John Wood

Founder, Former CEO, and Board Co-Chair of Room to Read

At age 35, John Wood left an executive career track at Microsoft Corporation to form Room to Read, a nonprofit organization that "combines the heart of Mother Theresa with the scalability of Starbucks." In fact Room to Read is one of the fastest-growing nonprofits in history, opening more libraries in its first decade than Starbucks did coffee shops. Razor-sharp business acumen honed at Microsoft combined with a passion to change the world makes John Wood a unique, inspiring, and popular speaker with universal appeal. Smart, quick, energetic, and inspiring, he addresses social entrepreneurship, business strategy, managing cross-cultural companies, and talent strategy.

Since its start, Room to Read has sponsored the opening of 1,675 schools and more than 15,000 multi-lingual libraries across the world. The organization has distributed over 13 million children's books in multiple languages and supports 22,000 girls with long-term scholarships. It has also found and supported local authors and artists who have created more than 1000 titles. Wood describes these results as "total tip of the iceberg" as Room to Read is on track to increase this literacy network to 20,000 libraries and schools serving at least 10 million children by the year 2015. In presentations, he fires up audiences and challenges them to adapt more rapidly to a changing world. With heart-warming tales, he shares his model for massively scalable growth. His experience has made him an authority on overcoming the obstacles of culture, language, geography, and technology to grow a truly global organization, and his insights on the promises and pitfalls of rapid expansion – gleaned through experience, intuition, and trial and error – are sought by leaders everywhere.

Business Background at Work. Room to Read is among the elite two percent of charities that consistently (seven years running) receive four-star ratings from Charity Navigator. It owes much of this success to Wood's expertise and founding principles: ROI maximization, massive scalability, and absolute transparency. In his award-winning memoir, Leaving Microsoft to Change the World, John tells the story of how he raised over $125 million of financial commitments from a "standing start" to develop one of the fastest-growing non-profits in history. The book was described by Publishers' Weekly in a starred review as "an infectiously inspiring read." Translated into 21 languages, it was selected by Amazon.com as one of the "Top 10 Business Narratives of 2006" and voted by Hudson Booksellers as a "Top 10 Nonfiction Title of 2006." He is working on his second book, Creating Room to Read.

Awards. Wood was twice named by Barron's as one of the world's 25 most effective philanthropists. He received a nod as one of Goldman Sach's "100 Most Intriguing Entrepreneurs of 2013" and is a five-time winner of the Fast Company Magazine and Monitor Group Social Capitalist Award. He was TIME magazine's first non-Asian recipient of the "Asian Heroes" Award, and he is an advisor and a four-time speaker at the Clinton Global Initiative, a Henry Crown Fellow at the Aspen Institute, and a two-time winner of the Skoll Foundation Award for Social Innovation. He was selected as a "Young Global Leader" by the World Economic Forum, profiled by the Public Broadcasting Corporation (PBS) as one of "America's Great Leaders, and was the second recipient of the Draper Richards Fellowship, America's largest fellowship for early-stage social entrepreneurs. He also won the UNESCO Confucius Prize for his local literacy program and received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Tribeca Film Festival.