

# RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY\*

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The social responsibility of business and corporate social responsibility (CSR) are not new concepts (Moura-Leite and Padgett, 2011). How do they relate to each other? Are they complementary? Could one support or supplant the other? Should one or both of them be on boardroom agendas? Howard Bowen (1953) drew attention to the social responsibilities of businessmen. For Milton Friedman (1982) social responsibility was about engaging in activities to increase corporate profits as long as one stays within the rules of the game, which for him was a matter of engaging in free and open competition without deception or fraud. Have the rules of the game changed?

Are stakeholders today more concerned about quality of life, the environment, sustainability, climate change, the preservation of endangered species and social issues such as diversity and inclusion? In competitive markets where people have a choice, do companies now need a degree of social acceptance to continue to operate and to avoid challenge, whether in the form of criticism in social and other media, customers taking their business elsewhere or potential employees preferring more socially concerned and responsible companies? If adverse publicity can quickly impact upon sales, does one in effect need some form of social license to remain viable and avoid boycotts?

Do directors attend annual events such as the International Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility to discuss CSR activities or because of changing external expectations of corporate conduct and pressure from stakeholders for more responsible behaviour? The 2016 conference's theme of embedding a CSR mandate into corporate strategy suggests considerations that have applied to CSR activities are important for corporate futures and a matter for the board. Does being a responsible business today involve new considerations? Does it incorporate or replace CSR, or learn from it? Are distinct CSR activities a core element of what being a responsible business is about, or might they no longer be needed when a business as a whole is socially responsible?

For a board that endeavours to ensure that corporate activities are both lawful and ethical, but also socially acceptable in today's business context, what more needs to be done beyond building mutually beneficial relationships with a company's stakeholders and ensuring they are treated fairly and that offerings represent value for money? Who sets the tone in relation to ensuring that a company and its people behave in a socially responsible way and respond appropriately to evolving stakeholder concerns? An ACCA survey of culture and channelling corporate behaviour has found that "tone at the top is the most influential driver of corporate behaviour across all age groups, geographical locations and sectors" (Stathopoulos and Tsileponis, 2015). Boards should lead.

## IMPORTANCE OF BEING A RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS

How important is it that a business is responsible, seen to be responsible and regarded by others as responsible? 2015 was the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary not just of IOD India, but also of Britain's Most Admired Companies awards. These awards are compiled annually by *Management Today* in conjunction with Leeds Business School whose Prof. Michael Brown undertakes the research. The UK's largest public companies in 25 sectors are asked to evaluate their peers using nine criteria, one of which is community and environmental responsibility. Analysts at leading City of London investment firms were also polled. 247 companies were ranked. In sectors where there were insufficient UK listed companies selected private, public, international and employee-owned businesses were included.

The top two companies overall (Unilever, Johnson Matthey) also topped the rankings for community and

environmental responsibility (Johnson Matthey, Unilever). Unilever, the overall Most Admired Company award winner, met a demanding sustainability target of sending zero waste to landfill sites across its European operations (Saunders, 2015). Is it significant that of the two companies which excelled at community and environmental responsibility, Unilever also topped the poll for financial soundness, ability to attract, retain and develop top talent and quality of marketing, while Johnson Matthey also topped the rankings for value as a long-term investment.

For companies in the UK's Most Admired Company rankings, being responsible seems associated with success in key areas of corporate performance. It also applies to a wide range of - if not all of - corporate operations, and not just those activities being undertaken under the label of "CSR". It is not clear how or whether any activities they might undertake as CSR projects contribute to their peers and others viewing them as responsible businesses. Many companies spread their social responsibility effort across a range of activities. Others are more focused and, with concentration creating the potential to have greater impact, they can be more ambitious (Coulson-Thomas, 2014). According to their Most Admired Company sector winner profiles in *Management Today* Telecoms provider O2 is aiming to help a million young people develop life skills and lead community projects, while food giant Unilever is aiming to empower five million women by 2020.

