Leadership, Strategy and the Environment*

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In a recent encyclical on climate change, the environment and inequality Pope Francis (2015) suggests our planet is 'beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.' His indictment of rubbish and the throwaway culture represents a challenge to political, social and business leaders. His references to the impacts of pollutants such as industrial and chemical waste and greenhouse gas emissions suggest our environmental governance arrangements, leadership and strategy are less than perfect in terms of their implications and results.

Litter is not hard to find. Recently in Bangalore I left a smart home to walk past piles of garbage on any available space, a modern manifestation of the private affluence and public squalor that J K Galbraith (1958) identified. If you are a business leader, is accumulating rubbish an inconvenient consequence or side effect of your activities that can be ignored, or is a growing mountain of waste and ever more dumps and landfill sites the most tangible legacy of what you do and an issue that needs to be addressed?

In his classic article on marketing myopia Theodore Levitt (1960) asked the question: "What business are you really in?" In the light of the Pope's comments perhaps some company boards should ask whether they are actually in the business of producing rubbish. In certain sectors such as fast food one can sometimes locate premises by following a trail of discarded wrappers and cartons. Those that consume en route leave their rubbish in lay bys or at the road side. Should the companies that produce or serve the food be made responsible for clearing up the resulting rubbish?

This year is the 25th anniversary of the founding of an Institute of Directors in India. This body organises an annual World Congress on Environmental Management which is now in its seventeenth year. The 2015 event provided a forum for reflecting on environmental governance and the role of leadership and strategy in addressing the concerns which Pope Francis and others have expressed. In particular, it provided an opportunity to consider certain questions that business leaders should be asking (Coulson-Thomas, 2015b).

Asking the Right Questions

2015 is also the 30th anniversary of Innovation '85, an activity I conceived for Rank Xerox. Over 20,000 decision makers responded to personal invitations and attended. The event attracted Royal and diplomatic visitors. Its air displays included one by the RAF aerobatic team the Red Arrows. An exhibition and presentations covered the history of innovation. A common feature of many breakthroughs was that those causing them asked the right questions. Is leadership, governance and effective strategy formulation about ensuring the right questions are asked?

Are we asking the right questions in relation to the environment? Are we focused on reducing carbon emissions while overlooking the extent to which our combined activities are also depleting biodiversity (Hilton, 2015)? Do boards ask what their organisations and their supply chains could do to protect and encourage biodiversity? In discussions about the natural and built environment are the social dimension, the social environment and various social impacts being overlooked?

Responsible leadership is about choices - making the right calls, selecting the best alternatives, establishing appropriate priorities, and achieving an optimal balance between contending forces. Progress in some areas can involve losses in others. For example, and in relation to the built environment, are we getting the right balance between growth and development? Are we protecting

our architectural, artistic and cultural heritage as old buildings are swept away?

Business leaders can be ruthless in the pursuit of profit, but so can city, town and local planners in the pursuit of current priorities. An Art Deco factory was destroyed in London minutes before a measure to protect its status came into effect. In the 1960s vibrant streets that could have been renovated were replaced by soulless tower blocks. A masterpiece of Portuguese colonial architecture was demolished in Sao Paulo to make way for a metro station. Leaders should be alert to results of strategy. After many traditional tiled buildings were pulled down in Singapore action was finally taken to save those remaining. The survivors have become a major tourist attraction.

In the Gulf, China and other locations people join coach trips to recreations of traditional buildings that are often pale shadows of the originals that were once all around them. The wonder and enjoyment people feel on occasional visits to a holiday or leisure park was once part of every day life. The buildings destroyed may also have had features such as traditional cooling towers that were more environmentally friendly than contemporary air conditioning and other replacements. Modernisation and globalisation can lead to the loss of cheaper and more effective local solutions.

Setting the Right Objectives

Mistaken, incomplete or inappropriate environmental objectives and strategies can exclude and be harmful. Some architects and builders create low-cost environments and spaces that are safe for some, but how inclusive and accessible are they for the disabled? Do they create positive feelings of contentment and improve performance? What about welcoming, inspiring and creative environments? Will new buildings and layouts enable interaction as opposed to causing isolation?

