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## Empreender para revolucionar

História de [Bill Drayton](#)

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Ashoka

Depoimento de Bill Drayton

Entrevistado por Karen Workman

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P/1 - Ok Bill, I would like to start. You can give your full name, place and date of birth.

R - Bill Drayton, New York City, June 15th, 1943.

P/1 - What was the name of your parents and where did they come from?

R - Well, my daddy had the same [name], Bill Drayton, and my mother was originally Joan Bergere, so she eventually became Joan Bergere Drayton.

My mother was an immigrant to the US from Australia. She came as a cellist. It was a very bold thing for her to do, to be a nineteen-year-old cellist arriving in the US in the midst of the Depression with nothing other than one's cello. You have to be nineteen and have a certain self-confidence.

My dad is American and also was a very free spirit underneath a conservative exterior, who did the exploring a variety of other things that involved him in the outside. [He had] a very beautiful sense of land and could see its history and audible dimensions. He started off as an explorer.

P/1 - What exactly [means] 'explorer'? A land explorer?

R - Yeah. I was... I came along late in their lives, so you have to go back a bit. He did some work in the Sahara and Northern Canada, some archeological work. But this is a field that ran into a big dry period which he had not planned on, so he shifted his energies into wilderness, going into the wilderness, understanding the trends so he could do plaster mining. Stream went by here ten, twelve thousand years ago. It's slope with such \_\_\_\_\_ probably deposited a certain type of mineral on a gravel pit here and therefore you have to get at it.

P/1 - Are you the only child? Do you have brothers and sisters?

R - I have a significantly older half-sister who is a very remarkable person. She discovered late in life that she is an extremely talented artist. She started with sculptures, moved to painting and then, tri-dimensional painting. She's also a very good organizer who, in the state of Connecticut, runs a recording for the blind program. It records books, magazines, newspapers, which is the most successful of any of the fifty state's programs. She's a very interesting person.

P/1 - When we go back to your childhood, what is the most remarkable thing you can remember of it? Something that brings you very, very strong

memories from your childhood.

R - I had some many advantages growing up. I had these parents who in their hearts were really free people. I grew up in Manhattan.

P/1 - Ah, you grew up in Manhattan.

R - It was a complete gift because every subway stops as a different country of non-continent. Once you're allowed to cross the street then the whole city opens up to you. Even before then you're limited to one city block. So much goes on in a New York city block... It's bigger than most of small towns and villages and whatever interests you develop you can find people in New York that have that interests coming through. It's a very tolerant place, a very interesting, wonderful place.

I also was lucky, very fortunate in going to a school that respected me. I was a little different. I was interested in starting things. As you can probably tell I'm not made to be a brilliant \_\_\_\_\_ and other school wasn't going to tolerate that.

P/1 - You're willing to start a new things that the school... What was different about you, exactly?

R - Well, I liked starting things. Originally was a type written with carbon paper, one or two page little newspaper and that grew, eventually. I got one mimeograph machine which was a very big deal. That became a newspaper that circulated with elementary school students for multiple schools.

It turned into something of a production that produce regularly. Piles of paper all over the house, people coming to take copies of each page from each pile, staple them and put some color tape over the staple so it looked good and sell these things. You have to go out and get advertisements and so on.

It was a wonderful place to grow up. I wasn't dependent on some station wagon driving me from place to place. I got a free bus and subway pass as an elementary school student. Developed an interest in Uruguay which... I was in art class, I forget, probably 5th grade or something like that. Everyone was given a South American country to get interested.

It had a huge project on Uruguay. I found people who knew about Uruguay, their airline, American Association, the Consulate, students. I can even find Uruguay in toy metal soldiers in New York, matte cops and the whole thing. I developed an interesting in India, which I did... And, of course, India, [there's] so much about India in New York.

P/1 - And was there a specific person during this period that you were growing that was particularly, precisely more important that, you know, was strong for you? Was there a person that was striking you and influencing you during this period?

R - When you're at that age family is really important. I mean, it is at all ages, but probably even more so in your elementary school. I had not only my parents but other relatives from my father's family and they were around, they come over for tea or we visit other friends. It's just that New York is such a wonderful place. It's a real city, with enormous diversity. You can find friends deep and interesting and I had lots of friends at school, some of which became a lifelong friends, very interesting people. I knew Bobby Wagner who... His father later became mayor and while we were still at elementary school and so I had, because he was really a good personal friend, I had an exposure to some of the politics in the city. It's just a privilege growing up in Manhattan. It's very similar to growing up in a place like São Paulo.

