

The Purpose and Practice of Conscious Business

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This is the second edition of eO&P on Conscious Business (CB).

In the [first edition](#) of this two-part themed edition of eO&P (Winter 2013) we explained our caution about the way that CB might be reduced to formulaic frameworks and schema that play down the attention that we give to everyday practices and how people relate to each other. We ended with an invitation for you to draw your own conclusions, based upon your experience, inviting you to develop your own ideas around the subject.

We also offered six diverse pieces around the subject of 'awareness'. As we said, CB is not a thing. It is a way of doing business. We believe that the practice of CB aims to raise awareness of the hurly-burly of everyday life and to notice those assumptions that influence our perceptions and practice – to become more aware.

Whilst being aware is, in principle, simple, business on the other hand is complex. Business involves many people in many ever-changing relationships.

People are, of course, complex. We are bodies and minds, thoughts, feelings, hopes and dreams; we are rational and irrational, language-based and visual; we have a past, a present and a future; we change state from moment to moment. Sometimes we're up, sometimes we're down; we tell stories and we remember and forget whenever and whatever suits us.

And we're connected in an ever shifting web of relationships with others. In business we interact constantly in never ending configurations with colleagues, customers, suppliers, partners, investors, advisors.

We interact at an emotional and human level and also through a vast array of technical knowledge, systems and disciplines, strategies, policies, processes, procedures and so on. There are different 'modes' for doing business: planning, analysing, and executing. Sometimes these can be cumbersome and slow other times they can be lean, emergent, and rapidly evolving. All of these processes are constantly changing, merging and being updated by the huge numbers of people involved.

So to become and remain aware is simple. But it is certainly not easy.

It takes great discipline and hard work. The complexity of the subject matter works

against us. Our busy world works against us. Social pressures work against us. Even parts of ourselves – the parts that want to be busy and distracted – work against us.

All we can do is make the effort, to try, to hold the intention – to be more aware, more conscious.

Beyond Awareness

To be 'conscious' means to be knowledgeable aware. But it also means to be deliberate, intentional, to act with purpose. We think that to be involved in a Conscious Business means to be doing business, that is being 'business-like', but with more awareness, with more knowledge, **and** with intention.

So this second edition builds upon awareness in two respects: firstly, that of **purpose**, including the reasons why we should bother with Conscious Business.

Secondly, and linked to this, we give a taster of some further elements of **practice**, in other words the means by which we can bring this about.

The first group of articles dwell largely on the subject of purpose.

In his article "**What is the Difference between OD and CB ...?**" Steve Hearsom explores his own practice of being an Organisational Development (OD) practitioner and how he sees the link between the purpose of OD and that of Conscious Business.

Sam Zubaidi writes with great personal presence in "**Pain of Caring in the Caring Sector**" (Part 1 and Part 2) about his experience of working in what he believes to be an unconscious business. In this situation there are patterns of behaviour that come to damage the central purpose of the organisation: namely to help and support people with disabilities.

And what is Sam's purpose? Partly to expose unhelpful and damaging practices and partly to get beyond them, to make better personal choices for himself and others.

Rob and Pete felt there was more to be said in this case – so we asked [Valerie Isles](#) to make some comments on the piece. Valerie is a healthcare educator, academic and someone who is passionate about *care*. She is the author of [Why Reforming the NHS Doesn't Work](#), and has practical experience of the delivery of care. From Valerie we received a different perspective on the events and the various players involved which revealed a number of different purposes.

Discussing those different purposes seems useful to us. But it also highlights the difficulty and dangers of doing so.

We experienced these dangers and difficulties as editors, both in commissioning Sam to write such a personal piece, and also involving Valerie to take a different perspective. Would our intervention go down well with Sam? With Valerie? With you, the reader? We were reminded of the ‘precepts’ raised by Dick Davies in [the first edition](#), including “Do the right thing”.

We too were experiencing those choices and dilemmas and the difficulty in pursuing our purpose, and in so doing gradually becoming more conscious of that purpose.

What came out, we believe, is a rich picture of the dynamics that occur in organisational life. One that compares starkly with the sanitised versions that are prevalent in much organisational literature. It also raises the question of how these different purposes coexist and how they are negotiated through dialogue and ‘gestures’ in every day action.

Lasy Lawless writes about women leaders in her article “**Women in Conscious Leadership**”. Here we discover another strong sense of purpose: that a balanced mix of genders across business leadership offers a more sustainable way of doing business. This is an example of the broader social purpose that Conscious Business often seems to evoke.

Drawing on her own experience and working with other women leaders she points out that it is up to everyone to support women in the journey of establishing more diverse organisations – so as to achieve more sustainable success for everyone.

In her role as Director of Membership of the UK’s Employee Ownership Association **Deb Oxley** writes with passion in “**Employee ownership – the opportunity for better business**” about another way of doing business, and about the growing role of employee ownership. She believes that employee ownership will help transform our economy into a more sustainable one whereby employees and owners have a shared purpose in delivering success.

