

Globally-Conscious Capitalism: A Consciousness Perspective on Economic Management and Responsibility

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What's wrong with the world and how to fix it

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Abstract

Today's increasingly capitalistic global economy is a complex and dynamic web of social, cultural, and economic systems that reflect our personal and collective consciousness. With greater recognition of the way consciousness creates and connects everything, and with an enhanced sense of global responsibility, the capitalistic system can be pragmatically altered to promote sustainable prosperity for everyone.

Introduction

"The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality." Max DePree, former President of the Herman Miller Company, a leading manufacturer of office furniture, made this insightful statement a number of years ago. What model of reality do you follow? A model based on the duality of mind and matter or one where thoughts and things are unalterably connected. The latter view recognizes consciousness, with its thinking, willing and discriminating faculties as the architect of all that exists. The late Willis Harman, Ph.D., emeritus professor of Engineering-Economic Systems at Stanford University expressed the view of a growing number of cutting edge thinkers; "Consciousness is not the end-product of material evolution; rather consciousness was here first!"¹²

Nonetheless, consciousness remains an enigmatic concept; to combine it with capitalism as in the title of this paper seems even more inscrutable as many view these terms as incompatible. To see how these concepts are intertwined, this article begins by briefly describing the characteristics of a conscious capitalist – one who is aware of the role that a pervasive model of ethical-equity and collective-sustainability can play in the design and maintenance of economic systems. Next we examine some of the attributes of consciousness and begin to deepen our understanding of this awesome force. The necessity of operating businesses in a more conscious manner, so that equity and sustainability are paramount, becomes obvious once these concepts are grasped. Capitalism devoid of consciousness is calamitous. Since capitalism has the capacity to be both productive and fair, there is no reason to abandon this dynamic system unless and until another economic model demonstrates its superiority.

Consciousness at Work

A key aspect of consciousness is awareness. Businesspeople who practice a collective-consciousness form of capitalism are aware that their decisions have a pervasive effect on employees, customers, investors, suppliers, and communities

worldwide. Following a unified view of reality, globally-conscious business executives take the needs of all parties into consideration. Such leaders serve the common good, not because they are altruistic but because it makes their employees more motivated, their customers more loyal and their enterprise more productive. Businesspeople, of course, are influenced by many factors. By examining a business leader's choices and priorities, it is possible to infer his or her view of reality and level of awareness. Grouping these business decisions into four categories – *reactive, proactive, contractive and supracative* – helps delineate a decision maker's position on the consciousness continuum. A description of these categories, arranged in ascending order of conscious awareness, is provided below. First, a more detailed look at some of the critical aspects of consciousness is in order.

Consciousness encompasses and connects all that exists; from mammals to minerals and from the densest of objects to the most ephemeral and formless. As Einstein protégé David Bohm stated, "The inseparable quantum interconnectedness of the whole universe is the fundamental reality."¹³ Consciousness and energy are interdependent aspects of life's countless expressions. Neither the

energy of electricity nor the energy of thoughts is readily visible yet both are real forces that create forms we term physical matter. In this regard, it is interesting to note that a recent Business Week article reported that university researchers are now able to use Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) technology to explore how thoughts are processed.⁴

Being confined to the limitations of a specific body, place and personality, people tend to view life as the interaction of separate, discrete elements rather than the flow of a unified whole. This leads to a belief that consciousness and matter are separate and that we must fight for our share of "things," many of which are in dangerously short supply. Our ability to draw on our innate ingenuity to create what we need is regrettably ignored; a mindset of scarcity follows. The dualistic, me-versus-them worldview makes life seem like a continuous struggle. Everything is divided into opposing camps, one viewed as right or better and the other as wrong or inferior. In such disparity, conflict and confusion are inevitable. To the extent we see others as adversaries we logically react in ways that confirm our negative beliefs and fears.⁵ But things are rarely inherently good or bad. Indeed, right and wrong are subjective determinations based on factors such as family circumstances, educational biases and societal conditioning – in a word, acculturation. Moreover, what is thought to be right today may be considered wrong tomorrow. The medical world's constantly shifting, often contradictory views of what is healthy and what is not points up the difficult task of determining what is right or wrong; good or bad.

