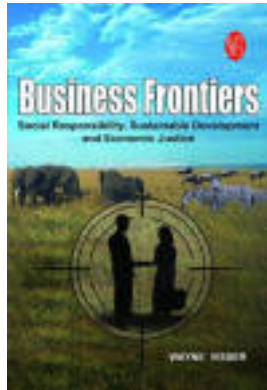


Business Frontiers:

Social Responsibility, Sustainable Development and Economic Justice

By Wayne Visser (ICFAI Books, 2005)



~ PROLOGUE ~

Reflecting on Responsibility

Responsibility is the choice we make to respond with care.

Do you sigh when you hear the word responsibility? Perhaps responsibility is even a dirty word in your vocabulary - you associate it with burdens and restrictions; it represents the opposite of being carefree and without obligations? But responsibility doesn't have to be a chore, or a cage. It all depends how you think about it.

Responsibility is literally what it says – our ability to respond. It is a choice we make – whether to be attentive to our children's needs, whether to be mindful of the plight of those less fortunate, whether to be considerate of the impact we have on the earth and others. To be responsible is to be proactive in the world, to be sensitive to the interconnections, and to be willing to do something constructive as a way of giving back.

Responsibility is the counterbalance to rights. If we enjoy the right to freedom, it is because we accept our responsibility not to harm or harass others. If we expect the right to fair treatment, we need to respect the rule of law and honour the principle of reciprocity. If we believe in the right to have our basic needs met, we have the opportunity to respond when poverty denies those rights to others.

Taking responsibility, at home or in the workplace, is an expression of confidence in our own abilities, a chance to test our own limits, to challenge ourselves and to see how far we can go. Responsibility is the gateway to achievement. And achievement is the path to growth. Being responsible for something means that we are entrusted with realising its potential, turning its promise into actuality. We are the magicians of manifestation, ready

to prove to ourselves and to others what can happen when we put our minds to it, if we focus our energies and concentrate our efforts.

Being responsible for someone – another person – is a great privilege, for it means that we are embracing our role as caregivers, helping others to develop and flourish. This is an awesome responsibility, in the truest sense, one which should be embraced with gratitude, not reluctantly accepted with trepidation. Responsibility asks no more of us than that we try our best, that we act in the highest and truest way we know. Responsibility is not a guarantee of success, but a commitment to trying.

So why is responsibility seen by many as such an onerous burden? Responsibility becomes onerous when choice is removed from the equation, when we do not realise our freedom to act differently, when we forget that we are allowed to say no. Responsibility becomes pernicious when we take on too much, when we mistakenly think that more is always better, when we take on the guilt and expectations of others. Accepting too many responsibilities is in fact irresponsible – for it compromises our ability to respond. “Do few things but do them well” is the maxim of responsibility. Being responsible also doesn’t mean doing it all ourselves. Responsibility is a form of sharing, a way of recognising that we’re all in this together. Sole responsibility is an oxymoron.

Taking responsibility is a way of taking ownership in our lives, of acknowledging our own hand in the shaping of destiny. Responsibility is the antidote for victimhood. When we walk with awareness, we realise the enmeshed nature of reality, we see the subtle strands that make up the web of life, we accept that everything is linked to everything else. Responsibility is being conscious of the oneness of existence.

Responsibility, if we manage it well, should never be like the curse of Sisyphus rolling a rock uphill, but rather a blessing gratefully received. For what can be more joyous than making a positive contribution in the world, or making a difference in someone else’s life? Responsibility is the footprint we leave in the sand, the mark of our passage. What tracks will you leave? Where is the place where you can most freely and effectively respond? The choice, as always, is yours.