Are your environmental strategies and solutions creating problems for other people? Is your growth and development contributing to congestion, pollution and ill health? Internationalisation is wiping out local languages as well as indigenous species. Can we achieve what some might consider to be progress while at the same time preserving linguistic, cultural and biodiversity?

Pope Francis (2015) has expressed the view that globalisation has weakened the ability of national governments to address environmental and other issues. While globalisation can be advantageous, complacency, weak reforms and quasi-protectionism can leave an economy like that of India, which faces a range of environmental issues, vulnerable to external economic forces (Sharma, 2014). The challenge for the leaders of companies is what if anything they can do to help in the light of their international operations and contacts.

How joined-up are the various elements of your environmental strategy? Are you formulating and implementing it in collaboration with others? Could your corporate activities and capabilities contribute to smart city, town and village initiatives and benefit from them?

Seeing Environmental Challenges as Business Opportunities

Environmental improvements can represent strategic business opportunities. In the UK, the regeneration of waterways, derelict docks and waterside locations has created new centres of excellence and world class facilities. It has boosted employment, growth and property values. Activities like cleaning up rivers can yield leisure, health and lifestyle benefits as well encouraging tourism and other commercial activities.

Responsible business can be profitable business. There are opportunities in many areas. For example, some companies are much more effective than others at purchasing (FitzGerald, 2000). Could purchasing power be used to reduce negative impacts? Maybe one could part fund the

development of more environmentally friendly packaging by a supplier in return for a share of resulting revenues. This would reward an early mover for purchasing initiative.

Environmental improvement can lead directly to greater commercial success in an area such as retailing. The most visited place on our planet is not a world heritage site of great historical, religious, architectural or educational interest but a shopping mall in Dubai. The most polluted shopping location in the UK is Oxford Street. Following the completion of the Cross-rail project, might it be possible for the flow of buses along the street to be reduced? In other locations, regulators, retailers and transport authorities have worked together to implement visions of more environmentally friendly areas that benefit shoppers, retailers and landlords.

Visioning and Collaboration

Leadership is about compelling and differentiating visions that engage and excite, and assembling the people, know-how, technology, finance, organisation, processes and tools to implement them. One does not need to own resources and capabilities to secure access to them if one can collaborate and partner with those who have missing pieces of the jig-saw puzzle. Increasingly also, there are new models of network and virtual organisation, and ways of working, learning and consuming, that free people from activities at particular times and places. Such developments and greater use of intelligent homes and offices, robots and support tools can have significant environmental benefits.

Innovation '85 also showed the importance of vision. We held a meeting while looking for collaborating partners to make it happen. Representatives of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force both said they had agreed programmes for the events they would be supporting that year, did not have budget provision and the plans seemed very ambitious for the relatively short time available for implementing them. However, they also said they liked the idea, the vision was an exciting one and they wanted to support it. A number of high-technology companies then followed their lead.

Some projects that involve significant environmental considerations are so large and complex that even Governments find them difficult to handle. A network of collaborations may be required to deliver them. UK examples include an additional runway at one of London's airports, replacing the city's Victorian sewers, and the next generation of nuclear power stations. At the other end of spectrum, company's can provide their customers and users of their products with simple performance and decision support tools that explain their advantages and help these people to select the least environmentally damaging purchase and consumption options.

The Leadership Role of Boards

Directors and boards should probe, question and challenge. Questions stimulate the search for solutions. The next 25 years will depend very much upon the questions we ask today and tomorrow. How might we achieve more with less? Can we simultaneously achieve multiple objectives, and are there quicker, more affordable and sustainable, and less disruptive ways of doing this? These questions stimulated my interest in performance support, and how making it easier for people to excel at difficult jobs can deliver benefits for individuals, organisations and the environment.

Corporations and their stakeholders face multiple environmental and environment-related challenges and opportunities. The effects of climate change will impact directly upon people everywhere, although some may face issues such as food and water security, flooding and coastal erosion or bio-diversity before others. Certain challenges represent huge business opportunities ranging from clean and low-carbon technologies and sustainable and renewable energy to geo-engineering and new investment vehicles. There will be growing demands for related services.

