to destroy the planet. That is a collective outcome from ways of thinking, feeling, and being that lead to choices that feel good in the short term but come at the expense of the longer term.

So conscious evolution is about bringing deep, flexible awareness to the processes of our own behavioral and cultural evolution. That is why ProSocial places so much emphasis not just on the agreements we create (the Core Design Principles) but also on the flexibility and quality of our awareness of our context and values. What gives me hope is that, over and over again, I have seen that when people slow down enough to listen to themselves and others deeply, they make choices not just for the good of themselves but for the good of other living beings.

This book, developed and disseminated in Dutch, will no doubt bring a particularly Dutch sensibility and culture to these ideas and the practice of ProSocial, which will be invaluable for Dutch organizations and facilitators. This is important. Organizations like Buurtzorg, for example, discussed at length in this book, are leading the way in introducing more human-centered ways of organizing into commercial organizations. It seems to me that there is particular potential within Dutch-speaking countries to lead in more innovative ways.

This book should be useful for those working with all kinds of groups, including teams in corporations, education, healthcare, community-based groups, and volunteer associations. I thank Jenny and Matthijs for bringing all their many years of skill and experience to writing it. And if you like it, I also look forward to welcoming you into the ProSocial community accessible at [www.prosocial.world](http://www.prosocial.world).

Paul W.B. Atkins  
David Sloan Wilson  
Steven C. Hayes

Deze download hoort bij het boek *Teamkracht met ProSocial* van Jenny Blaauwbroek en Matthijs Steeneveld (Boom, 2023).  
De downloads zijn te vinden op [www.teamkracht-prosocial.nl/downloads](http://www.teamkracht-prosocial.nl/downloads).