

Beyond Reasonable Greed: Why Sustainable Business is a Much Better Idea!

By Wayne Visser and Clem Sunter (Human & Rousseau, 2002)



~ 4 CARING ~

The Promise Of The Elephant

4.1 Trading in fangs for tusks

The elephant is a truly remarkable creature as literary tributes like *Elephants: A Cultural and Natural History*, on which we have drawn in research for this book, well testify. It is an animal that has been respected, revered, even worshipped in many of the world's cultures for thousands of years. While the Western world has been obsessed with the power symbol of the lion, the East has long held the elephant as their supreme animal icon.

In Hinduism, the oldest and most pervasive religion of the Indian sub-continent, elephants hold high status. In the original Creation, they are accorded the title of 'bearers and keepers of the universe'. Furthermore, one of the Hindu gods, Ganesh, who is the protector of wisdom, erudition and well-being, chooses the head of an elephant in his preferred form. Elephant legends also surround Guatama Siddhartha, the Buddha; some depicting the white elephant as the original carrier of his soul, while in others the elephant protects him from harm. Even today, Indian elephants are regarded as sacred, and many given a garland-laden funeral.

In India, elephants have also long been associated with kings. The book of Old Indian elephant lore states that "elephants are consubstantial with kings" and "the creator of the world created the regal elephant for the salvation of the world, and endowed him with majestic power and splendour." Elephants, placed on the same level as kings since ancient times, have therefore remained closely associated with India's rulers and their ceremonial occasions throughout history.

Of course, it is not just in the East that elephants have enjoyed special cultural and religious status. There is a particularly rich tradition of honouring the elephant in Africa. According to some traditions, elephants are reincarnations of gods who have been slain in the unseen land of the sky. Others believe that elephants live for hundreds of years and are reborn again and again in some magical way.

The association with political leadership is also strong. The iconic leader of the Zulu nation, Shaka, was called 'son of the elephant' and the king of the Swazi nation is still today known as 'the great elephant'. In praise songs, the elephant gets a series of impressive titles: 'animal of our kings', 'lord of the trees', 'master of the valleys', 'king of creation' and 'servant of the great Earth Mother'. There are also many African legends about the time before people lived on earth, when all the animals of the bush lived together under one king – Elephant. The stories all describe this time as one of peace, justice and prosperity, for Elephant was a wise ruler. Lion made all kinds of attempts to become king, but no one took his efforts seriously. They all knew that it was Elephant who possessed all the qualities of genuine leadership.

One particular legend from Zimbabwe, recounted by Nick Reaves in *When Elephant was King*, begins to hint at why the elephant is an appropriate symbol of leadership in the area of sustainability. One year in Southern Africa, drought struck. The rains failed and the animals soon ran short of water. One by one, the water holes began to dry up and their plight became very serious. Such was their distress that King Elephant called a council of all the animals where they were all invited to come up with suggestions. Having listened to their ideas, he decided that their short-term solution to the lack of drinking water was to dig a large, new well in the nearby river bed. The water table had dropped drastically and the animals had to work night and day without resting. King Elephant worked hardest of all using his enormous tusks to dig deep into the river bed, while the others carried away the soil, mouthful by mouthful. Eventually Elephant reached water and the animals rejoiced, praising the strength and hard work of their wise king. Then Elephant made rules about the water hole so that the water should be shared equally and everyone could quench their thirst. He decided that the animals could only come and drink at sunrise and sunset.

That is only half of the story. Lion disobeyed the rules and crept down in the middle of the night to drink his fill. He also had a bath and muddied the water. Then, in an attempt to discredit Elephant and usurp his throne, he gathered up some mud and smeared it on sleeping Elephant's feet. Fortunately, Lion's plan was neither well thought out nor cleverly executed. Not only did he forget to clean the mud off of his own paws, but his tracks were the only fresh spoor at the water hole. Lion was banished from Elephant's kingdom and King Elephant retained the trust of his subjects and reigned over them for a long time. The rains returned and life was good.

The end of the story is also worth noting. By the time old Elephant died many years later, he was the most respected animal in the land. Lion now had his chance and proclaimed himself to be King of the Beasts. After his takeover many things changed and the animals of the bush were no longer ruled by a fair and just leader. There was much grumbling and you would often overhear statements such as: "If only things were like they used to be, when Elephant was King!"

What if, in business, Lion was no longer king? What if Elephant was king (or queen) once more? For, according to the theme of this book, in the corporate bushveld of the future

where social equity and environmental sustainability are the watchwords of society, Elephant has all the right characteristics to be the leader.