## RESPONSIBILITY AND STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS

Experienced directors should be aware that a board needs to address and balance the interests of different stakeholder groups and build mutually beneficial relationships with them. Some groups may appear to have more power to benefit and/or harm an enterprise than others, but the reputation of a company can influence relations with all of them. Boards ignore external groups at their peril and smart directors take account of their interests and concerns and try to work with the grain of opinion. They recognise that many people support good causes and want to make a difference.

The memberships of stakeholder groups can also overlap. For example, customers may also be investors and vice versa. A disgruntled employee might participate in discussion forums on social media or be politically active and able to influence legislators. Lord Browne a former CEO of BP has argued that business leaders can best make a difference by ensuring their companies are more successful both socially and commercially, and that to do this they need to look beyond customers and investors and engage with the concerns of other external groups such as activists, regulators and politicians (Browne et al, 2015).

Lord Browne's former company BP has paid a high price for conduct that has triggered regulatory and legal responses. Clothing retailers have experienced criticism in the media and a consumer backlash as a result of poor health and safety standards in overseas factories where their products have been manufactured. The bars of public expectations and public responses appear to be rising. We need to retain a sense of proportion and be prepared to both act and react responsibly. Ever since the author has been alive concerns have been expressed about the survivability of mankind and that action needs to be taken within twenty years (Vogt, 1949; Calder, 1962). Recognition of the greater scrutiny that individual businesses may now face and a preparedness to undertake social initiatives and respond effectively and transparently to crises are possible indicators of social responsibility.

## VISIBILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Can a business enjoy good relationships with its various stakeholder groups if it is perceived by certain people as not behaving in a socially responsible way? Volkswagen has experienced falling sails and a reduced share price as a result of the exposure of its practice of using software to detect that an engine is being subject to an emissions' test and and respond in ways to meet requirements with lower levels of pollutants than would normally be the case when driving on a road or motorway. A reputation built up over many years has been quickly trashed.

In the past risks to a corporate reputation might have been mitigated by media management and the barriers to effective action that faced those with concerns. Fifty years ago it took the motivation and drive of a young lawyer Ralph Nader (1965) to shine a spotlight on US motor manufacturers and cause legislative changes to ensure greater safety. Today, greater connectivity and accessible social media can enable any concerned citizen with a mobile device to record a failing and quickly communicate it to others with the possibility that an incident might go viral and global.

Whether or not a company wishes to be transparent, its actions and activities can quickly become visible in ways that may incorporate sound, visual and moving images. One cannot just release selected corporate data, invite journalists to a photo opportunity and rely upon being able to mould opinion as might have occurred in the past. Companies that initiate CSR activities that are the exception rather than the corporate rule because of an external requirement may become unstuck. Drawing attention to CSR projects in an annual report and other communications may just serve to communicate to external audiences that these activities are a special case and not mainstream activity, i.e. the business is only behaving in a responsible way because of being forced to do so.

## SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND EMPLOYMENT

Significant redundancies are regularly covered in the media. There is often a public expectation that companies will work with relevant parties and help those who are laid off to cope and prepare for alternative employment. Is there a responsibility beyond this for employers to safeguard and/or create employment opportunities, or is this a matter for Governments, markets and public policy? If ever more manufacturing, processing, retailing and service activities that require repetitive and rule based responses can be automated, where will new jobs come from to absorb growing numbers of young people in countries such as India with rising populations (Kaplan, 2015)? How many small local shops will survive the retail revolution as on-line shopping and supermarkets spread?

Even if providing enough school, college and university places were affordable, it might not be desirable or practical for people to remain in full time education for ever. Life-long learning might be possible by other means, whether by part-time distance learning or by integrating working and learning. Also, not everyone will have the ability to sniff out entrepreneurial opportunities or have the motivation and ability to successfully address them through a self-employment and business start-up route. There are always likely to be some who are dependent upon others to provide them with employment opportunities or some other means of economic and social support.

Is there a role for CSR in developing and testing possible corporate responses to community and/or social issues, just as a new product development unit might pilot or road test a new offering before a decision is taken on whether it should be adopted? For example, in relation to job opportunities, could CSR activities be used to test the viability of a range of personalised social, care and other services and stimulate interest and involvement in them? While CSR activities could be focused on needy groups with limited funds, might they alert a company and others to the value of new forms of people intensive one-to-one and small group support in areas such as personal fitness training?

