

Business and Sustainable Relationship

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Sustainability is about how as individuals and organisations we perceive our relationship with each other and the world around us. To create a sustainable way of life business must reassess its purpose and values and redirect its shaping influence to the task of creating a world that works for everyone.

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Sustainability, the issue at the heart of the Convergence Festival, is commonly perceived as an ecological issue - all about recycling, going organic and generally adopting good 'green' habits in order to create a better environment and ultimately a better world for all.

The reality is that sustainability is primarily a *relationship* issue. It's about how we as individuals, organisations and institutions perceive the nature of our relationship with each other and with the world around us. We don't usually see it in these terms because we don't see our connectedness, and that's because the central 'story' driving our human systems - the beliefs, values and assumptions that frame our behaviours - is a story of separateness.

A throwback to the days of early science, when people like Descartes and Newton broke things up from their wholeness in order to understand them, this story has underpinned the immense material progress and human achievement that has transformed society in the past three hundred years. The story still pervades our

culture, our economic system, our business model and the legal framework that requires companies to prioritise the needs of shareholders and stockmarkets above all other needs.

But as our fragile ecology increasingly shows signs of system breakdown, this story is now threatening our survival, because separateness is an illusion. We are not separate. Not from each other, or from the world around us. While the subtle threads that connect us may not always be obvious we are plugged into a vast network of connectedness that links all humans and the life-enabling natural systems we depend on. Everything exists in relationship - including business.

Because BigBusiness routinely ignores this interdependence and continually lobbies to dilute its accountability to the wider context, there is a growing cynicism towards it. With whole industries coming under pressure from a more informed and less trusting citizenry, it has become a contested institution. After oil, tobacco, alcohol, chemicals and fastfood, who'll be next?

Confidence in the institution of business has been further eroded by an ongoing flood of

financial scandals, but while individual companies become the focus of media attention, the real problem is systemic. Visa founder and highly respected business insider, Dee Hock says, "one has to be deaf, dumb and blind not to see that we are in the midst of a global *institutional* failure."

Where individual businesses have moved to respond to increased public pressure, it has been largely to sign up to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes and other voluntary activities ranging from workplace initiatives on issues such as diversity and work/life balance to publishing social and environmental impact reports alongside their financial statements. This is all very well, but does it go far enough?

Albert Einstein said you can't solve a problem from within the same mindset that created it. We will never resolve the pressing global problems of our time within the 'story' of separateness that has caused them, and however well-intended, programmes that work on the surface but leave the fundamental model intact, are unlikely to make any meaningful difference.

What is needed is systemic change - deep *cultural* change - to transform the language and the rules of the game that trap business in a dysfunctional relationship with society and the environment. Business needs a new 'story'.

Such a transformation can only happen if business is willing to radically reassess its purpose and values, to see balanced, sustainable relationship as the only foundation for all sustainable practices, and be prepared to learn its way into a new future.

Then, we will be ready to redirect the great shaping influence of our work and workplaces to the task of creating a world that works for everyone. ||| **dya**

About the author

David Youell is a partner at **downey youell associates** and works with individuals and organisations to address issues of culture and change in the workplace and the community.

He is a qualified Cultural Assessment Practitioner and co-author of *Exploring the Communication Dynamic - 301 Building Blocks to Enrich your Working Relationships*, a desktop companion of practical communication tips and inspirational wisdom. [Oak Tree Press, 1998]

He helped create *Q5 - New Leadership at Work* to prompt a movement for personal and organisational change, in which each of us begins to see our working and professional life as an opportunity to address the critical issues of our generation.

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