

CSR CHANGE AGENCY

Making a Difference

By Wayne Visser

In the face of unprecedented global challenges like financial market instability, persistent poverty and climate change, can individuals make a difference? This article looks at what motivates people to devote their time and energies to addressing social, environmental and ethical issues.

In particular, it shows how corporate sustainability and responsibility (CSR) can provide a powerful way to address what I called in a previous article for *Ethical Corporation* ("Five corporate sustainability challenges that remain unmet", EC 31, July 2004), the 'existential gap', i.e. the lack of a deeper sense of personal meaning and job satisfaction felt by many employees today.

A survey a few years ago by the London PR agency, Fish Can Sing, already hinted at the extent of the problem. They found that 66 percent all 18-35 year-olds are unhappy at work, and the proportion rises to 83 percent among 30-35 year-olds. According to their results, one in 15 has already quit the rat race and 45 percent are seriously contemplating a career change.

They labelled this group of people 'TIREDS' – or Thirty-something Independent Radical Educated Drop-outs. In analysing this market segment, they discovered that these otherwise highly successful and motivated professionals were lacking something in their corporate life. This they called the 'LDDR factor' – they wanted Less Demand (i.e. less work-related stress, shorter working hours) and Deeper Reward (i.e. more job satisfaction, higher quality of life).

What's more, this existential crisis doesn't appear to be confined either to the thirty-something age group, nor to the UK. According to the Worldwatch Institute, about a third of Americans report being 'very happy', the same share as in 1957, when Americans were only half as wealthy. And in Japan, there is a word for 'death from overwork' (*karoshi*).

In fact, the industrialised world in general fares much worse than expected on some measures of wellbeing. For example, in the New Economics Foundation's 2006 Happy Planet Index, which measures the relative efficiency with which nations convert the planet's natural resources into long and happy lives for their citizens, Italy is 66th, Germany 81st, Japan 95th, the UK comes 108th, Canada 111th, France 129th, United States 150th and Russia 172nd.

So what is going on here? Victor Frankl, author of *Man's Search for Meaning* and a personal survivor of four Nazi concentration camps, suggests that our Western pursuit of economic growth may be to blame: "Consider today's society," he says. "It gratifies and satisfies virtually every need - except for one, the need for meaning. This spreading meaning vacuum is especially evident in affluent industrial countries. People have the *means* for living, but not the *meanings*."

Management guru, Charles Handy, puts it another way: "We seem to be saying that life is about economics, that money is the measure of things. My hunch is that most of us don't believe any of this, and that it won't work, but we are trapped in our own rhetoric and have, as yet, nothing else to offer, not even a different way to talk about it."

He may be right. Then again, surely one "different way to talk about it" is through the language of sustainability and responsibility? After all, these are matters which run deep. They are matters of values and beliefs, of higher aspirations and noble causes. And yet, even here, we find the prevailing rhetoric of CSR is mostly about the 'business case'. Talking about the 'moral case' or the

'personal case' for CSR seems to be taboo. As if stripping human emotion and personal motivation from the debate somehow makes it more credible, if not more effective.

My research suggests that this corporatized, depersonalised approach to CSR is failing to tap into a massive source of energy for constructive change in companies and the world. The reason is that the 'CSR-zombie' view of the world (i.e. reflected in the mantra, "I only do CSR because it's good for business") completely fails to appreciate why people choose to work in CSR, what satisfaction they derive from this work, and what motivates them to keep trying to make a positive difference, despite huge obstacles and frustrations.

But let's start at the beginning. What do we know about the role of individuals as change agents? Intuitively, we resonate with adages such as Ghandi's "be the change you want to see in the world" or Margaret Mead's famous quote: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever does". But beyond these clichéd one-liners, what do we really know about change in the CSR context?

The first rich vein of research to mine is the concept of 'champions' within an organisation. This goes back to the emergence of HR champions in the 1980s, but in the 1990s, we saw the idea starting to be applied to environmental management and corporate social performance as well.

So what is a CSR champion? Essentially, it is an individual who has the ability to translate a set of personal beliefs about creating a just and sustainable future into an attractive vision for their organisation or sector. Or put another way, they are masters at identifying, packaging and selling CSR issues to those that have power and influence.

CSR champions – who are not always those with formal CSR roles – are often described as being: action-oriented, enthusiasts, inspirers, experts, volunteers, communicators, networkers, sponsors, implementers, and catalysts. They find that, contrary to popular belief, individuals have considerable discretion within organisations to pursue and promote agendas that they are passionate about.