P/1 - You went to elementary school there and then you went to high school in New York. Did you do everything in New York and how was your...?

R - No. I went to Andover, Massachusetts to a residential secondary school called Phillips Academy, which again was a big school that respected people, that didn't try to make you fit one form, life-form. And it was again very tolerant. I developed more than academic interest there. I always loved history and geography and had very good teachers in those and other fields there, but I also... The interest in Asia kept developing, so I developed the Asia Society in high school, which we build into the largest student organization with forty-so % of the student body was paid up members and ultimately they got the school introducing courses in Southern and East Asian history and after I left teaching Chinese language.

P/1 - Really?

R - But that was typical of the school. It was a place that really respected you as a human being and if you develop an interest they felt that their job is to help you do that, not to channel you in some narrow way. It very much was part of the wonderful yankee New England culture.

P/1 - And then how you decided your first career, what was your first career? So you went to study and then, how did you decide which direction you were going to?

R - Well, I suspect most people really know who they are in a deep way by the time they are six and they get to be somewhat articulated about it by the time they're in high school, you know. It's a perfectly clear in me. I love history and geography. I was fascinated by how institutions work, I love building them and all those pieces fit together.

Then you have the civil rights movements, when I was in high school and college. That fit together because it was a Gandhian movement. It came from India, so the interest in India and civil right movements, my involvement in both reinforced one another. You put all that together. Ashoka got started as an idea when I was an undergraduate at Harvard College. Why? Because I actually finally got into India and you can see an experience a hundred to one difference in per capita income, especially if you come from a society that cares about equity, a quality which American society does very deeply. Reinforced by being a member of the generation where this magical, very powerful experience of the civil rights movement was taking place. We could actually see the fundamental evil in the society being pushed aside, entirely eliminated. They really pushed back past through the loving, respectful Gandhian philosophy. This is really powerful and if you're a young person it's even more powerful. Then you add the Indian civil rights dynamic and you go to India and realize that this is just a remarkable culture, equal to Western culture,

clearway, from which we've already drawn probably the most important import ever, certainly in the last century. And you see not just statistics, but people that you get to know in a particular village, another friends and you see what this difference means. You come back, specially if you have an entrepreneurial temperament and you'd say: "What we gonna do about this?"

You know, American culture is an extremely activist. It's a culture of immigrants who came and wanted to do things [and] it all reinforces itself, so you can't possibly be a sophomore in college, have this experience and not say: "What are we going to do?" And so the Ashoka idea comes from that, very straightforwardly, because it's the most important lever that we could imagine. Big idea in the hands of one entrepreneur changes the system, right? So how do you... What's more powerful than that? Nothing. If we could have more entrepreneurs get started, there's nothing that we could do than we'll be more powerful, because it's that starting point which is the highest leverage in the whole life circle of being an entrepreneur and that idea was clear by the time we were largely through undergraduate.

P/1 - And then how did you go on? What was the main, the first activities you did towards creating a really a concrete step for the idea? So you got this idea when you came back from India, first. You went to India?

R - Yes.

P/1 - How old were you, more or less?

R - Let's see... I was this year between my second and third years undergraduate and we... Three friends and I picked a car in southern Germany, a Volkswagen and drove, basically. It's the only way we could afford to get there. Then we had just the absolutely magical time in India and...

P/1 - I was just getting a little bit. What was the first thing that stroke you when you saw the country? Was there a stronger moment that when you arrived there?

R - I have a complete visual image of crossing the border from Pakistan and the road from Lahore to Amritsar. When you got to the Indian side of the bridge there was this soldier there who stopped us and then handed us smangle, which was not how we were treated on the Pakistan inside of the border, and then the road coming... By then it was getting to be dark, early evening and the road from the border to Amritsar was extraordinary because it just lined with these little buildings clanking away. I remember we stopped into several of them and one of them was the Amritsar model textile machine manufacturing company. It was just a couple of rooms and this man who borrowed a little money... He learned how to do this, he borrowed a little money and he was making these textile machines. They didn't look very smooth but they were very inexpensive and very durable and he could sell them so, you know, right from the first you could get a sense of this entrepreneurial energy in India, the confidence. If you gave people a half chance they run with it, they're perfectly capable. You see the same thing in the village over and over again and you could see the impact that democracy was having.

