



LEADERSHIP CASE  
**HIGH RESOLVES**

“Growing up Baha’i in Iran,” Mehrdad Baghai says, “I had direct experience with fanaticism and hate.” The Baha’is are among the world’s most systematically persecuted faith communities. They see science as being on par with faith, and advocate for racial unity, gender equality and universal education. These are grounds for Baha’is to be considered heretical. “I remember people who would not touch me fearing they would go to hell,” says Mehrdad.

Although his family fled to Canada when Mehrdad was just nine, these childhood experiences and the values espoused by the Baha’i Faith were formative. Why would otherwise smart, well-meaning people hate another group based on their beliefs?

This personal experience of persecution drove his graduate studies at the Harvard Kennedy School, the ideas in his international bestselling book, *As One*, and his deep fascination with collective action and growth all through his professional life. It also led to the birth of High Resolves, which is founded on the idea that society must focus on educating people in the qualities of good citizenship.

“ WE CAN BE AS SYSTEMATIC ABOUT CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AS WE ARE ABOUT CORE SUBJECTS LIKE MATH AND SCIENCE. AND, GIVEN THE STATE OF THE WORLD, WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO DO JUST THAT. ”

Being a good citizen is not intuitive. “When we speak with people who see themselves as global citizens, they frequently refer to some peak experience during their youth that transformed the way they thought about the world,” says Mehrdad. “Our theory of change holds that for personal transformation to be sustained, there needs to be an ‘ah-ha’ moment that shifts belief and motivation, which is then hardwired into long-term memory through repeated practice and application over time.” Moral education, Mehrdad believes, is what is required to “immunize” us against the blind prejudice that feeds human unkindness, and leads to human atrocities.

High Resolves enlists the natural passion of young people to make change, through a curriculum designed to build mastery in the core competencies of social justice and citizenship. Interactive, simulation-based workshops provide peak experiences for participants that challenge and shift their existing beliefs about the world, like the High Resolves exercise *Find My Peeps*, which exposes biases about identity, race and social constructs. These are reinforced and deepened by learning in the classroom, and by

**ABOUT MEHRDAD**

**Co-led global growth at McKinsey**, was CEO of a venture-backed tech company, led Australia’s national science agency, and co-authored international best-sellers on collective action and growth.

Chairman of Alchemy Growth, a boutique strategy firm.

As a child, Mehrdad’s family **fled religious persecution in Iran.**

**Henry Crown Fellow** of the Aspen Global Leadership Network.

**Winner of the 2018 John P. McNulty Prize.**

Worked with Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling at Harvard, studying cooperation strategies.

**Global CEO of High Resolves**, which he co-founded in 2005 with his wife, Roya.

real-world applications like social action projects in the students' communities, or Videos for Change, a televised competition where Australian students bring awareness to an issue through storytelling.

The story of Mehrdad's journey from a nine-year old immigrant, to the pinnacles of private-sector success, to High Resolves, a venture which has the potential to change the world, is a powerful one.

Despite those difficult childhood experiences, his family life was solid. "My mother was meticulous," he says, "incredibly ordered in her thinking and in her approach to service and work, and I think she bred in me and my sisters a conviction about doing things right."

This conviction bore fruit in Mehrdad's multiple degrees, always with distinction, culminating in a juris doctor in law. What stands out in hindsight is a period at Harvard Kennedy School during which he worked under Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling to study the emergence of cooperation using simulations. Mehrdad became fascinated by how people learn to hate, and conversely, by what cognitive skills could help protect them from bigotry, prejudice and corrosive ideologies. "I realized these games had power," Mehrdad says, "we had stumbled upon a modern approach for a moral education." It was a new idea, but one which resonated: the simulation was ultimately offered at the Business School, Law School and Kennedy School, and incorporated into the curriculum of 120 schools in Ontario. The seed planted at that time has today grown into one of the key building blocks of High Resolves.

After graduation, the management consulting firm McKinsey & Company snapped up the young Mehrdad. Although he laughs about having "disappeared into the corporate vortex" for about 10 years, he is grateful for that period. Co-leading McKinsey's global growth practice, amongst other things, gave him profound insights. "It's been central to how we have perceived the possibilities of High Resolves," he says.

## “ IN OUR WORLD, TO STAND STILL IS TO GO BACKWARDS. ”

In 2005, Mehrdad became a Henry Crown Fellow at the Aspen Institute. For him, the charge put forth by the Fellowship—to create an enduring enterprise that makes a significant difference to society—was a clear call to action. Now, married with a son and living in Sydney, Australia, he was adamant that whatever he built would not be another thing to take him away from his family.