## CSR AND CREATIVITY

Innovation is essential if global sustainability objectives are to be met and inclusion and other challenges are to be addressed. In a world in which an increasing range of activities can be automated and handled by robots and rule based systems, and helping people to help themselves becomes more affordable, there seems little point in employing people unless they are providing bespoke and individualised services, or advancing understanding and creating better ways of doing things. For many companies the challenge is to stimulate more imaginative solutions and creative responses without incurring disproportionate and unacceptable levels of risk. Could involvement in CSR initiatives help people to raise their ambitions and think outside of the box? Should a CSR team become an innovation unit for responsible business?

In India CSR expenditure has to satisfy certain conditions to count towards a 2% of net profit requirement applicable to certain companies. To achieve sustainability objectives we need to deliver more with less, join up initiatives, collaborate and find ways of simultaneously delivering a variety of objectives and benefiting multiple stakeholders. Does setting tight rules as to what constitutes a CSR initiative and ruling out activities that benefit both a company and an external target group prevent us from doing this? Should we instead be encouraging the effective use of resources that generates a variety of outcomes that benefit both or all parties to relationships? Should we actively promote responsibility initiatives that are beneficial for businesses, their staff and those they are seeking to help? Might such projects attract greater internal interest, commitment and support?

Government initiatives such as the requirement in India for certain companies to devote a specified portion of net profit to CSR activities are designed to create public value and deliver public benefits (Moore, 1995). However, is there a danger that specifying a requirement and setting limits as to what will satisfy it may

marginalise CSR and act as a break on more general progress towards socially responsible businesses? Similarly, with standards and codes. Do we need common approaches to CSR, or should each board do what is best in relation to its particular situation and stage of development? As is often the case, well meaning initiatives can sometimes be counter-productive and the extent to which the intentions of legislators, regulators and others are fulfilled and value is delivered will depend upon how those who are subject to the requirements respond.

## RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS AND RESPONSIBLE INVESTMENT

Milton Friedman (1970) recognised that executives are employees and have a responsibility to the owners of businesses and should carry on business in accordance with their desires, which he assumed would usually be to make as much money as possible while conforming to the basic rules of society, whether expressed in the form of laws or ethical custom. Today's owners and investors could embrace various groups, including those seeking ethical and sharia compliant investments. In some jurisdictions both laws and ethical custom have placed new responsibilities upon directors.

Members of the asset owner and management communities vary in the extent to which they are concerned about whether their investments meet environmental, social, sustainability and other criteria. Some are very concerned. They use indices that attempt to quantify the extent to which funds and opportunities meet their responsible investment expectations and requirements. Others mainly focus upon traditional concerns with maximising returns and minimising risks, and making sure that any risk involved is not disproportionate in relation to anticipated returns. This raises the question of how important CSR is in relation to access to finance (Cheng et al, 2011).

For the community of asset owners and managers concerned with responsible investment how important is the perceived scale, quality and impact of CSR programmes, initiatives and activities as opposed to responsible behaviour across the full range of a company's operations? When investment portfolios are assembled, how significant are the aims of CSR policy and the achievements of CSR teams compared with overall corporate strategy and its implementation and responsible business behaviour? Is the market a company is in, the nature of its products and services, and corporate conduct and resulting reputation more important than what it devotes 2% of its net profit to if it is subject to the provisions of the Indian Companies Act 2013? For example, would an ethical fund be more or less likely to invest in a tobacco company because of its CSR projects?

## CSR AND SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Whether or not self-contained CSR activities contribute significantly to an assessment that a company is a socially responsible business, the challenge for many owners of CSR budgets is how to get the maximum of leverage from a finite sum. Should one spend an available pot on directly assisting a target group for a defined period of time? Alternatively, would devising a mobile device app or an on-line service or social network that might reach a larger community for longer be a better alternative? Should supporting the start-up of a social enterprise that might grow and over time respond to an even wider range of evolving needs be the way ahead? Should one act alone or in collaboration with other companies, charities and public bodies? There are choices to be made.

