

Pandora's CSR Box: The Case for Banning CSR

By Wayne Visser

I participated in a strategy session on CSR/sustainability this week and was left wondering if we CSR specialists are our own worst enemy. Would more progress be made if we banned CSR? Would we be better off if we never used the C-word again? What if we substituted "CSR" with "risk management" or "new business development"?

Let me explain what I mean. By having a CSR function, or department, or profession or career, we have created a neat little box for mainstream business to put CSR-related activities into - the CSR report, the ethics code, the supply chain audit. That has some advantages - there is a focal point, people to get things done - but at what cost?

The problem with boxes is that people often don't think (or act) outside them. If environmental quality, or human rights, or health and safety, or stakeholder engagement is something that gets assigned to the CSR-box, there is a very real danger that everyone else feels they have been absolved of responsibility.

Not only that, the CSR-box mentality suggests that social, environmental and ethical challenges can be solved by tinkering at the edges of business, rather than reforming the core. If the current financial crisis teaches us anything, it is that we have to fundamentally change the way we do business. The current model is broken.

But what are the chances that business will change voluntarily? The answer is: extremely good! In fact, it is inevitable. That is because the issues we are dealing with - the breakdown of ecosystem services, the erosion of morality and the disintegration of social justice - are not marginal issues. They are business deal-breakers.

Put another way, the issues CSR is trying to tackle are business risks. If fish stocks collapse, or communities stay poor, or we have catastrophic climate change, or corruption is endemic - these undermine the ability for business to prosper. They undermine the enabling conditions for business - resource availability, political stability, and clear rules and ethics.

So when I say there is a case for banning CSR, I don't mean stopping CSR-related efforts, or firing CSR professionals. I mean changing the language of CSR and raising the CSR game - to the level of strategic risk and opportunity. This is not about greenwash and moral high ground. This is about competitive survival and future markets.

Business will not (and should not) do CSR only because it is the right thing to do. Business should do CSR because it will go out of business if it doesn't and it will be more

successful if it does. And if it just calls that approach “good business sense” or “risk management” or “strategic investment”, rather than “CSR”, so much the better.

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