Here again emerges the strong Conscious Business theme of social, economic and environmental well-being for all.

And what’s the *purpose* of Conscious Business?

We can give a hundred reasons to justify the effort we have put into this journal. For example, business, as we said in the first edition, isn’t working. Or if it is, it works only for a small minority.

We can easily explain that the world is a bad place, that senior bankers earn [a lot of money](#) (Wright, 2014), that inequality leads to poor health even in wealthy countries

([Pickett and Wilkinson, 2014](#)); that the impact of global poverty and inequality is vast – according to the [Gates foundation](#) (and the [United Nations](#)) an estimated 1.5 million children die each year – one every 20 seconds – from vaccine-preventable diseases such as diarrhoea and pneumonia. It is clear that we are breaching the safe boundaries of the vessel we are all share in physical (eg climate change) and in social terms ([Raworth, 2012](#)).

Indeed some seem to see Conscious Business as a way to improve things. Involve more stakeholders, make the rewards more equitable and fair, have a clear purpose and make that purpose to improve the world. Get the leaders leading, and things will get better.

But we believe being conscious isn't just about doing good. It is about being aware, knowledgeable and purposeful.

Being aware that any explanation we can give of our purpose – is just that, an explanation: a clarification and often a justification.

And as we have said before we need to be careful not to start to believe our own explanations. Better, we think, to be aware that there are always multiple viewpoints, multiple perspectives and that 'reality' emerges moment by moment, and is different for each of us. Awareness emerges from the complexity we inhabit – as individuals and in our relationships with others.

So what's the Practice of Conscious Business?

Where does that leave us? What can we actually do? Do we simply contemplate the world with our increased awareness, and consider our "higher purpose"? Do we disappear into inaction?

No, consciousness is a process. According to Dan Siegel at UCLA "the human mind is a relational and embodied process that regulates the flow of energy, and information" (Siegel, 2010), and we can explore it, and perhaps even get better at – through practice.

We can do that alone, but Conscious Business is not about working alone. Business is not a solitary task – it is all about relationships. Business is about people. Living is about people.

As the Zen masters said:

Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.

After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.

Kofman (2006).

One thing we can do therefore is to make sure our purpose is aligned with others. We can test our purpose, clarify it with others. A new, and shared purpose may emerge. Something a group of people can get behind, at least temporarily.

That may mean serving the needs of the group, just as much as it means serving others outside the group. Serving others reminds us of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002). We sometimes call Conscious Business “Business that works for people, not the other way around.”

And once aligned as a group, what can we do?

So now we enter further into the domain of practice – repeatedly applying these ideas, gaining proficiency, getting better. Alone and with others. We don’t do this to fix things, but to get better at being aware, at clarifying and emerging new purpose and simply at practising.

There are, of course, far too many possible helpful practices to cover here. We only have space for two. But we hope these whet your appetite. Many more can be found in other editions of [eO&P](#).

Nate Whitestone, an expert in [sociocracy](#), explores practice from a number of interweaving perspectives in *"We hired Erin!"*. He gives us a great process for making decisions and a great insight into how it is only through the facilitator’s ability to focus on their purpose and on who they are serving that a new and different future may emerge.

In *"The Conscious Individual – how to lead by example/live the change"*, **Natalie Wells and Giti Datt** introduce us to some practical tools for increasing awareness in They approach awareness in a different domain from the rational/logical one which is so prevalent in western business today. But they also show us how to put ourselves in context in which purpose is important, using the example of ICT – Intentional Change Theory (Boyatzis, 2006).

From both articles we get a sense of a collaborative community emerging. Community, which like awareness, purpose, and practice, is central to our understanding of CB.

Where are we now?

A year or so ago, when we started this editing and writing project, we issued a call for papers to interested people to write an article in an area that they felt strongly about. We were hesitant about offering a fixed definition of Conscious Business for the reasons we have stated already.

Instead we offered a few descriptive features that we felt were important in CB. At the

end of this, our second editorial we revisit these.