Directors have a key role to play in understanding the likely impacts of changes, assessing both challenges and opportunities, discussing issues and determining responses, and ensuring that future growth is beneficial, inclusive and sustainable. Decisions taken in boardrooms can have positive and/or negative impacts upon the physical and social environments. The stakes are high. Effective corporate governance arrangements and responsible judgements increase the prospect of beneficial outcomes and a reliance upon market mechanisms with their advantages (Friedman, 1962).

The consequences of a lack of awareness, inadequate understanding and inappropriate responses could also be significant. A failure to see the bigger picture, a reluctance to grasp strategic opportunities and a mistaken focus upon narrow and short-term aims could lead to a loss of faith in markets and tighter and more restrictive regulation that might inhibit beneficial innovation. So for directors and boards intent on exerting leadership and influencing the formulation of environmental strategy, what are the questions that they should be addressing?

Environment Governance and Environmental Strategy

Lets start with governance considerations. Will our existing mechanisms be able to cope with the speed and scale of adjustment required, or will radical change, transformational leadership and new forms of environment governance be required? What leadership should boards provide? What should the agenda be and who should be consulted and involved? How do we ensure informed debates and integrated responses? Are all those who need to be approached aware of environmental impacts, challenges and opportunities in their areas? Is our ignorance causing harm (Carson, 1962)?

Should we take the initiative and act alone or further reflect and seek allies? Should we engage directly with environment related initiatives where our corporate capabilities are relevant and collaborate with other organisations in the search for market solutions? Are our environment policies and responses consistent with our activities in other areas such as business development and corporate social responsibility? Are they fully integrated into our business model?

What are the views, aspirations and preferences of our stakeholders in relation to environmental issues, challenges and opportunities? Are we communicating with them and engaging with them? Is there mutual understanding and respect? How are we accounting for our performance in this arena? How do and should we report our concerns, activities and achievements? If we have not done so already, should we consider the adoption of integrated accounting?

Do our governance arrangements ensure we achieve the right balance between the various areas that require attention and between immediate pressures and longer-term concerns. For example, the issue of biodiversity has already been raised. In relation to individual, collective and public policy action are we focused upon issues that are in the spotlight such as climate change and overlooking other areas such as the loss of biodiversity and species which is happening at a rapid rate and may demand prompt action (Hilton, 2015).

Strengthening Markets and Market-based Strategies

Will market-based solutions be enough? If Government intervention is required, what form should this take? Are we tracking regulatory developments and compliant with them? How can we best endeavour to ensure that any future regulations are effective, easy to implement and proportionate, and that they address priority issues rather than pander to vested interests? What are market trends and developments and the tone and topics of public debates telling us about the concerns of others?

How might we best use existing market mechanisms to address environmental issues, challenges and opportunities? Are there new mechanisms that would strengthen them and improve market

responses? For example, carbon trading has been championed, but are there other areas in which a price could be charged for pollution and organisations allowed to buy and sell the right to pollute (Hahn, 1984; Tybout, 1972)? Are there barriers to entry and other obstacles in the path of market based responses and strategies that require attention?

Have we identified the various parties involved in delivering what we are seeking? Effective market responses can require action at a number of levels. For example, the rapid and widespread adoption of vehicles powered by electricity, hydrogen or bio-fuels depends upon the extent to which the activities of relevant parties are consistent and synchronised. New vehicles will need to be licensed and tested and enough refuelling points provided to make their ownership viable for early adopters.

Encouraging desired behaviour without distorting market responses is a challenge, as is the question of what represents "desired behaviour". The poor, eager to catch up, may have a different view from those who are better off. There are difficult judgements to make, such as how long it may take and at what level of subsidy for the cost of renewable energy to be competitive with that of fossil fuels. There are also lobbyists and propagandists of different persuasions seeking to influence our choices. With pantomime villains to distinguish from real ones balanced views are required. For example, while fossil fuels are much maligned has their use prevented some deforestation (Epstein, 2014)?