The economic model most widely taught in colleges and universities is aligned with the dualistic view of reality cited above. A key assumption of this model is that happiness is attained through the accumulation of material wealth. With emphasis placed on immediate gratification rather than long-term fulfillment, self-interest is defined in exceedingly narrow, self-serving terms. The widespread desire to maximize short-term shareholder wealth and, thereby, enhance happiness seems eminently logical. Yet, according to a detailed study by psychology professors Ed Diener and Martin Seligman, the sharp rise in economic wealth over the past decades has not led to any increase in life satisfaction.⁶ To the contrary, this period has seen a substantial increase in depression and distrust. To quote Diener and Seligman, "economic success falls short as a measure of well-being, in part because materialism can negatively influence well-being, and also because it is possible to be happy without living a life of luxury, as long as one's needs are met." Notwithstanding compelling evidence, the belief that wealth and happiness are closely connected is a centerpiece of western culture in the 21st century. This thinking creates an either/or construction that gives priority to tangible possessions over quality of life concerns. If an organization's consciousness-culture is limited and a "me first" attitude rules, very little questioning of the prevailing model's validity or consequences is likely. In a world without borders, this thinking leads many corporations to impulsively move capital wherever labor is cheapest and environmental regulations are

most permissive. Unconscionable sweatshops and myriad forms of environmental degradation are ignored or worse, condoned. Barely considered is the effect irresponsible practices have on a company's reputation or the sustainability of an essential resource. The short-term wealth maximization mantra takes precedence over longer-term, more inclusive behavior.

Unity consciousness, on the other hand, views all apparent opposites as complementary relationships in which each of the two poles is dynamically linked to the other. Whereas hot and cold, for example, seem to be polar opposites, they are merely varying degrees of the same characteristic (temperature). A solid, such as a block of ice, can easily be transformed into a liquid (water) or a gas (steam) by a change in temperature. Ice – apparently hard and distinct – is just one of energy's many manifestations. The same concept can be applied to emotions. Love and hate can blend into each other so that it becomes impossible to differentiate between them. While the apparent individuality of things is eminently practical on one level, it is essential to remember that all differences are relative and part of an all-encompassing whole.

Resisting the Resistance to Change

Ingrained beliefs do not change easily. Survival is often difficult and if current beliefs seem to keep us safe – however imperfectly – they are reinforced. Only when conditions become intolerable or life becomes devoid of meaning will a paradigm shift occur. A growing number of people have now concluded that humanity's survival is threatened.

One day's scan of the local newspaper found the following news stories reflecting a growing list of dysfunctional institutions:⁷

- A Wall Street economist is sentenced to 33 months in jail for wire and securities fraud.
- A financially troubled airline defends its CEO's multimillion-dollar compensation package.
- As pressure on students to earn good grades mounts and grade inflation proliferates, college students are hypocritically warned that straight A's lead to burn out.
- A publicly owned company and four of its employees are charged with manipulating energy prices.
- State and Federal legislation proliferates – many laws are wasteful (paybacks to contributors), frivolous (legalizing ferrets as pets) or written to correct defects in previous bills.
- House arrest ordered for former officials of an international dairy conglomerate accused of fraud.
- A well-known mutual fund company pays a \$110 million penalty for market timing irregularities.

Corporate scandals, abetted by handpicked, disgracefully negligent Boards of Directors, proliferate. Executives receive outlandish compensation even when the business flounders. Unconscionable severance packages are given to incompetent and, at times, unscrupulous executives. The differential between the highest and lowest paid employees grows wider. In politics neither the ideas nor expertise of office seekers is as important as their access to

money. The pay-to-play culture that rewards campaign contributions with government jobs, favors and contracts threatens society's well being. It creates bureaucratic waste, economic inefficiencies and public distrust. Our educational system produces children who are illiterate and increasingly exposed to drugs and other dangers. We know that things are not as they could or should be yet attempts at true reform are feeble or nonexistent. It is easier to take the line of least resistance and accept the status quo.

Fortunately, the evolutionary process moves inextricably from separative thoughts and actions toward unifying beliefs and behavior. As evolution progresses, the life force becomes increasingly vibrant and consciousness expands to higher levels. A unified view of reality transcends dualism and diminishes conflict. When we are more intent on the truth than being "right," we are increasingly able to tap into our intuitive faculties – that part which is able to perceive the world and its many paradoxes in a more integrated way. As we explore consciousness' ubiquitous treasures, we find more creative ways of solving problems and more productive reactions to life's challenges. Attitudes and thought processes are altered, new goals chosen and new tasks undertaken. Survival becomes a cooperative pursuit and sustainability becomes a necessity. Analyzing human behavior in light of our evolving consciousness is always enlightening. At one extreme, the dualistic view of life – focuses on separation rather than unity – and influences most beliefs and actions. Cause and effect appear disconnected; thought and deed are erroneously assumed to

be detached and independent of one another. As awareness increases, so does our desire and ability to experience our interdependent world and to act responsibly.

