

CSR is dangerous

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Words create reality. And words can stop a reality from being created. Words are powerful and can dictate where focus goes or does not go.

One area where many words are thrown about is that of the business case for CSR and sustainability. Yet should we be focused on the business case for CSR and sustainability or on the sustainability case for any given business?

To build a small analogy: a car undergoes a periodical technical inspection every few years after first having undergone a thorough design review before it was allowed to be produced and put on the road in the first place. The aim of the car inspection and review is to make sure we get safely (people and their environment) from A to B. Businesses also undergo review before being started and they undergo periodical tests as they continue on their journey; but their journey to where?

Looking closely, cars have significantly improved in performance in getting safely and efficiently from A to B, although many still criticise them for the slow progress associated with their impacts, saying they still represent the stone age of a sustainable solution to society's transport needs. Nevertheless, no one would ever think of asking to justify the business case for car safety and efficiency: it is now taken for granted that the car needs a solid safety case for the car industry to thrive.

Yet a car has a relatively small impact on society compared to the rest of our everyday business (or busy-ness). Why then is time still wasted in debating the business case for sustainability instead of simply taking it for granted? Doesn't it strike us that, in a year when our world population has exceeded 7 billion people and many financial and natural systems are under extreme stress from how we conduct our busy-ness, sustainability is an essential safety belt from unprecedented hardship for us and for the generations to come?

Indeed, the time for us to all accelerate a little our mental performance to develop our businesses' sustainability case may already be gone. It is not rocket science; it is about each of us being honest about the economic, social and environmental consequence of each decision we make as we go about our "busy-ness". It is about using our brain cells and emotional intelligence a bit more, and asking others for input to enable informed decisions. It is about having the skills to build relationships that enable timely, real and effective feedback and collaborative engagement leading to sustainable results.

So why is CSR dangerous? It is dangerous because it has enabled us to procrastinate for over ten years. It has enabled us to think that all is ok if we simply add on a CSR department, do CSR programs or write CSR reports and give CSR speeches. It has enabled us to say that profit is negative but can become positive if “business gives something back to society”. It has enabled us to continue to undermine our economies and to dress up irresponsible business practice as acceptable. And worst of all, it has enabled our CEOs to postpone the stark reality that some of our business practices are downright lazy, do not wisely use human, social, financial, natural and manufactured capital, and need to be rethought. It has enabled many professionals to not meet our professional responsibilities to conduct activities in a way that supports the welfare of society and the planet we live on.

CSR is also dangerous as it has managed to waste many years of our time debating what it actually is. Maybe the recent ISO26000 and EU communication has put an end to that particular discussion. For those who have rallied under the banner of CSR there is much to do to make our businesses act under the internal and external realities of the requirements for us all to be successful in a finite world. We need to share the required competences and knowledge, become aware of the life-cycle of our decisions and integrate each one of our activities, trades and professions into a sustainable world.

For over two hundred years we have genuinely made a great place for many to live in through much progress. Yet, despite all the mitigation measures we have also implemented to manage our negative impacts, how aware are we that whilst we have been perfecting mass production, we have also been intensifying the associated mass destruction? Do we know that we need to use our skills, intellectual power and dialogue to go beyond mitigation? Are we aware to what extent do we need to integrate each one of our activities into sustainability? Whatever we are busy at – be it business, education, NGOing, governing or just surviving – we all are equally guilty for having allowed our society to become so non-sustainable. And if we all choose to, we can start on the common march towards sustainability tomorrow. But will tomorrow ever come? Not if we continue to word-craft rather than become decided and decisive in our actions.