

Be the Change – But First Be Yourself

By Wayne Visser

What do we know about the role of individuals as CSR change agents? Intuitively, we resonate with adages such as Gandhi'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 clichés, what do we really know about change in the context of CSR?

As part of my PhD research, I interviewed a range of CSR professionals – by which I mean managers, consultants, academics and NGO representatives working on corporate social, environmental and ethical issues. As expected, I found that the desire to create change recurs as a consistent theme. But the way in which CSR professionals make change happen, and the satisfaction they derive as a result, differs considerably.

For some, as one might have guessed, values play an important role. In particular, corporate responsibility is seen as a way to align work with personal values. For example, one manager I interviewed says: '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 explains that it is important to have 'inspirational leadership and people who align with your value sets'.

For many CSR professionals, their motivation also derives from the fact that sustainability and responsibility are such dynamic, complex and challenging concepts. 'The satisfaction is huge,' says one corporate responsibility 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 reflects that corporate responsibility '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 CSR concept – are fairly cross-cutting motivators. However, it is also possible to distinguish four fairly distinctive types of CSR professional, based on how they derive 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.

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 explains: '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 Expert says: '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 says: '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 Facilitator explains: '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 claims: '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 says: '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, the *Activist*. For Activists, motivation comes from being aware of broader social and environmental issues, feeling part of the community, making a contribution to poverty eradication, fighting for a just cause, and leaving a legacy of improved conditions in society. One Activist-type CSR professional says: '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 confesses: '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.'

One of the underlying messages of my CSR change agency research is that companies stand to gain a lot by going beyond the business case for CSR, by justifying sustainability and responsibility efforts on the basis of values – or by appealing to the deep satisfaction that working on CSR issues can inspire. Taking this position – in addition to, rather than instead of, the business case – will enable companies to tap into a powerful source of motivation, namely the meaning that CSR professionals (and in all likelihood many other employees) derive from the alignment of values with work.

Postscript: My research on CSR change agency is presented in detail in my book, *Making A Difference: Purpose-Inspired Leadership for Corporate Sustainability and Responsibility (CSR)*.

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