4.2 Masters of survival

Elephants are the epitome of sustainability, having survived for 50 million years and having evolved through the forms of more than 300 species to reach us today as our largest land mammal. They have shown themselves to be supreme survivors and masters at adapting to different regions, climates and habitats. From their origins on the dry, grassy plains of Africa, they spread across all the continents except for Australia, adjusting to steamy tropical rain forests, sandy coastal deserts, extreme mountain terrain and snowy temperate zones. They have even survived an ice age.

As with companies that wish to endure, adaptation is the key. The desert elephants have evolved into more slender creatures with longer legs to cope with the sandy conditions, while the forest varieties are smaller and more compact. The elephants also have the ability to modify their behaviour, depending on the prevailing circumstances. For example, during a drought, they are able to regulate their reproductivity so as not to give birth to young when the chances of survival are poor. When they migrate during the dry season, they also break up into smaller groups to allow greater flexibility in the face of scarce resources.

Lion-like companies stand in marked contrast. Although proving themselves to be extremely innovative and flexible when dealing with highly visible threats constituting typical fight-or-flight situations, they have a very poor radar system when it comes to picking up and responding to more fundamental, invisible changes over long periods of time. After all, the modern capitalist corporation, especially the multinational, is for the most part less than 100 years old and already it is threatening to destroy the very social and ecological fabric on which it depends. Companies are going to need to learn what it means to survive epochs and symbolic ice ages, and the elephant can lead the way.

4.3 Benefactors of cooperation

Elephants are not predators. They are complete vegetarians living from the land, not off their fellow-creatures. They have no natural enemies other than humans and are seldom seen in violent encounters with other species. In fact, bushlore has it that despite their tremendous size, elephants in the wild go out of their way not to harm any other animals in their path, no matter how small.

As a rule, the elephant's relationship to other species and Nature is highly cooperative and symbiotic. For example, elephants often provide the lifeline that other animals need in the dry bushveld by digging for water, or enlarging existing water holes. Their eating habits, which often appear destructive, simultaneously open up the forest canopy to allow young growth better access to the sunlight and make previously inaccessible vegetation more widely available to other species. They also fertilise and distribute the seeds of a large variety of plants, earning them the nickname of 'gardeners'. Not only are they the

plumbers and gardeners of the wild, they are also the road-builders, leaving a vast network of trails that give other creatures pathways through sometimes dense habitat. Elephants' cooperation with humans is also legendary, from the storybook tales of Tarzan and Mowgli, to the real life war-elephants of Hannibal and the hardworking domesticated animals of India and Africa.

In the complex world of wider accountability to stakeholders, sustainable companies will need to learn to survive not by their ability to hunt and kill, but by their capacity to identify, nurture and sustain cooperative relationships. Like the elephant, this behaviour will be in spite of or perhaps even because of their great size and power in the modern world. Incidentally, America as the most powerful nation on Earth will need to take the same lesson to heart, having operated almost entirely in a lion-like mode since the terrorists struck in New York in September 2001. Interestingly, W.E. Gladstone's words in England during the second Afghan war in 1880 demonstrated that Britannia at the height of her imperial authority could still produce a Prime Minister with an elephant-leaning belief system. He said: "The sanctity of life in the hill villages of Afghanistan, among the winter snows, is as inviolable in the eyes of Almighty God, as can be your own". Do the present generation of Western lions honestly believe that Afghan lives are as precious as their own? We have our doubts despite claims that everything was done to avoid 'collateral damage' during the bombing campaign in Afghanistan.

4.4 Inspirers of greatness

Elephants' awesome size and strength inspires respect and admiration from humans and other animals alike, although they do not abuse their power. While some of their ancestors stood an incredible 13 feet at the shoulder, a full-grown African elephant bull remains supremely impressive, measuring 11-12 feet at the shoulder and weighing around 6 tons. In terms of size and strength, the analogy with today's multinational corporations is a fitting one.

But it's not just that they are big; it's how elephants carry themselves that count. When they walk, there is a remarkable grace in their movement. When threatened, they can move quickly across the ground, reaching speeds of up to 40 kilometres an hour. When stretching for food just out of reach, they show unbelievable balance and agility. When moving through the bush or forest, they can travel with great stealth and silence. In fact, the bone structure of their feet is designed so that they constantly walk on tiptoes, cushioned by a pad of fatty tissue across their soles. And when duelling for mating dominance, they give breathtaking displays of coordinated aggression like an intricate dance between highly trained warriors.

The key for sustainable companies is not only to learn to find this grace and flexibility despite their size, it is also to be creatures of inspiration. Like Dumbo, they need to believe they can fly against the odds and in the face of public perception. They need to add new symbols to the traditional symbols of success adored by fund managers, not for show but because it is the right thing to do. Above all, big business needs to exchange a reluctance

to display generosity – because it is a sign of weakness to give anything away that you don't have to – for a more conscientious and caring image. They need to inspire smaller companies to follow in their footsteps.

