

Trading in futures

Paula Downey

downey youell associates

Because business exists inside society, its success - and its future - depends on the success of the community which is its life-support system. Engaging authentically with the community is a mutually enriching process.

This article was published in the Lilly's Road Foundation Journal, October 1999

Picture this, if you will. A busy Thursday afternoon in the heart of Dublin's business district. The NIKEI finished on a record high. The FTSE is climbing. Here in Ireland, it looks like the market will close 'up' a significant number of points today.

Thank god... that's the important stuff taken care of.

In sunny Merrion Square, a happy clatter of three year olds from the local Montessori school are engaged in a closing event of their own: milling around to kiss Carol, one of their teachers, goodbye. Lots and lots of hugs. Big bear ones. Some of tomorrow's brokers and hotshots perhaps, negotiating a swing-around or another kiss from the lovely Carol. A sea of tiny, waving hands concludes the ceremony of separation: *Bye-bye, Carol... Bye-bye!*

As she walks down Baggot Street, just a block away, Carol will step over no less than nine, perhaps ten, street urchins and beggars, some not that much older than the children she has left behind.

One of the Dublin 2 street elders is 'Coppers', a broken shadow of a human being, badly weathered by a decade on this tiny patch of the planet. He can't be more than forty or so. His face is red, his eyes unfocused. The snot

runs down his chin onto his tatty jumper, already stained with vomit and all manner of substances. When he stretches his supplicant hand towards her, it will be from a vague sense that someone is approaching, and not from any expectation that his voiceless gesture will be seen or responded to. His psyche is as broken as his body. After a decade of being ignored, it must be easy to doubt that you exist. Or that you matter.

'The DOW' may be up, the NIKEI on a roll. The Tiger can roar till it's blue in the face, but as long as there are children in today's parks and playgrounds destined to succeed Coppers on the street beat, then the future of our society is a grim one.

I direct this message to business people because you are the people I know best, and because the language of business dominates our current discourse about our sense of ourselves as a nation. We call ourselves a Celtic Tiger - not because we're busily pursuing environmental or social objectives, but because we're pursuing economic objectives, and winning.

Or so we think.

But however much we might like to construe it, an economy sits *within* a society, not the other way round. No matter how sunny the current financial climate is for some, unless the sun is shining on everyone, all we're witnessing is a

passing patch of blue. And for anyone interested in the longevity of their organisation and of business as a whole, this is a real issue.

Because a business exists *in* society, its success - and its future - depends absolutely on the success of the community which is its life-support system. The source of its employees. The source of its customers. The source of its suppliers. The source of its licence to exist and the ultimate arbiter of all its activities.

Most people in business shy away from this truth. They build a wall around their domain and say: *"This is the bit we're responsible for. We pay taxes to someone else to look after our debris."* But the walls that a business builds around itself are in the mind. In truth, there are no boundaries. If a business does not serve the greater social good, and serve it as rigorously and passionately as it serves its own needs, then ultimately it has no place in a society.

So what role can business play in securing the future of our children?

Usually, the typical response of business is an economic one: *"Let's give money"*, and very often, contributions are rooted in self-interest. Giving in order to receive - reciprocal favours, kudos, an enhanced image, whatever.

But no matter how deep the pocket, money alone is a shallow response because although something may be bought or built, fundamentally, nothing changes. Giving money reduces our social response to a transaction, when what is needed is a transformation. Not just a transformation of these children and their sense of their destiny, but a transformation of *our* selves, of *our* mindset, our sense of our role and our social footprint. A transformation of our values and priorities. Dare I say it in a business context, a transformation of our spirit and our soul.

And as it happens, transformation doesn't happen by proxy. You can't send an alternate. You can't get it from a report, even a well-

written one. You've got to get your hands dirty. And in this context, 'getting your hands dirty' means *being* with these children and giving them the most valuable gift of all: your time, and your attention.

There is nothing more powerful than our attention, especially our attention to each other. Knowing that a busy individual considers it worthwhile to spend time with them is hugely enriching for children. It's a simple act that builds the kind of self-esteem that every one of us needs to live a complete life. The future is not something we inherit. It's something each of us invents for ourselves, and while no one can live these children's lives for them, they may consciously live a better life if they believe they're worth it. *If they believe they matter.*

In my experience, when someone from 'the outside world' spends time with children, especially those at risk, and speaks openly and authentically about their experiences, lives can be utterly transformed. The children are meeting the kind of person they usually only see in newspaper photographs, or at a distance - and what they discover is a human being, just like themselves. Someone with two arms, two legs, perhaps with a background not unlike their own. An ordinary mortal. And suddenly, leading a successful life doesn't seem so remote. In fact, it can seem quite possible.

The real magic of this process, though, is that the transformation is mutual. When we move out of our own everyday pond and come face-to-face with these lives, it's impossible to return to our own life, unchanged. We return feeling very responsible for those people, *knowing* that we are somehow responsible. Without graphics and pie-charts and longitudinal studies and all the quantitative data we normally rely on for *proof*, we can come to know the simple truth: that we are all connected. And that as long as there are any losers in our society, there can be no winners.

No matter how blue the patch of sky is overhead. . ||| dya

About the author

Paula Downey is a partner at **downey youell associates**.

She has a Distinction in *Communication Studies* and a Masters with Distinction in *Responsibility and Business Practice* from the University of Bath and has studied *Systems Thinking* at the Open University. Alongside her organisational development work she writes and speaks on the challenges and opportunities of system change.

She is a co-author of *Exploring the Communication Dynamic: 301 Building Blocks to Enrich your Working Relationships*. She 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.

Discover more at www.dya.ie

downey youell associates

is a service for leaders and change agents who want to take a living-systems approach to organisation, culture and change.

CultureWork - for a world in transition

is our unique resource - a suite of concepts and practical processes designed to support the work of transition in organisations and in the community.

Find out more online at www.dya.ie

a: 123 Lower Baggot Street
Dublin 2
Ireland
p: (353 1) 661 2636
e: mail@dya.ie
w: www.dya.ie