Crucially, however, they need a combination of knowledge and skills to be successful. For example, they need to be able to gather sufficient credible information to make a rational case for change. They need the ability to tell an emotionally compelling story about a more sustainable future. And they need enough political savvy and interpersonal skills to persuade others, especially leaders, to listen and take action.

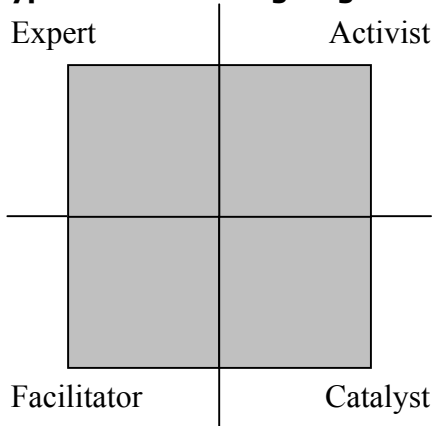
So we know that many CSR professionals are effective change agents, when they act as champions. But this still doesn't tell us what motivates them to engage with the agenda in the first place. This is the question I set out to answer in my doctoral research. And in the process, I found that, while change echoed as a consistent theme among all the CSR professionals I interviewed, the way in which they make change happen, and the satisfaction they derive as a result, differs considerably.

For some CSR professionals, as one might have guessed, *values* play an important role. In particular, CSR is seen as a way to align their work with their personal values. For example, one said: "It's the inner drive, it's the way I am put together, my value system, my belief system ... it's my Christian belief, my ethical approach." Another explained that it is important to have "inspirational leadership and people who align with your value sets".

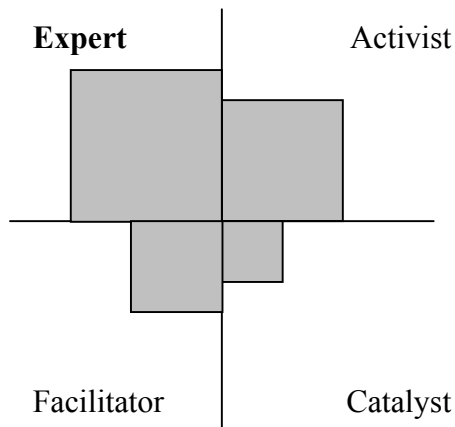
For many CSR professionals, their motivation derives from the 'nature of the beast', i.e. the fact that sustainability is such a dynamic, complex and challenging *concept*. "The satisfaction is huge," said one CSR manager, "because there is no day that is the same when you get into your office. It's always changing, it's always different." Another reflected that CSR "painted a much bigger picture" and is "just as holistic as you want it to be. It requires a far broader vision".

These two factors – values alignment and the sustainability concept – were fairly cross-cutting. However, after analysing all the interviews, I also found that I could distinguish four fairly distinctive types of CSR professional, based on how they derived satisfaction from their work. In practice, every individual draws on all four types, but the centre of gravity rests with one, representing the mode of operating in which that individual feels most comfortable, fulfilled or satisfied.

Types of CSR Change Agent

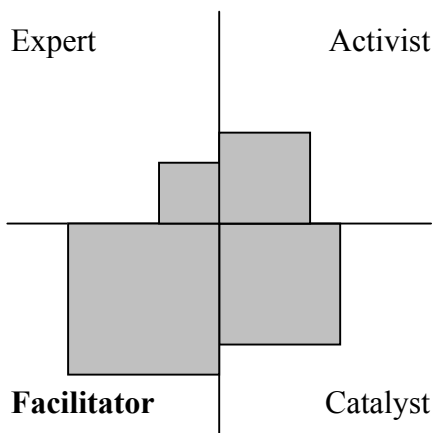


The first type of CSR change agent is the *Expert*. Experts find their motivation through engaging with projects or systems, giving expert input, focusing on technical excellence, seeking uniqueness through specialisation, and pride in problem solving abilities.