Monitoring External Developments

Effective directors are aware of what is happening in the business and market environment. Is your board monitoring external trends and developments and threats and opportunities relating to environment related issues, strategies, policies and plans? For example, what will the implications of the Made in India initiative be for locations in which your company operates? Would additional manufacturing activity put pressure upon water and other supplies, or your organisation's ability to attract skilled labour at an affordable price?

Has the board prioritised the issues that most impact upon the company and identified potential crisis areas? When assessing impacts do the directors take objective and independent advice? How do they gain access to the specialist and technical expertise to help them understand enough of the science involved to assess the significance of developments and their consequences? Are they aware of the corporate environmental footprint and the full implications of their activities (Carson, 1962)?

Does the board understand the company's own impacts upon the environment and the externalities and social costs of these activities along the lines initially raised by R H Coase (1960)? Companies that do not internalise significant external and social costs and take effective steps to reduce them may be those which are most at risk of intervention by Government and regulatory authorities.

Companies need to identify and track significant developments, assess their implications and impacts and determine what needs to be done in response at local, business unit and group level. Responses could be reactive or proactive. In some cases they could involve various departments and collaboration with other and complementary organisations that have shared interests and concerns. Reading the road ahead and thinking about consequences should come naturally to a director. Should a proactive response include lobbying to influence public decision making?

Securing an Integrated and Considered Response

In relation to global developments such as climate change and immediate issues such as emissions, hazards and threats of shortages of resources, are environmental risks being identified and assessed? Are mitigating actions and assurance mechanisms in place? Does an organisation have robust and integrated policies, processes and systems for ensuring effective environmental risk management?

In relation to its business model and strategy, can a company access affordable energy and other required resources as and when they are likely to be required?

Boards needs to ensure that stakeholders whose activities are impacted by environmental issues participate in decisions relating to environmental policy. The interests of some functions are more obvious than others. Thus emissions from a manufacturing unit can have an tangible and measurable impact upon the environment, while the consequences for an HR team concerned with health and safety of environmental pollution might be more difficult to assess.

Some environmental arenas can appear more distant than others. Urban issues may be evident from the polluted air that directors breath while in traffic jams en route to board meetings. Are rural and food issues and more remote areas and operations where individual and corporate effort could have a significant impact being overlooked? (Cornell et al, 2014). Are the related concerns of rural communities being addressed by an organisation's strategy and responses?

Are you sure that all those who need to be involved in environment related strategy reviews and decision making have an appropriate voice? Have any significant interests been missed? Are minority views being overlooked or ignored, or are they being taken account of in integrated responses? Is there enough challenge and debate and a sufficiently inclusive process to avoid "groupthink" (Janis, 1972)? Are people encouraged to raise concerns and protected if they do so?

Collaborative Actions and Responses

Because environmental changes and developments can impact upon a variety of organisations in a particular locality they can create fertile ground for both strategic and tactical collaboration. Some boards are primarily reactive and defensive. They may cooperate when adversely effected or there are interests to defend. Is a board missing opportunities to collaborate for positive reasons? Should it be more proactive in pursuing opportunities that require the complementary qualities that working with others can assemble, or the critical mass that it might create (Coulson-Thomas, 2014)?

Are directors taking a sufficiently long-term and strategic view of environment issues, challenges and opportunities? Do they accept the social responsibility of business and believe they have obligations to future generations of stakeholders (Bowen, 1953)? If so, how do they weigh them? Can a company cope with the challenges and address the opportunities with its current capabilities, collaborative partners and existing legal and regulatory requirements? What changes are required? Where, when and to whom should stakeholders communicate their suggestions for reform?

Should a board lobby or otherwise put its case at local, regional, national and/or international level? Who are the key decision makers and what are the the most important forums for discussing the matters that most concern them? How can they best be reached and influenced? Where and when will the most important meetings be held? Are the agendas public? How do interested parties monitor proceedings? Who could help a board to assess what emerges and its implications for a company's strategy and operations?