So Mehrdad sat down with his wife, Roya, to explore options. Their thoughts turned to their son's school in inner Sydney, and what they perceived to be an absence of citizenship training. They recalled the simulations from Mehrdad's time at Harvard. Would these still be applicable? Their son's school granted permission to run a pilot. The response was encouraging. It became clear, however, that a comprehensive and contemporary curriculum was needed, and so the two of them decided to create High Resolves. "One school became five," says Mehrdad; then 15, then 20; some 13 years later,

## ABOUT HIGH RESOLVES

- Founded in 2005 in Australia, **High Resolves inoculates young people against racism** and hatred through transformational learning experiences.
- High Resolves has developed a proven formula for **citizenship and leadership education** that involves immersive peak experiences, repeated practice and real-world application, **based on learning science, behavioral economics, social psychology and neuroscience.**
- High Resolves has **engaged over 200,000 students in more than 350 schools** in Australia, or 4% of the country's high school students. **They aspire to reach 50% of students** by 2023.
- The program is expanding globally, having **launched in the US, Canada, China and Brazil.**
- Their operations in Australia are **self-funding.**

High Resolves is in more than 350 Australian high schools, and has launched in the US, Canada, China and Brazil.

Naturally, along the way, there have been some of what Mehrdad calls "near-death experiences."

Initially, High Resolves did not charge schools for the implementation of the program; it was fully funded by Mehrdad and Roya themselves. Later on, some corporate funders joined. "But the more schools we added, the bigger the funding gap became." By 2011, it became clear that the team had to rethink the paradigm. Mehrdad and Roya devised a payment model which allowed growth to continue, and crisis was averted as additional revenue streams opened up.

But four years later, the hovering axe came into view again: for different and unrelated reasons, the two biggest sponsors decided not to continue the relationship. "A very large part of our budget disappeared, and we had to figure out a new plan."

It was a profoundly disruptive and painful time for the enterprise as they grappled with the knowledge that one of their most impactful activities, a mandatory piece of the social action curriculum, was also the source of their financial stress: they lost a great deal of money every time it was run. Should they cut it out of the curriculum in order to keep the ship afloat? What did High Resolves stand for after all? The clear logic, potential for growth, and the rigor of his life's experience informed the decision. "In the end, we went for a complete transformation, and cut it out," says Mehrdad. "It was a hard decision, and a painful pivot. Some of our people left; they felt we were cutting the most interesting part of the program. But it turned the organization around; it meant we were in control of our destiny. The fact that we were viable made a big difference to



how US organizations saw us, and to their interest in funding us.” Among those was the Omidyar Network, which had been looking at citizenship programs globally and noting the success of High Resolves, funded the US expansion.

“The first thing you learn at business school is to let go of sunk costs,” Mehrdad laughs, “and yet it’s so against human nature. We have a feeling that what we are doing is going to become very important, so we have to keep doing it, even if it means great discomfort.”

Since then, there has been no standing still for High Resolves. “School leaders’ expectations increase each year. In our world, to stand still is to go backwards,” says Mehrdad. “We innovate our curriculum every year to maintain our position.” This includes a blended physical and digital approach, including online teacher training and annual and quarterly lesson upgrades. The outcomes of this drive for continuous improvement are impressive: by recent measures, 95% of students rate the program as highly engaging. In Australia, the nonprofit has already achieved financial sustainability, paid for by schools that have recognized the value of its offerings.

More telling, perhaps, is the impact the program has made on alumni life trajectories. “Our alumni tell us that their lives have been shaped by some of the experiences they had as part of the program. It gives us hope that there is a chance that the next generation is going to be different; they might not make the mistakes our generation has made.”

In 2018, the demands of pending global expansion pivoted Mehrdad into full commitment to High Resolves. He stepped back from his advisory business, and stepped into the role of Global CEO of High Resolves. “It has been amazing to be wholly engaged,” he says, his voice becoming instantly more animated. This new role brings together everything Mehrdad studied, and his 25 years of advising companies on strategy and growth. “We have done in one year what we would have expected in three before. We rewrote our theory of change, launched into new markets and developed a digital platform which is available to schools that cannot afford the program.” High Resolves, he says, now “has the potential to make a disproportionate contribution to the world.”

Part of that contribution is an education technology venture called the Composer. The Composer is a new approach for feedback and assessment that provides more detailed and richer insights into what lessons students are learning from the exercises. “This will provide formative advice to teachers about what learning to prioritize with their students.” Building on this, a new digital marketplace will allow schools to design their own sequences of learning exercises according to citizenship themes. With support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and Omidyar Network, this platform will enable education service providers to share their curriculum with schools in a more modular and customized way.

“In terms of software design and user experience, the Composer is revolutionary. If we are being thoughtful about the right organizational structure for this to thrive, it doesn’t really fit in a not-for-profit. It wants to be out there, so in the next months we are considering spinning it out as a for-profit tech venture in Silicon Valley.” This could be a clever way to generate an endowment to sustain and grow High Resolves.