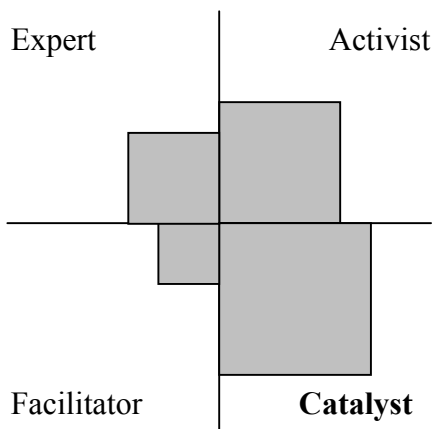
To illustrate, one Expert-type CSR professional explained: "There were a couple of projects that I did find very exciting ... It was very exciting to get all the bits and pieces in place, then commission them and see them starting to work." Another said: "I usually get that sense of meaning in work when I've finished a product, say like an Environmental Report and you see, geez you know, I've really put in a lot and here it is. Or you have had a series of community consultations and you now have the results."

The second type of CSR change agent is the *Facilitator*. Common themes among Facilitators are the derivation of motivation from transferring knowledge and skills, focusing on people development, creating opportunities for staff, changing the attitudes or perceptions of individuals, and paying attention to team building.



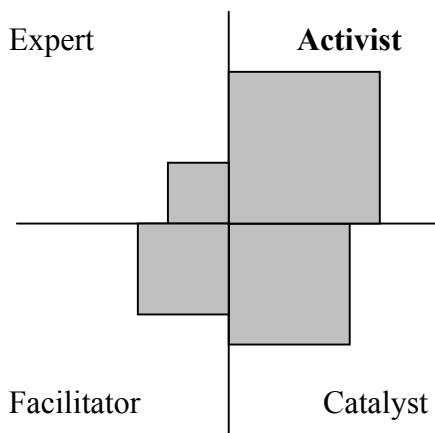
For example, one Facilitator-type CSR professional said: "If you enjoy working with people, this is a sort of functional role that you have direct interaction, you can see people being empowered, having increased knowledge, and you can see what that eventually leads to." Another explained: "The part of my work that I've enjoyed most is training, where I get the opportunity to work with a group of people - to interact with people at a very personal level. You can see how things start to get clear for them, in terms of understanding issues and how that applies to what they do."

The third type of CSR change agent is the *Catalyst*. For Catalysts, motivation is associated with initiating change, giving strategic direction, influencing leadership, tracking organisational performance, and having a big picture perspective.



One Catalyst-type CSR professional I interviewed claimed: "The type of work that I'm doing is ... giving direction in terms of where the company is going. So it can become almost a life purpose to try and steer the company in a direction that you believe personally is right as well." Another reflected: "I like getting things changed. My time is spent trying to influence people. The real interesting thing is to try and get Managing Directors, plant managers, business leaders, and sales guys to think differently and to change what they do."

That is quite different from the fourth type of CSR change agent, which is the *Activist*. For Activists, motivation comes from being aware of broader social and environmental issues, feeling part of the community, making a contribution to social upliftment, fighting for a just cause, and leaving a legacy of improved conditions in society.



For instance, one Activist-type CSR professional said: "It's also about the issue of being poor. It actually touches you. You see these people have been living in appalling conditions, the shacks, the drinking water is so dirty, or there's no running water at all, you see those kind of things, it hits you, and you think: What can you do?" Another confessed: "I think my purpose here is to help others in some way and leave a legacy for my kids to follow. I could leave a legacy behind where I actually set up a school, a kids' school, or a campus for disadvantaged people, taking street kids out and doing something, building homes for single parents."

Characteristics of CSR Change Agents

	<i>Types</i>			
	<i>Expert</i>	<i>Facilitator</i>	<i>Catalyst</i>	<i>Activist</i>
<i>Primary source of meaning</i>	Specialist input	People empowerment	Strategic input	Societal contribution
<i>Level of concern</i>	Individual	Group or team	Organisation	Society
<i>Source of work satisfaction</i>	Personal development, quality input	Staff development, effective facilitation	Organisational development, strategic change	Community development, social change
<i>Skills</i>	Technical, process	Managerial, facilitation	Visionary, political	Collaborative, Questioning
<i>Knowledge</i>	Specialist	Generalist	Key players, future trends	Community or macro needs
<i>Legacy</i>	Successful work projects	Staff or team's achievements	Organisation or industry transformation	Sustainable environment & equitable society

The different types find some resonance in the broader management and sustainability literature. For example, the Catalyst type clearly draws on a strategic role and applies it to sustainability, bringing in a lot of ideas from change management. Arguably, the Facilitator finds echoes in the servant leadership and sustainability management research. The Activist is probably best described in the work on social and environmental entrepreneurship and there are glimpses of the Expert in much of the more technical scholarship on environmental and quality management.