Because Government action can be a blunt instrument that imposes costs upon all players it may pay a company to be vigilant in trying to reduce any negative impacts of its sector. This could involve drawing attention to the failings of competitors and importers that do not meet its own environmental standards. Are there alternatives to regulation such as the use of affordable performance support tools or incentives that Governments could use - either themselves or in collaboration with business - to change behaviours (Coulson-Thomas, 2007, 2012a & b, 2013; Thaler and Sunstein, 2008)? Helping a Government could represent a business opportunity.

Environment Cities and Localities

Cities can have a significant environmental impact (Newman, 2006). In India and elsewhere there is now a greater focus upon establishing smart cities. As a consequence, will there be less emphasis upon creating more environment cities? Will rural areas become an even lower priority? Alternatively, will increased networking and improved infrastructure provide new opportunities for quicker responses to environment issues and collective action to address them? A systems and joined up approach could allow more city wide responses to issues that arise. For example, a real time system could provide public information, re-route public transport and delay mass departures and journeys to reduce the impact of a serious traffic jam created by an accident.

The internet and social media enable small businesses and individuals to participate in and influence wider debates. Directors who doubt their ability to sway national and international decisions may find their voices carrying greater weight at local and municipal level. Access to politicians and officials may be easier. Attendance at relevant meetings may also be more affordable. Is there a local cluster of like-minded business leaders with shared interests? Does municipal environmental policy match the requirements of corporate strategy? Does it enable sustainable local development?

Are current arrangements to provide water, power, transportation and other services to a company;s manufacturing, warehousing, office and/or retail locations sustainable? Does a city and/or corporate location have an integrated and sustainable development plan covering areas such as education, housing, energy, transportation and the environment? What are the implications of this for current and future operations, customers and employees? What can a board do to address any gaps?

Environment Management and Behaviour

Some environments remind us of our place within a hierarchy, while others are less constricting. Many corporate headquarters are office blocks in which people are piled on top of each other in rooms with windows looking out and away from each other. A central core of lifts, stairs and other support services further inhibits interaction. Directors could ask questions about corporate spaces, facilities and furnishings that go beyond traditional health and safety concerns. How do they influence behaviour? Are they energy efficient? What needs to change?

In many UK cities planners replaced Victorian housing with the glass and concrete tower blocks mentioned earlier. They destroyed the intimacy and interaction that occurred when neighbours used to meet each other and talk and play outside their front doors. In comparison, the limited social spaces in graffiti laden entrances to lifts and stair wells seemed forbidding and unsafe. British Airways recognised the value of interaction, networking and chance meetings when designing its corporate headquarters with its meandering atrium streets, social spaces and coffee bars.

Have environmental strategy and management debates become too technical? Are they overly hard and scientific? Are we paying sufficient attention to softer issues such as environmental impacts upon behaviour? Our disposition and behaviour can be heavily influenced by our work, social and built environment. How can boards introduce a greater degree of freedom into how, when, where and with whom people work so that working environments can better reflect the nature of the work being undertaken and the preferences of those involved (Coulson-Thomas, 1997).

Creative Environments and Innovation

A key consideration for many boards is the extent to which work, corporate and local environments are conducive of innovation and creativity. Some environments are oppressive and depressing, while others are more uplifting and inspiring. One can specifically create an environment that

encourages flexibility, dynamism and change, for example working and learning spaces and supporting technology that can be reconfigured for different purposes.

Directors can enquire whether working and learning environments and related arrangements inspire and enable the innovative thinking and developments required to address environmental issues, challenges and opportunities. Are support arrangements, processes and tools conducive of responsible innovation while at the same time ensuring compliance (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a & b, 2013, 2015c)? Do they and business and funding models allow alternatives to be explored? What incentives would encourage the development and trial of more sustainable options?

There may be barriers to innovation to address. Entry costs to some new renewable energy technologies can be high and it may take time to move far enough along a learning curve to be competitive with conventional alternatives. In a field such as coastal erosion getting access to trial opportunities can be complex and may involve a number of parties. How should one fund developments in areas such as these and prepare for the future while remaining competitive?

