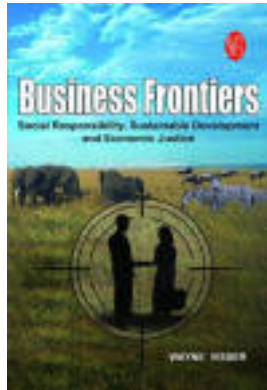


Business Frontiers:

Social Responsibility, Sustainable Development and Economic Justice

By Wayne Visser (ICFAI Books, 2005)



~ PERSONAL INTRODUCTION ~

Feeling the Tension

When I think back on all the writing I have done over the years, it strikes me that much of my creativity has been the result of tension. For example, when I had to decide what to study at university – and by implication, what career I wanted to pursue – the two things that really interested me were business on the one hand, and religion on the other. I eventually selected business, but that did not resolve the tension. Throughout my undergraduate degree, I found myself looking for a way to reconcile the material pursuits of commerce and the spiritual aspirations of religion.

One answer came in the form of AIESEC – the International Association of Economics and Commerce Students – which had a clear focus on the importance of values in business. Through AIESEC, I became involved in the environmental movement, and ended up attending their global conference on Business and the Environment in Tokyo in 1990. I also chose “Green Marketing” as the dissertation topic for my Honours degree.

The year after graduation, I went on an AIESEC traineeship in Kingston, Canada, and I remember using the library of the lovely Queens University to search for anything that had been written on the connection between business and spirituality. As a result, I discovered the inspiring books of two Canadians: *Meditations on Business* by John Dalla Costa (who I went to Toronto to meet), and the *Community Business* booklet series by Greg McLeod (who I got in touch with by phone). Their influence is evident in Chapter 2 on Community Business.

After Canada, I moved to London and heard about The Business Network, an informal group looking at creative alternatives to the status quo in business. I attended one of their

meetings and met futures researcher Francis Kinsman, whose books (*The New Agenda* and *Millennium*) once again encouraged me that my quest was not in vain. In fact, I became so enthusiastic that I returned to Cape Town to begin a research-based Masters degree on Holistic Business (see Chapter 3), although this was cut short by an offer to join the international firm, Gemini Consulting, as a strategy analyst.

My time with the CAP Gemini Group gave me excellent exposure to the realities of business and management, and perhaps began to introduce a more pragmatic perspective to my writing. This was reflected also in my discovery of the World Business Academy, whose founder, futures researcher Willis Harman (*Global Mind Change*), greatly influenced my thinking. Having written to him and received an encouraging letter in reply, I proceeded to found a South African chapter of the World Business Academy. I still felt a tension, but began to express it differently – in terms of calling for a New Paradigm in Business (see Chapter 1).

Gemini also brought me into contact with the leading edge of business thinking in South Africa. Not only was the founder a well respected management author (*The Winning Way*), but Gemini was supporting research at the University of Witwatersrand into African Management (see Chapter 5). As a result, I met management pioneer Albert Koopman (*Transcultural Management*), whose philosophical and values-based approach gave me something to role-model my own emerging ideas on. It also gave me the courage to make a career shift.

I was convinced that I needed to specialise as a management consultant, to channel the tension I felt between business and its role in society. The result was that I undertook a one year Masters in Human Ecology at Edinburgh University. This gave me the platform to build a more focused career. My time at the Centre for Human Ecology (see Chapter 26) and my dissertation research on the financial sector brought me into contact with the groundbreaking work being done by New Economics Foundation (NEF) in London. I was captivated by the idea that we have to change the rules of the game if business is going to become a positive force in society. Encouraged by a meeting with Simon Zadek (*Tomorrow's History*), who was one of NEF's leading lights at the time, I returned home after my Masters and co-founded the South African New Economics (SANE) Foundation. This focus on economic transformation is reflected in Section 2 of the book, dealing with Economic Justice.

Keen to put my newfound knowledge on social and environmental impacts to good use, I then joined KPMG and started up their Environmental Consulting Unit, which later became Sustainability Services and worked with companies to manage their environmental, health & safety, business ethics and social transformation challenges facing business. The tension that I engaged with during this phase was typically between economic or financial pressures and social, ethical and environmental constraints. It was during this time that I attempted to capture my learning in a book co-authored with Clem Sunter called *Beyond*

Reasonable Greed: Why Sustainable Business is a Much Better Idea. Much of Section 3 of the book, dealing with Sustainable Development, is also based on my consulting experiences during my years with KPMG.

Finally, deciding that another career shift was due, I embarked on my doctorate at the International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility (ICCSR) at Nottingham University. The people I have met through the ICCSR, including the academic staff and visiting professors like Malcolm McIntosh (*Raising a Ladder to the Moon*) and Jem Bendell (*Terms of Endearment*) have helped to shape a new phase in the evolution of my thinking. Some of the fruits of my research are captured in Section 4 on Social Responsibility, which also reflects a current shift of focus that is underway in global business to focus once again on the social issues which remain among the most pressing challenges of our day. Section 5 pulls together some of my writing on corporate social responsibility and sustainable business that illustrates the tension between past, present and future, while Section 6 gives some insight into the sorts of creative tension from which I have drawn inspiration at a personal level.

All of these tensions I have felt, and continue to feel at a personal and professional level, are illustrative of the subject of this book. Business Frontiers are the points of tension inherent in current models of business and capitalism which are bringing massive benefits on the one hand, yet still failing the majority of the world's poor and alienated people. There is a palpable tension between the realities of today and the possibilities of tomorrow. I trust that by sharing these words, you will be inspired to find your own threshold of dynamic tension, and join me in the search for creative solutions. For we can all, in our own way, make a meaningful contribution to the lives of others and the legacy of business in society.