In light of his success in the world of business, Reinhard Mohn felt an obligation to give back to society. He wanted to encourage people to get involved in issues they deemed important. He also wanted to help create a society capable of offering everyone a chance to succeed.

Each person must be in a position to determine the goals they pursue and the life they lead. That was the principle Reinhard Mohn used in running his company, Bertelsmann AG. He firmly believed in individual responsibility and decentralized management. From the start, he made sure that employees shared in the company’s success. He was not moved by a desire to achieve social utopia, but by the conviction that motivated employees who are given the opportunity develop further in the workplace perform better and are happier.

In light of his success in the world of business, he felt a strong obligation to give back to society. He believed that it was not the state and its institutions that were responsible for making the basic values of freedom, solidarity and goodwill come alive, but each individual person.

"Surely every responsible citizen in a democracy is concerned when the social order fails to live up to its promise. It was precisely this concern that prompted my desire to make a difference."
In keeping with that wish, he established the Bertelsmann Stiftung as a nonprofit foundation on February 8, 1977. The foundation was formally approved on March 14 of that year. Mohn thereby achieved two goals:

1. The sociopolitical, cultural and social commitment of the Bertelsmann and Mohn families could be continued by the foundation and managed in a professional manner.
2. The continuity of Bertelsmann SE & Co. KGaA, which Mohn had built from a small, family-owned business, was assured. The foundation is the company’s majority shareholder and its activities are largely funded by the company’s earnings.

Helping People Take Responsibility and Get Involved

In his view, social participation – meaning the opportunities each individual has to develop within society – required responsible, capable individuals, on the one hand, and, on the other, a society and business community able to create those opportunities and encourage people to take action.

In keeping with Mohn's wishes, the Bertelsmann Stiftung is a private operating foundation that conceives and initiates all of its own projects, and then supports them as they are carried out. It works in an interdisciplinary manner with researchers and experts in the field and maintains close contact with public and private institutions. It constantly strives to strengthen civil society, meaning the ability of individuals to get involved in areas they deem important, an activity that also reflects one of its founders basic beliefs and his vision for the future.

What Do People Need?

As Mohn himself stated, his experience as a prisoner of war in the United States was a critical influence on his life-long attitudes toward freedom and democracy. Under his leadership, relations between Europe and the US were a key issue addressed by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, as was promoting an exchange of knowledge between the two. Another core topic was respect for individual rights and cultural differences. Israel was also an area of key importance and, in 1979, Mohn joined with the president of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to create a joint program at the educational institution.
In later years the foundation expanded its international perspective. Its founder was well aware that globalization would fundamentally change the way we live and do business. Today the Bertelsmann Stiftung uses a range of projects to examine and respond to the challenges stemming from globalization.

“In the wake of globalization, what started in the 1970s has reached far beyond German borders. The demand to take a political stand and act politically reaches all of us. We all have to work toward just participation and integration in an ever more global world.”

Reinhard Mohn