

Can business survive and thrive by trading in its fangs for tusks?

By Wayne Visser

Based on the book by Wayne Visser and Clem Sunter, *Beyond Reasonable Greed: Why Sustainable Business is a Much Better Idea!* (Human & Rousseau / Tafelberg, 2002).

In search of sustainability

At the dawn of the 21st century, *sustainability* is one of the most profound drivers for transformation in business and the world at large. Sustainability is about surviving and thriving, by finding a proper balance between economic, social and environmental development. Neither one of these elements of the so-called 'triple bottom line' can be pursued relentlessly at the expense of the others, or else the whole system collapses. Sadly, at the moment, there is widespread evidence that we are out of balance and that, despite economic advances (and sometimes because of them), our ecological and social systems are breaking down.

Impacts by humans and industry have already destroyed over 10 percent of the Earth's biological species in just 100 years and scientists are predicting that we will lose up to 50 percent of all species by the end of this century, should current rates of habitat destruction continue. This is ecologically *unsustainable*. At the same time, the gaps between rich and poor, between CEO packages and workers wages, between developed and developing countries, have all widened in the past 50 years. This is socially *unsustainable*.

Trading in fangs for tusks

We believe that the very *mode* of modern business and the economy lies at the heart of the problem. To use an analogy, today, the majority of business embodies the characteristics of a lion – an impressive predator. Think about it: companies in general have insatiable appetites for profits and shareholder returns, which are automatically given a higher priority than their impacts on local communities, or the natural environment. They cleverly argue that turning themselves into fat cats will somehow miraculously trickle down to benefit society as a whole, despite growing evidence to the contrary. All the other animals of the bushveld are not convinced!

By contrast, the future calls for different strengths, such as those displayed by the mighty elephant – a wise leader. They are masters of survival and adaptation, and live in cooperative harmony with their fellow creatures. Elephants are organised in matriarchal herds, which display highly developed social tendencies and sophisticated

communication abilities (including the use of infrasound). They are extremely intelligent creatures, but also display sensitive emotions like affection and grief. Most of all, these gentle giants inspire all who encounter them.

Scenarios of the future

These analogies of lion versus elephant companies have not just been dreamed up as an exercise in light entertainment. They are a glimpse of the very real future landscape of business that will emerge over the coming decades. Underpinning the sustainability trend are a number of conditions – what scenario planners call ‘rules of game’. These include: the biophysical limitations of the Earth; the multiplier impacts of population growth and industrial lifestyles; pervasive poverty and growing resentment among the dispossessed masses; declining ecosystems; a techno-scientific boom; a communication networked planet; and a renaissance in values.

At the same time, there are key uncertainties – variables that could go one way or the other. They are the pivotal points on which the future swivels. These include: the willingness of business to share power; the direction of scientific and technological innovation; the nature of economic and trade developments; the ability of volatile regions in the world to reach stable, peaceful solutions; the rate of environmental decline and the time lag of its effects; manifestations of social unrest; and lifestyle choices.

Given these rules of the game and key uncertainties, which are described in more detail in the book on which this article is based, two contrasting scenarios emerge which serve to illustrate how the future landscape of business and the world could turn out. The actual outcome will partly depend on the options we choose over the coming decade. The two scenarios are *Oases in the Desert* and *Plains of the Serengeti*. Remember, scenarios are stories of what *can* happen in the future – they are *not* forecasts of what is going to happen. Their purpose is to educate rather than prescribe.

‘Oases in the Desert’ or ‘Plains of the Serengeti’?

Oases in the Desert is where we end up if the lions continue on their path of ascendancy towards global domination. The scenario’s oasis image points to pockets of plenty existing in the midst of a desert of deprivation. It is almost as if the excesses of water and lush greenery in the oasis have been sucked out of the rest of the landscape and accumulated at just a few spots. (Some golf courses give one that impression!) Generally, the scenario is the net result of the present lions’ tendency to accumulate power and concentrate wealth in fewer and fewer hands (or should that be paws?). Additional consequences are that the majority of the world’s population is pushed into a marginal existence and the natural environment is systematically degraded. Only the cats get fatter. All the money that flows into the lion’s den never leaves.

In contrast, *Plains of the Serengeti* is where we head for if the lions realise that their game of domination has a no-win conclusion and voluntarily or begrudgingly begin

shapeshifting into elephants. The scenario conjures up breathtaking images of the fertile plains of East Africa and the Great Rift Valley teeming with wildlife, all living in a state of dynamic harmony with each other and the natural environment. A rich heritage of biological diversity exists, with even the predators finding their rightful place within the larger community of animals. Hence, although competition still takes place in the society, it is tempered by the more pervasive co-operative tendency in Nature which ensures that a healthy balance is maintained. The smaller, more entrepreneurial animals flourish in this setting.

Who will lead the charge?

The elephant symbolizes all the qualities needed in the sustainable companies of tomorrow. Sustainability is about embracing something larger than ourselves, something awesome and inspiring. It is about surviving over the long term, living through many aeons. Sustainability relies on an understanding of symbiosis and cooperative living. It requires extraordinary communication abilities, sometimes even extra sensory perception. Sustainability is complex and requires leaders of great intelligence, capacity for learning and sensitivity. Most of all, it is rooted in compassion, wisdom and intergenerational thinking.

In 10 years time, let the corporate bushveld echo, not with the roar of greedy lion companies, but with the gentle rumbling of sustainable elephant enterprises.

Postscript

Wayne Visser is Director of Sustainability Services at KPMG. *Beyond Reasonable Greed* is available in South African bookstores or can be ordered online from www.kalahari.net.

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