

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR A CONSULTING ENGINEERING OFFICE

Before discussing the term “Corporate Social Responsibility” and its application to a consulting engineering office, it may be helpful to consider responsibility in a wider context, which may then enable conclusions to be more clearly seen and policy to be implemented in a more balanced way.

There are a number of levels or enclosing envelopes of responsibilities:

Personal Responsibility	(me, myself)
Familial Responsibility	(children, spouse, parents)
Community Responsibility	(tribal, corporate, footy team)
National Responsibility	(aussie, aussie, aussie!)
Global Responsibility	(ecological)
Cosmic Responsibility	(spiritual, religious)

Personal Responsibility is responsibility to one’s self; to seek to be healthy and strong, to take care of one’s appearance and one’s well-being. It evokes self-esteem and shuns additive behaviours that can lead to self-harm, such as excessive smoking, drinking, laziness.

Familial Responsibility is love of family. It comes naturally and it is the cornerstone of our society. As will be discussed later this is the responsibility that most clearly illustrates the interplay of social forces.

Community Responsibility includes on one hand gatherings like Neighbourhood Watch, P and C committees, local school boards and also hobby, craft and citizens’ groups. On the other hand, it is tribal: baying for blood at the grand-final; corporate greed.

National Responsibility is love of country, pride and respect of national rituals and customs. But also jingoistic fervour, racism and war!

Global Responsibility is a relatively new area of responsibility. It is an awareness of the fragility of the planet’s eco-system, and of the ecological care that that calls for; and it is also trying to come to terms with the tragic poverty in Third World countries. The opposite is a squandering of the earth’s buried riches; a “necessary” despoiling of the environment for corporate and personal gain.

Cosmic Responsibility What can be said of this? For some, it is the overarching responsibility to which all other responsibilities submit. For others there is no need for this level and global responsibility is sufficiently overarching. And yet others will consider nothing past national (or even personal) responsibility.

There seem to be two main forces that drive each of these interlayers of responsibility. The apparently stronger of these is the natural force of evolution, of competition between individuals and species – competition for a better or greater share of what is available. This lawful, benign, “downward” force pervades all of life on earth and is the fundamental force that finds us humans here, together, on this planet.

The second force is one that is only displayed in some higher evolved species, in primates and humans. That force is social awareness, of caring for each other; of effectively giving up or rather *fighting against* the first force for the sake of the greater good. This is sometimes called the upward force.

Nothing here is particularly clear and each of the levels of responsibility contain a mix of these “down” and “up” forces. Note that the words down and up do not necessarily refer to a fundamental good or bad.

Our ideas of duty and our motivations are a mix of these levels or envelopes of responsibility and within every level, each of us has different (and changing) positions. So it is not always easy to see clearly where one’s responsibility lies. And when the term “Social Responsibility” is used – where does that fit? It has not been noted at all in the above list, but as will be seen, it can touch on all.

Interestingly, there is a political corollary here. Right wing or conservative parties extol the benefits of competition (free-enterprise) and that in any struggle the stronger will succeed and in so doing, lift the rest higher - to a better way of life. Left wing or socialist parties focus on the social benefits of spreading wealth and benefits across the community, especially to those ill-equipped for the struggle, and thus hope to improve the lot of all.

The problem with the right-wing approach is that it typically limits the number of levels of responsibility that one embraces. For example in climbing the corporate ladder, one is concerned much more with personal, family and the community of one’s own corporation than with others outside this sphere – in fact, everyone outside is fair game! Note the dog-eat-dog excesses prevalent in the US corporate world.

And the left-wing approach typically does not reward struggle (nor innovation, diligence and hard work) sufficiently, and there is a tendency for mediocrity and the lowest-common-denominator to predominate. An example is the mind-numbing multiple queues necessary for everyday retail shopping in the old communist countries.

As human society has developed over the centuries, it can be seen that we, as a species, are gradually realising that our survival and well-being is better achieved by focussing more on the second, (or up) force rather than the first (or down) force. We are taking more care of the weaker in society; slavery is outlawed; the disabled are acknowledged and cared-for; the elderly and infirm are better treated; etc. And the election swing between political sides has an overall historical trend towards increasing social welfare and caring for the disadvantaged.

So, returning to the term Corporate Social Responsibility in light of the above, we could say that Social Responsibility is an amalgam of all the levels of responsibility from personal to cosmic, specifically with a willingness to embrace and foster the

second or up force. And corporate social responsibility is this same amalgam applied within the business world.

Practically, social responsibility requires a personal viewing and perhaps reappraisal of one's motivations by considering them in the light of the first and second forces. Which force predominates? Is there a natural mingling? Is there a healthy balance?

One clear example of a natural and healthy balance between the up and down forces is in family responsibility. Here, the subliminal motivation is procreation and promotion of one's own gene pool – perhaps the ultimate form of competition. This is aided by an instinctive and natural love for our spouse with whom we couple and for our offspring. The natural down force is augmented by the up force of social feeling towards family and through to community (schools, neighbourhood).

And at work? At my life away from the family, in the corporate world? What is my social awareness towards my competitors, the bottom line, my shareholders, my staff, the community and the environment? If we can individually seek a better balance and can share that with others perhaps we can come to a better understanding and application of Corporate Social Responsibilities.

At Partridge Partners, we encourage an individual approach by staff of the particular issue(s) of concern, followed by a group discussion and only then does management endeavour to form a collective and balanced policy.

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