

Sustainability and Organisational DNA

To me, an organisation or corporation represents the soul of its employees – it is what its people make it – just like each of our own souls. What would life be without friends, family, time for work, rest and play, spirituality and security? Similarly, an organisation needs soul – human-type DNA. You may have heard about corporate DNA. If and when the organisation seems void of spirit and soul – is when its shareholders begin questioning its ethics. Making money (or satisfying shareholders) is important, but so is looking after its employees, its customers and suppliers, its community, environment and expectations as a corporate citizen – the relativities and importance of each certainly reflecting the nature of the organisation, its product/service and its influence. This sense of overarching responsibility also applies to the individual – we are also expected to make enough money – to look after ourselves (shareholders), our family and our children (employees, suppliers and customers), assist the needy (pay tax), be giving (community) and be environmentally friendly (environment). If we were seen to be only making money, dodging taxes and not providing for our family it would be seen as not only illegal, but also unfair and unethical. It will only be a matter of time before there is emotional abandonment by our friends and family. Similarly, organisations with a short-term profit oriented outlook will also face a test of its values. The ones that survive will be those that are preferentially treated by the community, based on the perceived interrelationships with its key stakeholders.

This would be the same company that employees would preferentially work for, suppliers would rather establish long-term relationships with, customers would rather frequent, and, as a result, shareholders would rather confidently invest in. This new-age 'tomorrow's company' is radical in some ways, and not in other ways.

For example, Henry Ford took pride in ensuring his workers were remunerated above local conditions, and conducted business with a philosophy of philanthropy and environmental consciousness. He found that this gave him a licence to operate and grow his business. However, the industrial revolution has seen more companies willingly trading the environment and social commitments for profit.

Contrary to Ford's philosophy, Milton Friedman, a famous US economist, once postulated that the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. There are those that oppose, and those that support this view.

As an indication of how much has changed in thirty years, a survey titled 'Too much corporate power?' by Business Week (September 2000) reported that only 4% of Americans surveyed in 2000 by a Business Week/Harris Poll agreed that US corporations should have only one purpose – to make the most profit for their shareholders – and their pursuit of that goal would be the best for America in the long run. 95% agreed that US corporations should have more than one purpose and that they also owe something to their workers and the communities in which they operate. I guess they wanted corporations to act like good friends and citizens rather than soul-less entities.

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