You're going to... Part of entrepreneurial strategy was to let ideas into the village, so we built these thin roads that started connecting the villages with the towns, so people can bicycle and you make it see... If something was working in one village, they'd go there for a wedding [and say]: "Oh, it works, maybe we can do this."

And it was... I found it an emotional experience on many levels, but a very hardening one because what I was seeing was the change, the energy, the hopefulness [but] you can also see the poverty. You could see in the early dawn hours young people who wear very little clothing and been working in some factory and had the \_\_\_\_\_, you could see the poverty, the villages that still hadn't been connected with any road, they had drainage problems.

When the British arrived in India there were schools in two or every three village when we arrived there they still had not been recovered, but they were working on it. And the system was that the village that get itself organized: they provided the labor, they get the school and they get a teacher. It was a very interesting dynamic. A whole different dimension that was very powerful.

What's really important in life? The physical things were not what was really important, I learned this at the village level. Do you respect and love other people, do they respect and love you? That makes sure a happy person. The hundred to one difference in per capita income is important and does have an impact but doesn't define except to the extremes, whether or not you're a happy person. If you're a contributing person, the same is here, you'll be a happy person.

Those are really fundamental lessons, it really helped India to see... A culture that's not western culture; that's a equal culture, but very different. You begin to see what is universal and what is cultural and understanding what universal turns out to be a very powerful lesson, what's really important.

And again I also had the great privilege of meeting some of the gandhians that had worked with Gandhi. I spent some time with an obabava, who was a man who Gandhi called his guru or teacher, who was then walking from village to village collecting land. All villages, people giving their lives in self-gift to a reconstruction process.

I'm not quite sure if the knowledge is right but this is like going back centuries and seeing a \_\_\_\_\_ actually working, seeing the impact. You talk to this man, he's very sophisticated and in retrospect I can see how he addressed to my immaturity. I was eighteen or nineteen or something like that at that time. But very patiently, talking and explaining and connecting. So many things that one saw, it had very very great relevance.

P/1 - And then it made you \_\_\_\_\_ the whole idea. You didn't have it before, right? You had the idea of entrepreneur. How to connect this, you got this after coming back?

R - I'm not a 100% sure, a lot of seeds were there. I've been an entrepreneur, you naturally respect people who have the qualities that you think are most important and sort out other people like that as friends. I was already engaged in civil rights movements, so that made much easier to understand what I was seeing. Even though the origins were in India, I learned first here and then put the two together. So a lot of ingredients were there, but the motivation to act certainly got a huge step forward in that summer.

P/1 - It was a summer period? How long? One month, two months?

R - No, no, it was three and a half months.

P/1 - Ah, it's a long period. When you come back, what was the first step towards getting this real?

R - We started off a something called the Ashoka Table at Harvard, which at least once a week we would invite someone who was doing things: they ran the sanitation department, they were the mayor of Chicago, whatever... And we were having an off the record conversation with them. "Why we were doing this, how does it really work?"

So this is a balance to the scholarly world in which we were able increasingly to understand more and more pieces of how... At a sophisticated level, people who were responsible, who were running pieces of the real world... What, why were they doing this way, why do these pieces fit together?

Why do we call the Ashoka Table? Because Ashoka, the man, was a quintessential entrepreneur in huge scale. He was not only gigantically creative but he translated it into major institutional changes. You can't do entrepreneurship if it's just the vision, or just the mechanics, you need both. How to use an envision back and forth. So in the fact we were, to the best of our ability, getting the two dimensions through the Ashoka Table and the scholarly work of being students. And then, of course, through this opportunity to work in summers after that in politics.

I worked for Lee Hamilton the next summer. He was then a non-incumbent running for congress for Southeast Indiana, a very real district. The summer before I was in India, I spent time in a real district and North Central West Bengal where some friends were running for Office and State legislature. I came back to the US the next summer and Goldwater was running for president, which I thought it was horrible.

P/1 - Who was really?

