

## **To Scare or Inspire? Bringing Admission, Ambition & Pragmatic to CSR**

***By Wayne Visser***

What is the most effective CSR/sustainability strategy – to scare or to inspire? How do you get the balance between sharing the bad news (i.e. the state of the world) and the good news (i.e. the innovative solutions)?

Betty Sue Flowers, co-author of *Presence*, told me that 'if you attempt to scare people with the enormity of the problems, the tendency is simply to give up. And so when you dispirit people, when you remove the spirit, you also remove the capacity to change.' This is a common refrain – and indeed a dilemma. We can't deny the severity of the crises that we face, and yet we can't paralyse people with fear.

Jonathon Porritt, author of *Capitalism as if the World Matters*, told me, 'I'm impaled on this every day of my life at the moment. What do you do? I think we still owe it to reality and to integrity in any communications process to share the empirical reality. But how you come out of that without leaving people spread eagled with despair and just utterly disempowered?'

Porritt elaborates, saying, 'We're trying to create these upbeat, opportunity driven wish lists about what would happen if businesses seized hold of this set of opportunities here, and started to do things completely differently over there, and if politicians started to construct societal and economic responses based on a world not on growth hormones. But then you look at the scale of their responses and you set it against the scale of the analysis, and of course it looks frail. It looks insubstantial in terms of where we need to be. So I think the mechanisms we're using are the only ones available to us, but we haven't got it right yet. Whether we can get there building, building, building gradually over a period of time or whether we need some shocks in the system to accelerate the emergence of that positive energy, that for me is still a hard one to call.'

Jorgen Randers, co-author of the original 1972 *Limits to Growth* report and author the recently released book *2052: A Global Forecast for the Next Forty Years*, is equally ambivalent. Speaking to me, he reflected, 'Are scare tactics better than carrots? There are groups pursuing both avenues. I think I've moved to thinking that having a positive view has a stronger motivational force than scare tactics. But then you can ask the question, is it possible to come up with sufficient carrots to make society act? And it looks as if some support from some scare tactics or some of the disasters would help.'

The 21st Century Living project, undertaken by Acona in conjunction with Homebase and The Eden Project, may provide some answers. Based on an 18 month study of 100 households in the UK, the findings showed that most people will act, given the right tools and information specifically for their needs. 'The data say clearly that environmental values are not a good predictor of action. The message we got back was clear: we can get on with cutting our environmental footprint without having to win the battle for the long-term soul of the nation. Don't browbeat people, don't frighten them – just show them where they are wasting money and resources and they will change themselves. Frame the topic like this and everyone is interested – young and old, wealthy and poor, green or not.'

Like all of us in the CSR/sustainability field, I have also been grappling with the issue of whether it is best to scare or inspire. In my case, however, this was also critical in a post-apartheid South Africa that was in the grip of pessimism after the euphoria of its political miracle had evaporated and the massive challenges of social upliftment became clear. This was the subject of my book, *South Africa: Reasons to Believe*, in which my co-author and I concluded that there are two basic ingredients to being positive. The first is to recognise that our pessimistic views are skewed by

unbalanced media reporting. We have to remember that our mental state is determined by what we focus on. It's not that the media is lying; it's just that they are painting a picture of the world that is highly selective. They are like manic-depressive artists patching together a collage, using bits and pieces of real events, most of which happen to be dark or disturbing. So, we need to start exposing ourselves to more of the positive news stories, in order to get a more balanced perspective of what is going on around us.

The second ingredient to being positive is to recognise that our attitude influences the world around us, for better or worse. The neutral scientist in the white coat is a myth – he/she does not exist. The observer and the observed are not separate; they are always inextricably linked. Everything we think, or believe, or value, changes the world around us. It even affects our physical health. Attitudes are like lenses that colour what we see. But they are also like yeast in bread – they have a very real, visible effect on the outcome of whatever we are trying to make work, whether it is a family, a business, a nation, or even a whole planet. This is not just a philosophical point. Optimism comes from actively engaging with life's challenges.

Relating this back to the theme of this blog series, namely CSR 2.0 and the Age of Responsibility, I always suggest that companies use a simple dual test. The difference between a CSR 1.0 and a CSR 2.0 company is the depth of their admission and the scale of their ambition. Interface founder, Ray Anderson, concedes in his book *Confessions of a Radical Industrialist* not only that today's economic system is broken, but that he and his company are part of the problem. He is able to see himself as a 'plunderer' (his word) – not through malicious intent, or even greed, but by failing to question the true impacts of business on society and the environment.

As Alcoholics Anonymous will tell you, admission is the first step to recovery. Unfortunately, most companies stuck in the Ages of Greed, Philanthropy, Marketing and Management are all still in denial, thinking that either there is no problem, or it's not their problem, or that it's a problem to benefit from, or that it's only a minor problem.

The Age of Responsibility is not just about admission though; it's also about ambition. As far as I can tell, Interface was the first major company to set the BHAG (big hairy audacious goal) of zero negative impact, as well as going beyond 'no harm' to also become a restorative business – to genuinely make things better and leave this world with a net-positive balance. Today, there are others like Walmart (zero waste, 100% renewable energy) and Unilever (double the business, halve the environmental footprint). I believe it is only such audacious goals that can lift the triple curses of incremental, peripheral and uneconomic CSR.

As Robert Francis Kennedy reminds us: 'There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?' We need more pragmatic dreamers, business leaders who practice what brain-mind researcher and author Marilyn Ferguson calls 'pragmatic'. Will you be one of the pragmaticians of CSR and sustainability? For all our sakes, I really hope so! Help us break the spell of irresponsible business and unsustainable capitalism.

Senge concludes that a good guy/bad guy mentality can be a barrier to such collaboration. 'You've got to wake up and say "We're all part of the system". You know who is causing the destruction of species? You and me. You know who's causing the huge waste problems around the world? You and me.' Once you become more open-minded to this possibility, then you can look for collaborative solutions. 'Look for small steps of things you can do together with people with whom you traditionally would never have cooperated – and do something useful, no matter how small.'

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