

# PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

It *is* Sustainable

WORDS: IVOR HOPKINS &amp; BENGT SKARSTAM

*As individuals - whether business leaders or not - living Sustainably is easier when you understand that active Responsibility is at the heart of Sustainability, and Personal Responsibility pulses at its core.<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. Car crash

If you drive with your eyes fixed only on the bonnet or hood, you will crash. If at speed you look only at the section of the road immediately in front of you, you will crash. And if you believe that you are the only person driving on that stretch of road, and can concentrate on anything but the road, you will avoid danger just as long as your luck holds.

How many of us in business operate with our eyes fixed only on the bonnet, with little or no attempt to view what is down the road, with scant preparation for the Wicked Problems<sup>2</sup> ahead and a dim long-term view of where we want to go? And yet we keep accelerating, hoping that if we ignore things, they will either go away, or others will take care of us, or technology will keep us safe.

All of us are currently facing a car crash socially, economically and environmentally: you only have to take half an interest in the media to find any number of examples that point to this. Although we are part of a very long-term evolutionary process, in our comparatively short time as a species on this planet, we have effected major changes. As hunter gatherers we have evolved from foragers with little impact, to top predator, stripping the world of its resources and bringing extinction to many other species - as well as cultures of our own - either as a direct result of our rapaciousness or as collateral damage in our insatiable quest for wealth, celebrity and status. Add to this a population that is both increasing and ageing, and it is hard not to have a dystopian vision for humankind. Can we recalibrate our sense and act on the wicked reality we have to manoeuvre in, securing the well-being of present and future generations?

We are business people and are by our natures positive, action-oriented, problem-solvers, whose businesses, by and large, are a social good. We can improve our personal focus and help work towards ameliorating the effects of Wicked Problems through making our businesses better.

There are two steps to your personal recalibration: Sense-making, and Personal Responsibility. A Sense-maker uses a clear framework in order to make sense of the complexity and the Wicked Problems in our world, before taking action. It is an initial stage of Personal Responsibility because reflection helps us to understanding and wisdom:

“Being an effective game-changer is not what you do, but primarily how you think”<sup>3</sup>

If we develop the metaphor of life as a car journey on a long highway, there are four key items you ought to take care of :

- **Values** are the chassis or structure: you cannot build a vehicle without this base;
- **Ethics** make up the control system (the gears, accelerator, brakes, and steering) which determine direction and speed. These are the most challenging to master;
- **Stakeholders** are, amongst others, passengers, other road users including pedestrians, garages (for maintenance and fuel), legal entities such as the police and registration authorities, and the environment;
- **Process** refers to actions that you control internally such as your driving skills, and the external controls that govern you such as the rules of the road.

At the vehicle’s heart is the engine or power: this is you. Once you have understood the four key points you can move from being a Sense-maker to being a cutting edge Change Agent. A Change Agent in business does things differently: in your metaphorical car, you might be someone who has added extra skills to make yourself an advanced - and improved - driver, or you may have taken the decision to ditch the car completely in favour of more environmentally friendly options, including holding a video rather than a face to face meeting. And this is when you show true Personal Responsibility:

“Personal responsibility is an individual’s open, wise and ethical engagement with the world, for the sustainable good of all.”<sup>4</sup>

*"It's easy to be good in business"*

- Kresse Wesling  
(One of the founders of Elvis & Kresse)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-business/10165283/Environmental-entrepreneur-Kresse-Wesling-Its-easy-to-be-good-in-business.html> ([www.elvisandkresse.com](http://www.elvisandkresse.com))

## 2. Open, wise and ethical

Michael Woodford, as new CEO at Olympus, took on the board when he discovered a massive irregularity in the company's accounts. In his particularly local *and* international battle, his stakeholders were vital to him, especially as he felt very strongly that he and his family - his closest stakeholders - were in real danger: he showed amazing tenacity and courage in taking on a multi-national, but could not have done it all alone.

You are unlikely to find yourself in such an extreme position, but you do have an impact on your company or organisation, and on its wider stakeholders. Therefore, it is important to know who the recipients of your actions - your own stakeholders - are:

"A stakeholder is any individual, organisation or group - which includes the Environment - that can affect, or is affected by, the action of an individual, organisation or group."<sup>5</sup>

List your stakeholders and then sketch a diagram with you in the centre and your stakeholders in orbit around you:

- Can you gauge how treating them all in a consistent and Sustainable way might work?
- Can you grade them in order of importance?
- Would that grading change if you saw the world - and yourself - through their eyes?
- What do you use to determine importance - bottom line thinking, networking potential, nature of their business, similar values?

Now take another journey, redrawing your Stakeholder map with the Earth at the centre, and you in orbit, surrounded by your Stakeholders: what would the impact of your own lifestyle be on that bright blue and green marble below you, when multiplied by seven billion, the current population of the world? And how good would your Personal Responsibility impact be?