Ascending the Scale

Business executives can be found everywhere on the continuum of awareness – from "consensus trance" opportunists to "conscious capitalists". Today's business leaders respond to their decision-making opportunities from different levels of consciousness, as shown below:

A reactive response is usually the result of an emotional reaction provoked by fear. An overriding fear in the business community is being ostracized or penalized for not following duly constituted laws or regulations. Avoidance of punishment and deference to power become primary motivators. Right and wrong are connected to authority and power rather than universal principles. Habitual reactions based on misconceptions of reality govern a reactive leader's choices. Knee-jerk responses ignore a decision's effect on the larger community and the subsequent boomerang effect that inevitably harms the long-term prosperity of the initiating enterprise. Behaviors are altered – perhaps ceasing to dump toxic waste in a nearby stream – only when scorn or punishment is threatened. The level of consciousness required to stimulate a reactive response is negligible – limited awareness will suffice.

A proactively motivated firm follows the current model of reality that prioritizes short-term, self-centered interests. There is little if any awareness of the long-term consequences. For instance, proactive companies may engage in unethical behavior if the benefits are thought

sufficient. Conversely, if acting in a responsible manner enhances a company's image by more than the associated costs – as when building supply companies stopped selling old growth timber products – progressive policies may be initiated. While self-serving choices usually rule, proactive executives may, at times, be pragmatically moved to serve society at large.

Contractive business executives understand the world's interdependent nature. They have the foresight and courage to oppose prevailing values and beliefs. Rather than conform to conventional thinking, with its flaws and misconceptions, they risk ridicule and resentment in the quest for higher standards. These trendsetters view self-interest in the broadest terms and often incur short-term costs even when benefits seem incalculable or distant. For example, while most firms wait for government mandates to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, contractive companies make a stand. British Petroleum (BP), contrary to most large oil companies, has acknowledged the risks of climate change and taken steps to counteract this growing problem. BP's initial goal of reducing operational emissions to 10% below 1990 levels has now been met and a more aggressive target has been set for 2012.⁸ BP's actions combine idealism and pragmatism – acting responsibly has enhanced their reputation and made their operations more efficient. Less globally-conscious industry executives have engaged in a cynical disinformation campaign to raise doubts about this pressing issue. This self-serving approach is similar to the tobacco companies' detrimental and disingenuous strategy during the latter half of

the 20th century.

In addition to opposing prevailing standards, supractive organizations challenge separatist beliefs and behaviors. They courageously live their unifying ideals everyday. The Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE) is a network of sustainably managed companies led by supractive businesspeople. Their business vision offers an alternative to today's shortsighted, counter-productive understanding of reality. They demonstrate the practical advantages of working cooperatively and defining success in all-encompassing terms. Members in the BALLE network are willing to spend more than necessary for products if doing so makes their community healthier and more hospitable. By buying locally produced goods and services whenever possible the connection between cause and effect is shortened; business owners and customers see the environmental and social impact of their actions clearly and directly. The global community is not forgotten; when local products are unavailable, BALLE members tap into the organization's database and connect to like-minded businesses around the world. Responsible economic, social and political activities aimed at sustaining the local community while staying cognizant of and connected to the global economy are aligned with the vision of unity consciousness.

Conclusion

Today most people and, therefore, most organizations are proactively motivated. As such, most thinking and behavior is self-serving and short-term oriented. This doesn't preclude proactively focused people

acting from higher or lower levels of consciousness. Conscious awareness varies from moment to moment and from situation to situation. Nonetheless, with ethical and ecological conditions reaching perilous levels, many leaders are embracing a more connected view of life. They realize sustained prosperity isn't possible unless all stakeholders are fairly considered. This shifts the self-interest focus from exclusivity to inclusivity. When unity consciousness attains a critical mass, the gap between reactive and supractive behavior will narrow and our institutions will move from being dangerously dysfunctional to being exceedingly effective. "Globally-Conscious Capitalism" is a not an oxymoron; it is a pragmatic imperative.

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