R - Barry Goldwater, a very conservative candidate. I wanted to get some experience in real America, which I had not experienced. I've seen this in India.

Lee Hamilton was a non-incumbent. He got elected and he later became the chair of Foreign Affairs Committee. Actually [he] was before that responsible for South Asia in the middle east as a subcommittee and remains a very good friend to this day.

P/1 - So you were getting all these elements together and then, when you finally... It took long and you finally found the Ashoka... What was the turning point for, you know, "I'm now initiating, that's the main model"?

R - It came later, for two reasons. One, I had to go through my own learning process, and so did the other colleagues with whom I was discussing it from early on. My apprenticeship, I worked to McKinsey and after that I went to Oxford to study Economics.

P/1 - So Harvard was undergraduation?

R - Yes. Then I went to England... I don't do math, I can't understand people who speak math, I don't understand it when I see it. It's a blank void for me. And in America, at that point, Economics was not taught as a policy science, it was taught as a mathematical science, it seemed to me. So in Oxford, thank God, they still have people who did political economy and economics and then understood that you can't talk to policy people in mathematics you got to talk to them in English. And all the other charms of Oxford as well, learning the other subjects, history and so on.

When I finally come back to Yale Law School so I had history, the broader social sciences then another broad \_\_\_\_\_ with the strong economic focus and then Law. All the way through starting things and getting better in that and enjoying it. The apprenticeship in McKinsey was just wonderful, just absolute wonderful because what does McKinsey do? They go into major institutions, both public and business, to help them imagine what the big next step is and how you actually do it. So I was apprenticing with people of very good values, who really understood how the major institutions worked. I just had the privilege of learning from them and learning from these sets of clients. It was a very creative period. Also I was able to take a sabbaticle [period] and spent three months in India again with...

P/1 - This year you were at McKinsey?

R - The first five years, yeah. Steve Hedley and I. Steve was one of the yearly co-founders of Ashoka [and] also spent three months. We basically were looking at three world districts where the green revolution were taking hold. The impact was very different. And understanding that, was also just a gigantic excuse to ask lots of questions and again understand how things were.

After that I taught at Stanford's Law School, The Kennedy School at Harvard. Then Jimmy Carter invited me to help him with his campaign and planning for a presidency. Sure he win the election and then I had this absolute spectacular experience of... First of all, helping to put in place a set of changes in the White House and then going to the Environmental Protection Agency as a assistant administrator. We were able to bring about a whole series of very important changes in how environmental regulation is done, how it's managed. At the time that all the major toxic statutes were being enacted and were having to be designed and put in place. The second major public health revolution in our history - the first dealing with natural pollutant and the second with man-made pollutants.

By then it was late 70's and we began to realize that the time for Ashoka was right. Even I was a still a DPA and so some of the co-founders and I took our vacation time to go to Venezuela, Indonesia and India - three very different countries, in terms of size and culture - to see if we could work through some themes, things we were worried about: how could we actually find leading social entrepreneurs.

P/1 - So this time you had already a very clear imagine of a social entrepreneur? You had this imagine already?

R - The broad idea, they'd expect to be undergraduate, but the right timing in terms of... I having gone through our apprenticeship. How do you build a great global institution around a new idea that no one knows how to do? Well, that takes a certain matter of skill, which I didn't have, I was

coming out of undergraduate and also the world hadn't reached the point where the field was ready to take off.

Around 1978, we sensed that the time had come. Why? Because some of the people we knew in India in particular, but also in Latin America and Indonesia, Southeast Asia... We could sense that the ice was beginning to break. We could see that some of our friends... Our friends naturally tend to be like us, so we would know people who have this calling. You could see a wave coming of people who didn't have a name to describe them, there were no supports, everyone thought they were very odd, a lot of barriers... We said: "Time has come".

So how can we do the design work to solve the problems, you know? The CIA, KGB, arms under the bed. We are committing to be a global organization. We didn't want to hurt the very people we were helping, they were doing controversial work early in their careers. We are committing to be a global institution and maybe that would hurt. We talked a lot, we talked to about three hundred and forty people over these vacation trips. And basically people said: "This is politics, don't worry about it". How do you actually find... In a systematic way, not just my judgment or your judgment. But how do we create a system where we reliably find leading social entrepreneurs and separate them out before they have succeeded? From all the very creative, very altruistic good people who will never change the whole system... A series of those key questions we felt we had to answer them before we could start.