Mehrdad and High Resolves have ambitious goals for the next five years: 20 to 30 hubs in the US; 20 more countries working with High Resolves; Videos for Change having a global momentum of its own; and the Composer used in tens of thousands of places.

But what most excites the team is the profound, personal impact the program has on young people. One graduate in Sydney, Annie, the daughter of an immigrant family from China, explains: “I was trying to figure out who I was, what I liked, what I thought was important in society. High Resolves taught me how to approach situations where there’s evidence of inequality and that I can, in my own capacity, make a difference.” Annie attributes a shift in her own self-belief, and her pursuit of a career in shaping policy to support those most in need, to her experience with High Resolves.

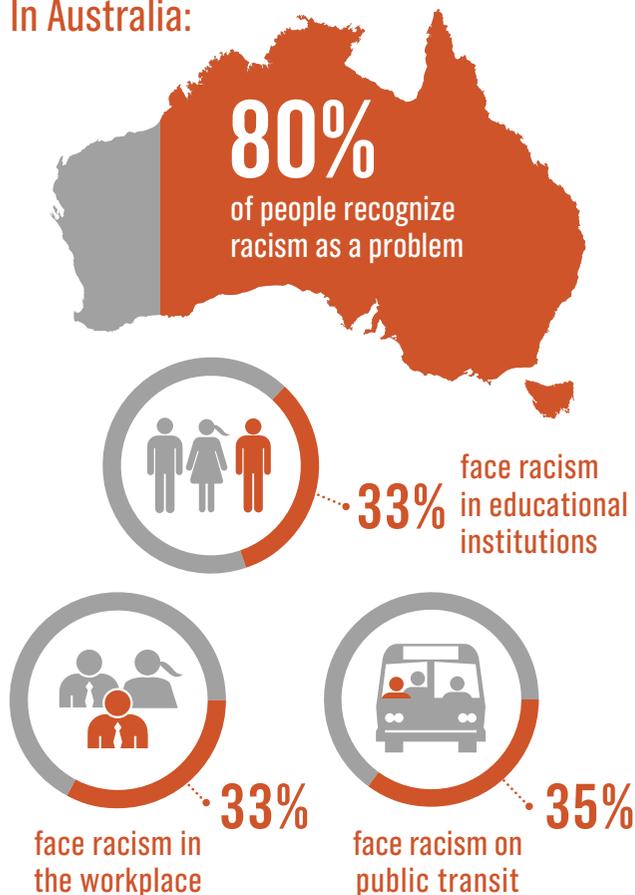
It’s people like Annie who inspire Mehrdad. “What makes me hopeful,” he says, “is that I can see the change happen with one person. And then, when you see it happen with one, you see it with dozens and hundreds and thousands. I think in some ways what we do at High Resolves is we lift the trajectory of people’s lives and point them towards what they were meant to do on this planet.”

# THE CONTEXT OF 21st CENTURY CHALLENGES

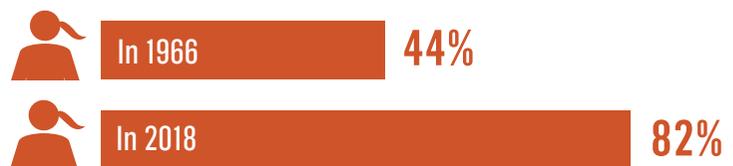
The world is experiencing growing division, racism and hate. Half of all countries believe the global system is failing and harbor deep fears of immigration, globalization and change.

Yet, in the US and most other countries, there are no experiential learning or moral problem-solving components in education to meet these challenges.

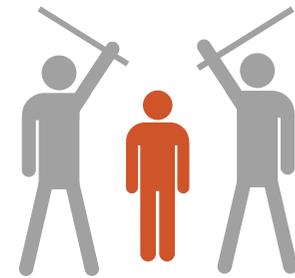
In Australia:



American teens who believe racism is a problem:



Hate crimes in the 10 largest US cities have reached the highest level in more than a decade.



But, young people are hopeful and determined.



## IN HIS OWN WORDS: WHAT MEHRDAD HAS LEARNED

**The next generation is our greatest hope.**

"We will fail to respond to the world's challenges unless we develop a critical mass of young people with the resolve to accomplish what previous generations have failed to do: act in the collective interest of humanity."

**A family journey can be extremely powerful.**

"I didn't want my Aspen venture to be yet one more thing that

took me away from my family. My wife, Roya, and I co-founded High Resolves as a personal passion project. We have worked on it incredibly closely. It's like another child in our family."

**Leadership means taking everyone with you.**

"I don't believe in partisanship. Inclusive leadership is not about winning 51% and then telling the other 49% what to do. It's about taking the whole 100% with you."