Michael Woodford's impact has been big, given his profile, particularly on a special group of company stakeholders: whistleblowers. His experience is mirrored by other whistleblowers who are often bullied, alone and unprotected, and then vilified for bringing to light information that is in the public

good. Whistleblowers are usually open and ethical, and it is an indictment of our corporate culture that they are treated in such a way that leads them to question whether their whistleblowing was indeed wise. If Woodford had not been so determined, and guided by strong values and personal ethics, whistleblowers would have one less champion, and transparency would still be lauded but not actioned.

## 3. Engagement with the world

Action is certainly at the core of one of the most remarkable athletes of recent times: Lance Armstrong, seven times winner of the gruelling Tour de France, cancer survivor and icon for a generation. There is much debate about elite athletes as rôle models, yet there is no question that Lance Armstrong excited millions of fans with his exceptional skill, tenacity and dynamism.

However, at the same time he was leading a savvy media campaign and maintaining a successful public profile, he organised his closest circle to ensure that he had clandestine access to performance enhancing drugs and other medical practices banned by his sporting federation. Winning is a drug, and Armstrong wanted to win at all costs:

"Yes, I was a bully. I was a bully in the sense that I tried to control the narrative and if I didn't like what someone said I turned on them."<sup>6</sup>

There is no question that Armstrong had extremely strong personal Values: the problem was they were not balanced by Ethics. On the field of play, some gamesmanship is (sadly) expected, such as fouling in soccer or sledging in cricket, but cheating is seen as completely unacceptable. Cheating is calculating and undermines the very foundations of fair play, calling into question all of those attributes that we so admire. If sports stars and high level administrators showed more Personal Responsibility then the corruption that plagues some international sports could be eradicated.

Ethics is about right and wrong, about the process of making choices in the face of many dilemmas, and about taking responsibility for those choices. It is not an easy subject and needs to be studied, but all of us - top athletes included - could



*“Blowing a whistle wasn’t really my style. I wasn’t a cop and I wasn’t the referee. I was a player who saw members of his own side not following the rules”*

- Michael Woodford  
Exposure: Inside the Olympus Scandal  
(Portfolio Penguin, London 2012) p233

do well to ask themselves the following test questions on any action we are considering. Would you like:

- your children to do what you are planning to do?
- your action to be on the front page of your local newspaper?
- to tweet your actions on Twitter?

If the answer to any of these questions is NO, then you have a dilemma, and you should re-evaluate your actions, using your Values and Ethics, until you can answer YES. The journey then continues with some reflection on how you impact on your stakeholders, as your actions should:

- respect others
- do no harm
- enable you to take full responsibility for your undertakings

When these three principles are also fulfilled, then you can move ahead with your actions: you are becoming a Change Agent. *But* Masters of the Universe be warned: if you feel that all this is for lesser mortals and that only the ends justify the means, consider Lance Armstrong. He journeyed far, but hubris brought him to the end of the road.

#### 4. Sustainable good of all

Of all the stakeholders in a business, suppliers are currently very much in the spotlight. A nurtured chain of suppliers is crucial for transforming your business, especially when based on fair pricing, local proximity and your supportive involvement. This choice is part of the Process required for your business.

Elvis & Kresse, founded by Kresse Wesling and James Hewit, is a waste innovation company which famously uses an unlikely material from an unusual supplier: they turn London Fire Brigade hoses, a complex layered material otherwise destined for landfill at the end of its useful life, into upmarket bags and accessories... and plough back a percentage of their profits into the Brigade’s benevolent fund.

They show Conscious Leadership “creating value for all stakeholders” (as well as following the other four tenets of Conscious Capitalism<sup>7</sup>) and are truly inspirational Change

Agents. It is clear that careful sense-making went into building their company combined with an innate Personal Responsibility.

#### 5. Personal responsibility - it is sustainable

We need to keep our eyes properly on the road, and add a long view to our current, mainly short-term view of the Wicked Problems that surround us. Future generations need to be in your stakeholder list alongside the environment: these are core aspects of Sustainability. And in order to take action on Sustainability - one Wicked Problem - we need to show true Personal Responsibility and work with the four precepts outlined above: Values, Ethics, Stakeholders and Process.

Business is a societal good and as business people it is in our gift to do more, whilst simultaneously improving our businesses. We can either avoid the metaphorical car crash through skilful driving, make the consequences less harmful through technology, or take the courage shown by Michael Woodford combined with the innovative mindset of Elvis & Kresse and do something extraordinary. For this we need Personal Responsibility. Every action - and considered inaction - has a consequence, so we must check our options as carefully as time permits, and then initiate the best ones to be real Change Agents:

“It is not only what we do, but also what we do not do, for which we are accountable.”<sup>8</sup> ■

1. I Hopkins & B Skarstam, Sustainability - it is personal, The Link (Swedish Chamber of Commerce for the UK, September 2014), p. 43

2. ibid

3. Andy Bird, Chairman, Walt Disney International, Special report: Celebrating global game-changers, Director (IoD, November 2014) p. 86

4. © I. Hopkins / B. Skarstam (2012)

5. © I. Hopkins / B. Skarstam (2013)

6. Lance Armstrong, <http://m.huffpost.com/us/entry/2500965>

7. Mackey & Sisodia, Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the heroic spirit of business (Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, Mass, 2014)

8. Molière