Some times social impact can be greater if one invests in building capability over time. However, care needs to be taken to ensure that the proportion of available resources committed to longer term projects is not so high that there are insufficient reserves to meet sudden, short-term and emergency or crisis requirements. In relation to the challenges and opportunities they face business and financial investors, CSR and fund managers and various Government agencies have to balance both long-term and short-term considerations when making decisions. Given the number and scale of social challenges will enough bodies be able to collaborate and effectively respond (Harari, 2014).

Different communities and groups often face common problems. They may have similar objectives and yet they often operate in distinct silos with their own terminology. A director or CSR manager attending a gathering of asset owners and managers might wonder what terms such as ESG or SRI actually mean. The scope for collaborative action to address social problems from multiple and complementary perspectives might be increased if these different groups realised they shared similar social, sustainability and responsible business interests, perspectives and objectives.

## SKILL DEVELOPMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Companies, communities, economies and societies need people with relevant and up-to-date skills if they are to prosper, cope with challenges and seize opportunities. Who should do what is relation to skill development and what should the contribution of a responsible business be? During the summer of 2015 Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched a new Skill India logo and a family of projects with the objective of training over 400 million people across India in a range of skills by 2022. Along with a mission and a policy for skill development and entrepreneurship a Skill Loan scheme was announced and financial incentives for those who complete approved training.

Like other recent initiatives the skill projects are certainly well-intentioned. They address a range of current issues, but much will depend upon how they are implemented and whether they are joined up with other initiatives like the creation of smart cities. Their success will depend upon how people, including those with the capabilities to deliver training, respond and the extent to which the skill development that is provided is relevant, current and provides a sound base for future updating.

Should companies and responsible businesses engage with such initiatives and in what ways? Do many corporate learning strategies still stop at corporate boundaries (Coulson-Thomas, 1999)?

How will Skill India relate to corporate CSR initiatives across India? How will it further the inclusiveness agenda? Will it benefit groups and communities that have hitherto not substantially gained from recent economic growth? How might CSR projects contribute to its aspirations, while at the same time contributing to social objectives and benefiting those needing support? Will individual corporate responses be enough? Is collaboration and private sector involvement required if a public initiative is to address the skill requirements of particular commercial sectors? How could digital developments help address the volume issue – the sheer numbers of people who need to be trained and scattered communities of people who are excluded and in some cases rejected?

## JOINED-UP AND COLLABORATIVE RESPONSES

India faces particular challenges. A significant proportion of the world's young people are Indian. Seen by many as a national asset, they could quickly become a costly burden if they cannot earn a living and require support. The nature of work and organisations is changing. If new production facilities resulting from the Made in India initiative are to be state of the art, one may see robots and automated processes rather than people on factory floors. Fewer sales, service and support staff may be needed as customers buy and help themselves on-line. India's emerging middle class may chose international brands rather than local alternatives. India needs more entrepreneurs who will create opportunities rather than dependants hoping that someone else might hire them. Where will they come from? Will companies and/or educational institutions become incubators of new enterprises?

A key challenge for many Governments is joining up various initiatives that have been launched. For example, what about the digitally excluded who cannot access e-Government and other services? How will Skill India relate to the Smart Cities drive? Will it equip people to take advantage of greater bandwidth, connectivity and digital services? Will new applications of technology be used to open up and deliver education and training initiatives? Could CSR budgets be used to develop applications such as mobile phone apps to help, train and support excluded groups?

Will schools, colleges and universities be involved? Public entities should consider how they might work with and support other public bodies. An examination of such collaboration in water supply found it has advantages over public-private partnerships (Lobina and Hall, 2008; Hall et al, 2009).

In an uncertain era in which we can never be quite sure what tomorrow might bring in terms of innovations, opportunities and challenges, re-skilling is as important as initial training and development. Acquired skills can become quickly out of date unless adapted, refreshed and updated to meet changing aspirations, priorities and requirements. Can a company that does not ensure its people, technology, approaches and offerings are up-to-date and is not seeking to operate more efficiently and sustainably be considered socially responsible? Basic skills are required to benefit from digital possibilities and on-line services. They need refreshing as technologies change.