4.5 Leaders of compassion

Elephant life in the herd is governed by a matriarch; in family and clan, all authority is vested in experienced mother elephants who demand respect and are acknowledged as the herd leaders. They alone protect and lead the growing calves; they maintain order and harmony in the groups; they face the foe with courage and aggression when danger threatens. The role of each cow in the herd is clearly defined, from the leader to the rear guard, in family groups that can number up to twenty or thirty animals.

This matriarchal social structure also appears to manifest in the kind of values that dominate the herd. Relationships are paramount, constantly nurtured through communication and bonding. Caring for and protecting the next generation is every adult elephant's prime concern. And paying tribute to their deceased companions is a ritual of compassion that moves all who witness it. Elephants are known to linger over the carcasses of their dead, forming a laager to ward off the first waves of predators. Or when they encounter only the skeletal remains of another elephant, they can be seen gently touching and smelling the bones with their trunks, with some even carrying a bone with them for a while afterwards.

Achieving comparable levels of social cohesion, empowering woman in leadership and embracing caring values and compassionate attributes - these will be the strengths that allow sustainable companies to survive and thrive in the new age of stakeholder-shaped management.

4.6 Champions of communication

Elephants possess highly developed senses that allow them to be in constant communication with their family and the larger herd, while simultaneously receiving information-laden feedback from the environment that surrounds them. An elephant's trunk, comprising more than ten thousand muscles and millions of nerves, is like an amazing multi-functional 'technology', capable of transmitting messages, picking up scented codes, gathering fuel, washing, not to mention caressing and playing. With this remarkable instrument, an elephant can smell water 12 miles away.

Elephants have a rich and varied language of communication and a range of sounds to express moods and feelings: a purring vibration denoting pleasure as they greet one of their kind; a rumbling sound in the throat, when feeling pain; a soft, moaning squeal when experiencing loneliness and boredom in captivity; a hissing rumble of anger; and an eerie melodious 'singing' when in community. Their most incredible ability, however, was only discovered by American zoologist, Katherine Payne, in 1984 when she began to wonder why 'the air trembled' around elephants sometimes. Subsequent research has shown that

elephants communicate with each other over vast distances using infrasound, namely frequencies that are too low for the human ear to hear.

Sustainable companies will likewise need to be geniuses of communication, using a wide variety of media channels to ensure that they are in tune with the needs and opinions of their stakeholders. They will need to improve their communication 'hardware' to ensure real-time monitoring of environmental impacts and have structured forums for receiving stakeholder feedback. Amazingly, CEOs on the whole spend very little time capturing relevant information about the external environment. They flick on CNN to watch the news headlines in the morning and skim through the newspapers over breakfast. The whole day is spent studying internal memoranda so that by the time they get home they're too tired to read or watch television. Like good lions, they go to sleep after the evening meal!

4.7 Keepers of wisdom

Elephants are among the most intelligent creatures in the world. With the largest brain of any land mammal and a brain-to-body mass ratio second only to humans, they also have among the highest 'intelligence index' of any animal: 104 compared, for example, with that of the dolphin at 121 and the human at 170 (we are not talking IQs!). The prolonged period of childhood shared by the elephant species is another indication of its evolutionary intelligence. Elephants display a remarkable capacity for learning in captivity as well as in the wild. What's more, they seem to share acquired knowledge amongst themselves. For example, when one elephant in a group experiences the shock from an electrified fence, none of the others will touch the fence; somehow, they invisibly warn each other and learn from each other's mistakes.

There is also the legendary capacity that elephants have in terms of long term memory; hence the saying 'an elephant never forgets'. Often, researchers or keepers have been recognised after decades of absence, with some elephants demonstrating their capacity for bearing a grudge. For example, after being tricked into eating some vile medicine by the keeper at the Dresden zoo in Germany, the African bull elephant Jumbo would vent anger at the keeper and refuse to let him approach, even pelting him with rocks when he spotted him at a distance. More than this, elephants appear capable of passing on their learning from one generation to another, as has been witnessed from certain behavioural responses of young elephants when culling has been reintroduced after a long moratorium.

For all these reasons, it is perhaps not surprising that elephants are associated with wisdom by many ancient cultures. Their lifespan is about 60 to 70 years, not much shorter than our own. Some African tribes even refer to their tusks as 'wisdom sticks'. Like the elephant, sustainable companies will need to be far more intelligent than today's lion-like companies. They will need to remember constantly why they changed to environmentally-friendly processes in their factories and plants; why they spend more time and money on social responsibility programmes than their competitors; why they allow their staff to lead more balanced lives with their families instead of making them work around the clock; and why they must never get too complacent with their success. In the end, they will be

rewarded for never forgetting. As the nineteenth century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer observed: "The idea of the elephant is imperishable".