When creativity and other issues are brought into environmental debates deciding what to do can sometimes be protracted. A succession of business leaders from Sir John Harvey -Jones (1988) to Jack Welch (2005) have stressed the need to speed up progression to the implementation stage. New governance and management aims to correct the imbalance between the formulation of environment related and other strategies and their implementation (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a & b, 2013).

Aesthetic and Supportive Environments

Some environmental discussion and planning focuses upon the avoidance of negatives such as pollution. Directors could enquire whether sufficient attention is being devoted to areas that might make a more positive contribution to improving the quality of life. How could budgets for buildings, facilities, fixtures and fittings be used to create safer and more flexible and enjoyable working environments that might accommodate a wider range of changing needs?

New leadership shifts the emphasis from traditional top-down motivation and command and control to the provision of performance support that enables people to excel at difficult tasks and innovate (Coulson-Thomas, 2007, 2012 a & b, 2013, 2015c). Help provided can be designed to deliver multiple outcomes. These could include better understanding of practical and affordable steps to reduce or avoid the littering and accumulation of rubbish highlighted by Pope Francis (2015).

Aesthetic considerations range from the briefs that are given to designers and architects to creating opportunities for people to participate. Most urban and many industrial environments could be greatly improved by individual and collective initiative, whether modest such as the sponsored planting of a roundabout or more strategic such as an integrated redevelopment plan. There are options to suit a range of budgets, but dealing with hazardous waste and contaminated land can require determination and significant effort.

UK examples, range from the aesthetic improvement of largely derelict and abandoned streets to encourage people to take pride in their immediate environment to volunteer groups meeting to clear up rubbish and cut and replant verges. One street to which residents are returning has been enhanced to the extent of being recognised as art. It has been nominated for the annual Turner Prize. Along the River Thames there are communities of house boats where floating gardens have been created with potted trees and shrubs on certain barges for the benefit of the community.

Inclusive Environments and Strategies

Some economies and social cohesion appear overly dependent upon continuing growth and development. Yet our finite planet may only be able to support so much of certain forms of growth (Higgs, 2014). If the most 'developed' parts of the world are going to continue to grow how will those with less catch up and how will those who suffer exclusion be able to more fully participate? How can and should directors challenge entrenched assumptions? Are there different and more sustainable and inclusive models of growth and corporate policies and practices that would simplify and enhance our lives while protecting and improving physical and aesthetic environments?

Are environment strategies addressing the extent to which environments are inclusive or whether certain groups are excluded. For example, how accessible and safe are corporate, urban and other environments for the partially sighted, or those who cannot hear a machine or approaching car? At one extreme, lepers are rejected and driven away from some communities, but there are also other groups who find that involvement and participation are a challenge. Is a board prepared to work with others to assemble the critical mass to address such issues (Coulson-Thomas, 2015a)?

Are disability and related participation issues properly addressed in environment management and planning discussions? Directors need to ensure that at a minimum a company meets its obligations under the law, for example in relation to disabled access if it is operating in certain countries. A more ambitious and proactive approach is required to ensure the full participation of certain groups. There are many social as well as commercial and public policy issues that an environment strategy could address. The environment is an arena in which leadership requires action rather than rhetoric.

In a democracy, if growth and development are not perceived as sustainable, mutually beneficial to stakeholders, fair and inclusive, businesses and the market itself may face much greater questioning and challenge. The benefits of greater Government intervention could be problematic given skill, experience and other barriers to the effective implementation of public policy (Cabinet Office, 2015). In contrast, innovative, responsible and sustainable responses from business leaders could lead to less intervention, greater reliance upon market mechanisms and closer and more productive public-private collaboration as each better understands and appreciates the contribution of the other.

Note

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Further Information

Transforming Knowledge Management, *Talent Management 2* and *Transforming Public Services* by Colin Coulson-Thomas which summarise the findings of a five-year investigation into the most cost-effective route to high performance organisations are published by Policy Publications and can be obtained from www.policypublications.com

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