## REACHING EXCLUDED COMMUNITIES

I presented the Digital Challenge Skills and Inclusion Award 2015 at a dinner at the UK's House of Lords which was hosted by The Earl of Erroll, Chair of the Digital Policy Alliance. The event followed an annual Next Gen conference dealing with broadband infrastructure and applications. Most of the entries contained a skills development and overcoming digital exclusion element. The award was won by Northumberland County Council with its iNorthumberland Project, which involved public and private collaboration, infrastructure improvements and training and other partnerships. An evaluation found the economic benefits were over five times the investment cost.

The runner up was Digital Unite for its Digital Champions Network which had created approaching 1000 digital champions. A common feature of many of the candidates for the award was collaboration between a variety of organisations across the public and private sectors. Also noticeable was the number of times project teams sought the delivery of multiple beneficial outcomes through a single initiative. Lessons learned suggest that digital applications could address digital and other exclusion issues across many countries, including India. They could also help to deliver the objectives of Skill India projects. Collaborative capitalism can further CSR and responsible business ambitions and achieve social outcomes (Coulson-Thomas, 2014).

Digital applications can deliver Government and other support services to remote areas and groups facing exclusion. One group whose plight has been recognised by the Law Commission of India (2015) faces economic, social and political exclusion, namely the community of people affected by leprosy. In recent years over a half of the world's newly disclosed cases of leprosy have occurred in India, where those afflicted face legal discrimination and the risk of disability. Every four minutes someone from India gets diagnosed with leprosy. Rejected by their families once their symptoms are visible, or their condition is otherwise revealed, they seek shelter in leper colonies and centres supported by organisations such as The Leprosy Mission and the Order of St Lazarus. Although some of the disabilities it causes may be irreversible in practical terms, leprosy is a curable disease. It can also be rendered non-infectious at an early stage of treatment and could be eliminated. Could CSR budgets be combined to achieve this or used to develop specific applications to help lepers?

## REMOVING BARRIERS TO INCLUSION

India is not alone in its legal discrimination against people affected by leprosy. In Sri Lanka a 'Leper's Ordinance' on the statute books calls for segregation. In both countries progress is needed to implement the UN Principles and Guidelines for the Elimination of Discrimination Against People Affected by Leprosy (EDPAL) and their Family Members (United Nations, 2010). The UN General Assembly has resolved that Governments, UN agencies and relevant public bodies and other actors in society should give them due consideration (United Nations, 2011).

An EDPAL Bill to repeal discriminatory legislation, abolish the term 'leper' and enshrine in law the rights of people affected by leprosy went to the Lok Sabha in July 2015, but there are suggestions it may not be considered until mid-2016 at the earliest. In the meantime organisations genuinely concerned with exclusion could lobby for the speeding up of its progress. Should advocacy be an element of CSR policy? Should a socially responsible company that articulates its principles and values in areas such as inclusion actively campaign to remove barriers that prevent certain groups such as those experiencing disability and/or discrimination from participating in its activities, joining one of its stakeholder groups or becoming fuller participants in wider society?

How might technology help? The online petition option for expressing support of a campaign relating to the treatment of those affected by leprosy which exists at [www.united4change.in](http://www.united4change.in) is a visible example of a digital application to help an excluded community. Touch screen technology can sometimes allow the support provided by relevant applications to be accessed by lepers and others whose disabilities might prevent them from using a traditional keyboard. If a single large company or group of companies focused their CSR budgets on the elimination of leprosy which is a treatable disease it might be enough to end a traditional scourge of mankind.

## ENABLING PARTICIPATION

John Stuart Mill (1859) put the case for liberty and political participation and freedom. He pointed out that subsequent events may show the one person who took a contrary and minority view to have been right. A similar argument could be applied to removing barriers to inclusion, involvement and participation. Once

engaged, just one disabled or otherwise excluded person may come up with a creative solution to a pressing problem, perhaps as a result of bringing a different perspective to the consideration of an issue. Smart companies and entrepreneurs set out to achieve multiple objectives simultaneously. Socially responsible ones could include wider involvement in their aims.