The conversations were really helpful. They were reassuring, we saw more and more people who fit the categories, who understood the categories. They were beginning to act clear about the mechanisms, and very importantly, from the conversations we got the idea of being "a fellowship of", as well as "for". And that solved virtually all the problems. Those were the right people to be the nominators; the political problems go away if you are in an association with many of the leading social entrepreneurs in the country, because they can spot the problem coming. I go to Bangladesh, I will never understand the politics of Bangladesh, but the people who were great social entrepreneurs in Bangladesh, they know better than anyone because their job is to cause major structure social change and they can't do that if they don't understand the politics really, really well. They're the world models to new people naturally gravitate because they are one of us, they have a sense. This is not just an idea. This person seems to really have the inner strengths that are required to shift the whole system.

At the end of those conversations and trips we felt the timing was right and we have the basic structures in our head, the basic how-tools. And then it took us five or six years - which we knew it would - of trial and a lot of air, before we were convinced that we had a model that we were ready to put our foot on the gas pedal and spread rapidly around the world. That was summer of 1986. We made that decision and we came to Brazil immediately. So the first Brazilian fellows were elected in December of 1986, the board made the decision to expand in June of 1986.

P/1 - Because when you start it, you started in India, right?

R - India first, then Indonesia. Why? Because the people we were looking for were so rare and you need to get a critical mass of people working together. And we didn't find enough except in the really big countries. So China, even now, is to put it mildly ambiguous about leading social entrepreneurs. India was wide-open. Russia... Soviet Union didn't tolerate this at all. The US certainly did but it was a way too expensive for our budget. And also Indonesia is the next biggest and Brazil the next biggest. If you look at the world what you see is that except for Europe and Africa, every continent has one country that is at least 51% of the population and so our strategy is to start with that country, build up a critical mass in that country then you can move out to smaller country as a render.

You know, it would be a very long time before we find sixty or seventy leading social entrepreneurs in earthwide. Once we have Brazil then earthwide fellows can contribute importantly and benefit importantly. And [it's] the same thing for all: Nepal, the India or Sri Lanka or whatever.

P/1 - How did you develop the economical sustainability problem? [Did you] question: how I'm going to put this on? Did you...?

R - For Ashoka?

P/1 - For Ashoka, yeah.

R - With lots of difficulty. You know, to help the first two countries, India and Indonesia, the costs were very low, but whenever you start with a really important new idea it will never fit the intellectual, organizational categories or stove pipes of governments creating agencies or foundations. They can't deal with the big new idea, it doesn't work. So we had the classical problem that all social entrepreneurs do. It took us six years before we could get the first institutional foundation to invest. So it was entirely dependent on the individuals and a few family foundations, which are really the individuals.

So funny... We were determined from the beginning we would never take government money because it really is essential for us to be completely independent in fact and perception. We don't want to go to bed with a huge elephant that chronically turns over with every political shift, cause we make three years commitment sign average to fellows and we need to have people who really are with you, who understands that the support base can be liable.

P/1 - Bill, you had a plan, you had an incredibly precise plan, but when you were leaving the plan after you, putting Ashoka on, then you started to leave it. Did you have shifts, many surprises? "I thought I was going that direction, but something new appeared." Were there moments like that?

R - All the time, every entrepreneurial adventure is like that. You got to really know where you're going and be sure it's right, that is a big win for everyone, that it will work. But how you actually get there? If anyone ever tells you that they know exactly how, they have a precise business plan, either it's not a new idea and they're not entrepreneurs or it's a mistake. It's just, you know...

Of course, the entrepreneurial life is one of constant looking for new opportunities, new problems and always adjusting. But in our case this is such a deep historical force that we're serving. This is not marginal. I believe this the most important historical force in human history at the moment, which is the transformation of the citizen in half of the world from primitive, backward, pre-modern to an entrepreneurial comparative in the same sense as business. And that's moving so fast.

What happened in 1980 was that the ice broken instead of just being a few outliers, individuals like Maria Montessori and Florence Nightingale; the whole system shifted. And we are serving a force that is so powerful. Nothing's gonna stop it and the only question really is how good a job can we do in serving a cutting edge social entrepreneurs and the field as a whole. Can we really help it evolve in a smartest possible way quick

enough? That's a big challenge and we do not have a total blueprint, we're... It's pretty clear where the field is going and to the degree that we can engage the energies of as many people as possible and we can figure out how can we work together. We'll make a big contribution, the only question is how big and can we do it quickly enough.

