

Can CSR Make Us Happy?

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 blog looks at what motivates people to devote their time and energies to addressing social, environmental and ethical issues.

In particular, it shows how CSR or corporate sustainability and responsibility can provide a powerful way to address what I have called the “existential gap” (Ethical Corporation, July 2004), or lack of a deeper sense of personal meaning and job satisfaction felt by many employees today.

A survey a few years ago by London PR firm Fish Can Sing hinted at the extent of the problem. It found that 66% all 18-35 year-olds were unhappy at work. The proportion rose to 83% among 30-35 year-olds. One in 15 respondents had already quit the rat race and 45% were seriously contemplating a career change.

Someone in this latter group was described as being TIRED, or a Thirty-something Independent Radical Educated Drop-out. These otherwise highly successful and motivated professionals were found to be lacking something in their working lives. They wanted less work-related stress and shorter working hours, and more job satisfaction, and higher quality of life.

What’s more, the existential crisis does not appear to be confined either to the thirty-something age group, or to the UK. According to the Worldwatch Institute, today the same number of Americans – about a third – report being “very happy” as did in 1957, even though they are as a group twice as wealthy as they were 50 years ago. And in Japan, there is even a word for “death from overwork” – “karoshi”.

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 and Japan 95th. The UK comes in at 108th, Canada 111th, France 129th, and the US 150th.

So what is going on here? 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 the 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 thinker 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.”

Handy 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 corporate responsibility is mostly about the business case. Talk of the “moral case” or the “personal case” for corporate responsibility is taboo – as if stripping human emotion and personal motivation from the debate on what companies should behave somehow makes it more credible, if not more effective.

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

To read the full article, published in Ethical Corporation, go to:

http://www.waynevisser.com/article_waynevisser_change_agents.pdf

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