The Disability Entrepreneurship and Leadership (DEAL) Programme aims to create more inclusive workplaces, while at the same time providing skills training and support for the members of groups that have hitherto found moving into leadership roles and becoming entrepreneurs to be challenging. The initiative was developed by ELMS a corporate learning and social responsibility partner which piloted a course for the blind and partially sighted which has resulted in greater self confidence and job opportunities for participants. There are various ways in which people can become involved with DEAL as a corporate partner, employer, employee or aspiring entrepreneur. CSR programmes, plans and budgets represent one way of engaging with such an initiative and achieving both skill development and inclusion objectives.

The greater bandwidth and connectivity that infrastructure improvements can provide could allow rural areas and hitherto excluded groups to be reached by support services specifically designed for their particular needs. For example, a broadband link to a 3D printer in a village centre or leprosy mission might allow low-cost replacement prosthetic limbs to be produced on demand that could allow those afflicted by leprosy to access other on-line services, participate in social networks and become teleworkers. Collaborative action and investments in improved digital infrastructure can deliver Government and other services, overcome barriers and achieve quick paybacks. Imaginative applications of technology developed at a cost that many CSR budgets could afford can develop new skills and transform the lives of marginalised and excluded groups.

## CHALLENGES AS OPPORTUNITIES TO DEMONSTRATE RESPONSIBILITY

I once wrote that if a company had a heart and a soul one should look for them in the boardroom (Coulson-Thomas, 1993). How does a company visibly demonstrate to external stakeholders and interested parties that it has a heart? How can it show that it cares and is willing to accept responsibility and behave in a caring and responsible way? Greater focus and collaboration can increase impact, as can using contemporary technologies and the selection of an issue such as the elimination of leprosy which would be of historical significance (Coulson-Thomas, 2015). Staying the course to tackle an infectious disease such as leprosy which has a long incubation period and is often difficult to detect can demonstrate the sustained commitment success requires (Burki, 2009).

Developments in e-learning, open-learning and performance support services that are easily accessible and available 24/7 whenever and wherever required, including when people are on the move are transforming the training, induction and updating landscape. Affordable performance support tools that incorporate social networking can capture and share the best ways of excelling at difficult jobs and coping with issues as they arise (Coulson-Thomas, 2012a and 2013). As a result work, including higher level jobs, can be more mobile than ever before. This creates opportunities as well as posing challenges for the Made in India initiative. People in the cheapest locations with appropriate performance support may have the potential to quickly outperform all but a few superstars among established experts.

The implementation of projects under the Skill India banner could learn much from initiatives in other countries. For example, in the UK for a period the Government's large training budget was administered by local and employer-led Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) in an attempt to ensure that training provided was relevant to the needs of employers. However, the new bodies operated in a framework designed to provide accountability for the use of public monies and many of their staff were former public employees who brought their civil service practices and mind-sets into their new roles. Many business leaders became frustrated with the bureaucracy involved and a focus upon quantitative targets rather than wider outcomes. As with so many initiatives of the Modi Government, much of the implementation of Skill India projects will be in the hands of people and practices inherited from the past.

## ENCOURAGING INNOVATION AND COLLABORATION

Evidence suggests there is considerable scope for transforming public services (Coulson-Thomas, 2012b). Many Government initiatives could also have greater impact if they were joined up. Successful outcomes from projects such as those under the Skill India umbrella could also be much more likely if the business community engages with them, encourages people to seize opportunities that arise and take steps to ensure

that training arrangements are flexible and make use of approaches and technologies that ensure that what is provided is relevant and current. The allocation of CSR budgets to projects that develop the skills of excluded groups could be a practical way of contributing and generating both economic and social benefits.

The extent to which a company engages with social issues of concern to stakeholders and wider society, collaborates with others in their solution and responds in ways that are creative, imaginative, innovative and inspirational could be indicators of the extent to which it takes its social responsibilities seriously. Governments considering measures to encourage more responsible conduct need to ensure that any laws, rules or guidelines they produce do not limit responsible business endeavour to those activities labelled as CSR and preclude more cost-effective and resource-efficient solutions that would deliver a greater range of benefits to multiple stakeholders, including a company itself and hence engender greater commitment to them and higher investment in them. Social responsibility laws, rules and guidelines should liberate rather than constrain.

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