(pause)

P/1 - When you understand the line of how you get to create something it really get you more clear on things.

R - Yeah.

P/1 - It really makes you understand better. For example, I know Ashoka ideas for quite [a few] years, but now... It's interesting pieces, you know, they get together. I've listened many times to your story, [that] you when to India but I never understood the line, the way you were really thinking and feeling. Because just thinking is not enough.

R - It certainly isn't. That's not \_\_\_\_\_ things, usually.

P/1 - Never. I think it's very interesting.

So just... It's a conclusion thing. Do you think there is a personal going back to you? What are your main challenges now? Thinking of the future.

R - First of all, starting with the Ashoka: we're going through a very profound change because the field is going through a profound change. We have so many powerful ideas that we've developed improving that we know we could make a big contribution to changing the field and we know what \_\_\_\_\_, the leverage point so that would allow us to foot the whole system.

We got to find the people and organize who actually get that done. We have to build institutions that are permanent because the task is permanent. This is not solving a problem which we'll be solving and go away. This is putting in place the most important set of processes. How do we help the best new ideas of entrepreneurs come up and succeed over their life? How do we help them work together and not only between the social entrepreneurs, but between the social and business entrepreneurs both.

How do we all work together, so the society ends up with the smartest solutions that actually get implemented and then beyond that: how do we make this a room for everyone who is a changemaker? This goes right back to the civil right movement, the Gandhi movement. That was all they were about. That's the main historical force. We've had a long period where ever since the agricultural revolution when two or three per cent have controlled everything. And that is no longer necessary, in fact is very destructive. We still have families with assumptions, we have school systems that were set up in the 19th century and don't even begin to try to do this and the leading social entrepreneurs are absolutely critical in changing that system. Every time one of us goes to work, we upset the existing arrangement, the assumption of things can change, we provide a user-friendly seed. Designed to be user-friendly, designed to encourage local people to say: "Oh, I can take this idea and run with it". That makes them local changemakers, they become role models to their family and neighbors and others.

The more local change makers, the easier becomes from the primary... National and beyond, primary social entrepreneurs. This feedback enforces to one another. That's the core dynamic and how can we really speed that up and make sure we get to the point where everyone is a changemaker? It's a very big change, the most fundamental change in the dynamics of human society since the agricultural revolution. It's happening very fast. We don't have twelve or fifteen thousand years to do this.

Think of what this going to be like when there are more problem solvers than ever can possibly be problems. Because every single human being lives their life coursing through society. The biggest fun for them is when they see a problem: "Oh, I can go and solve them" or an opportunity and they know how to work with others and we no longer became a societal pyramid of controls. That's much more like the human brain, we have simultaneous process of many different levels going on so at any moment in time, any issue, any location. There are people there, eager, ready, able to work together to solve the problem.

This is just a whole... It's a very different world. It may take us a generation. But if we can get the next generation to be twenty or thirty or fifty per cent that's a bigger improvement over two or three percent and onward. And in terms of setting the negatives: this is how you end marginalization. People who are changemakers are not marginalized, they have the skills and may define themselves in such a way that that's not an issue and we got to fix that.

P/1 - And you is Ashoka. It's like you are Ashoka. That challenge is yours and your main... How you feel your life...? This moves you entirely.

R - Well, you too.

P/1 - Right.

R - Everyone is a social entrepreneur. It's by definition married to a vision of the contribution that you're going to make and you also make other contributions to family and friends, to your garden. But of course, this is such a rare historical opportunity. We haven't had a major structural change like this happen, but rarely, let alone one this big moving this fast. We're blessed to see a privilege, the opportunity of being right at the center because we're in a association of so many of the world's best social entrepreneurs. Can you image a group of people that are more fun to have as your colleagues in life, people who really care with very strong values who know they're causing change, important change? They can't be cynical, there's no way. And the nature of our work is pulling us to be in global, pulling us to be empathetic and respectful. I mean, I can't think of anything much better.

P/1 - That's enough.

R - Ok.