It is important to note that the typology is dynamic. In the same way that sources meaning in life can vary over the life cycle or other changing circumstances, there is ample evidence to suggest that CSR professionals' default types can change as well. For example, one CSR manager I interviewed seemed to have shifted from being an Activist to a Facilitator (moving from political activism to business training and lecturing); another, from Expert to Catalyst (from laboratory work to strategic policy advice) and yet another, from Expert to Facilitator (from a technical scientist to a team unit manager).

For some (but not all) CSR change agents, their formal roles and their type are aligned, as in the examples cited above. Hence, there is a suggestion that either people are naturally attracted to roles that fit with their change-agent types, or that their roles shape the meaning they derive as certain types, or perhaps both. As one manager reminded me, "in your career or in your work, the manager must be able to swing from the one type to the other."

Another important influence is organisational context. For instance, one CSR professional made observed that the fact that the "organisation dynamics of corporates require conformism to the organisational culture, which to a large degree requires maintenance of the status quo ... this makes it difficult for Activists."

Career stage or life cycle as another important context. One CSR manager said: "I think that one of the things that you have to bear in mind is how much individual flexibility you get in working environments. I think at an earlier stage in someone's career, no matter what their typology might be, they don't necessarily yet have the luxury of finding themselves in the position that gives expression to their preference."

Beyond simply improving our understanding of CSR change agents, there are several practical uses for the typology. The most obvious potential applications occur at an individual and team level, with benefits for CSR managers, managers of CSR teams and human resource managers.

For CSR managers, the typology acts as prompt for individuals to reflect on their most natural type, or mix of types. This allows them to think about what sorts of roles they derive the most satisfaction from, and to consciously compare this to their formal role. If there isn't a natural fit between their type and their formal role, it may help to explain work frustrations or lacking motivation. As one CSR manager testified: "It immediately helps me to understand some of the frustrations that I have with some of the areas."

For managers of a CSR team, the typology helps to cast light on the mix of team members, from the perspective of their different sources of motivation. This can influence the way in which individuals are managed and allocated tasks, as well as the general management style adopted. For example, if there is a predominance of Experts, incentives that recognise quality may be far more effective than for a Catalyst heavy team, where tracking of strategic goals may be more motivational.

If the typology is used as a team-building exercise (i.e. where each individual's self-classification is shared among the group) it is conceivable that mutual understanding, sensitivity and team dynamics may improve. The manager of a CSR team may decide that there is merit in having a balance of all four types represented, which will in turn affect recruitment decisions.

Human resource managers may also use the typology to assist in recruitment, either for targeting a particular type to fit the corporate culture, or a specific role or need in the organisation, or as a way to ensure a balanced distribution of types in the organisation or the sustainability team. It could also be invaluable in designing targeted recruitment campaigns and incentive packages for this niche of professionals. For example, an appeal to values and expertise may be more successful on average than promises of financial reward and job status.

Another link to human resource management is the potential of employee volunteering. Numerous surveys and studies show that there is a compelling business case for involvement in CSR issues generally and employee volunteering more specifically. The basic rationale is that engagement with sustainability improves employee satisfaction and motivation, which in turn enhances loyalty, commitment and productivity and reduces turnover.

However, my research suggests that companies also stand to gain a lot by going beyond the business case, i.e. by justifying their corporate sustainability activities on the basis of values – what some call the ‘moral case’. My findings suggest that taking this position (in addition to, rather than instead of, the business case) would tap into a powerful source of motivation, namely the life satisfaction that CSR managers (and in all likelihood many other employees) derive from values alignment.

To conclude, there is a saying in Africa that there are two hungers - the lesser hunger and the greater hunger. The lesser hunger is for the things that sustain life - goods and services and the money to pay for them. The greater hunger is for an answer to the question ‘why?’ for some understanding of what life is for.

It is my contention that CSR change agents have a fantastic opportunity to feed the greater hunger, by making a constructive difference and leaving a positive legacy. As Victor Frankl said, “each person is questioned by life; and they can only answer to life by answering for their *own* life”.

NOTE

The research summarised in this article is presented in more detail in Wayne Visser’s book, *Making A Difference*.

Article reference

Visser, W., 2008. CSR Change Agency: Making a Difference, *CSR International Paper Series*, No. 1. First published in *Ethical Corporation Magazine*, November 2008.

Part of the CSR INTERNATIONAL PAPER Series

Copyright Wayne Visser & CSR International 2008