The features that we identified were that a Conscious Business would:

- be profitable but have more than just financial goals
- deliver value to a wide set of stakeholders
- provide a safe place for human development and growth
- ensure that all involved have the power to influence outcomes
- make paramount the values of transparency, communication and awareness

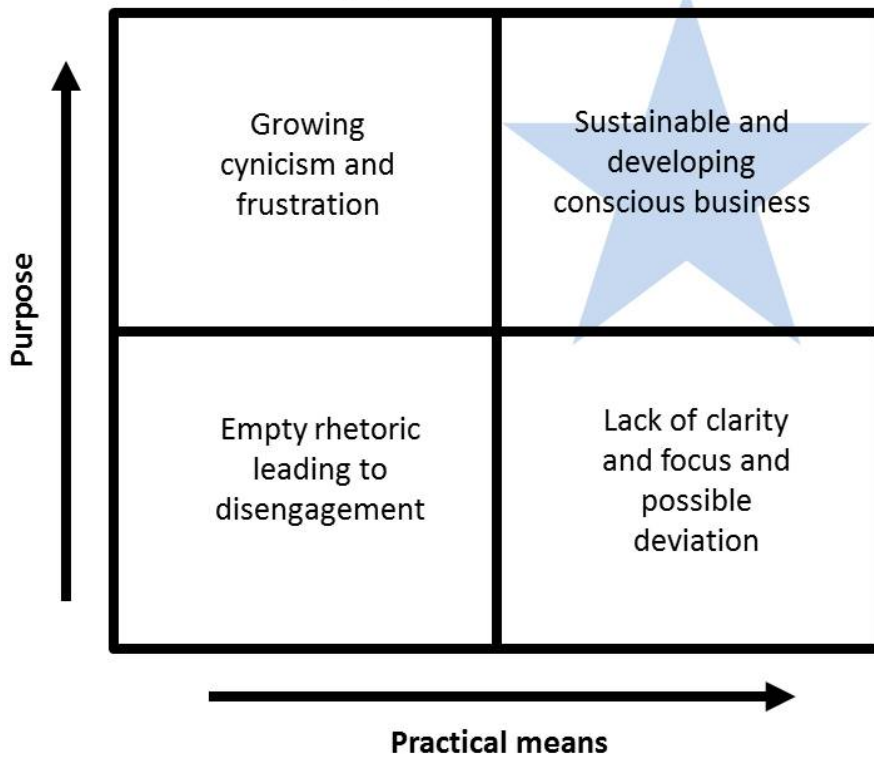
Throughout both editorials we have reconfirmed the importance of awareness.

In this second editorial we have discovered and highlighted *purpose* – those big ideas that one feels are important and worth pursuing. While not forgetting the small purposes of life that also make it worth living. Here we have focused on the *practical means of making it happen*; both in the grand plans and strategies, and in the day-to-day activities of learning from mistakes and successes. As we have seen in some of the articles, particularly Sam's, sometimes those practical means are difficult and can come to affect the very purpose that one is pursuing.

In the life of conscious business there is therefore a vital dynamic between purpose and practice.

Purpose without practical means brings about frustration and cynicism. Solely having the practical means to achieve something, but without that clear purpose, risks veering off in different directions and possible corruption of what instinctively felt important in the first place (Figure 1).

Figure 1: the dynamic tension between purpose and agency in developing conscious business



And we have identified that all of this: awareness, purpose and practice – takes place in a community – in relationship with others.

What does this all mean?

We hope that we have conveyed a sense of Conscious Business through these two editions of eO&P. For us all these meanings are continuously provisional and personal. They will evolve further with other people more conversations with other people like-minded or not.

The following extract, widely attributed to the American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), captures an essence of the multiple facets of what we experience in Conscious Business:

To laugh often and love much; to win the respect of intelligent persons and the affection of children; to earn the approbation of honest citizens and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to give of one's self; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to have played and laughed with enthusiasm and sung with exultation; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived—this is to have succeeded.

Emerson seems to us to neatly summarise the power of *purpose, practice, awareness, and community*.

In our conversations with the authors we encouraged them to put their experience at the heart of their articles, so as to get a grounded and practical perspective around which concepts and ideas could be discussed. This is in contrast much organisational literature focuses on the abstract and encourages us to think in abstract and detached ways.

We hope this approach will stimulate not closed and fixed decisions about Conscious Business, but an open and on-going conversation about how and whether it can bring sustainable benefits to all of us.

There are already many opportunities for this conversation: Conscious Business [meetings](#) are held regularly in the UK and beyond, and there are [many organisations](#) whose purpose seems to be somewhat aligned with Conscious Business. We're also considering a joint Conscious Business/AMED event at the Centre for Progressive Leadership in London. We hope to meet some of you there. So watch out for more details.

In this concluding editorial we recorded a conversation, facilitated by Paul Levy from the first edition, to watch and comment [click](#) here.

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The cover picture Photo by: D.J Clark

We are once again drawn to the metaphor of the balloon seller. Business, conscious business in particular, does not need to be boring and pious. There is much to be said for being positive and standing out from the crowd and to notice and influence how we interact with each other.

About the guest editors

For more than 30 years, **Pete Burden** has worked in many businesses in several industries, mainly those severely disrupted by digital technology and social change. Several successful, innovative, and sometimes ground-breaking businesses, groups

and organisations have emerged. More recently he has founded Conscious Business UK, a fledgling community-run organisation that helps spread experience of Conscious Business practice in the UK. He is now also a founding partner of CBP, a business consultancy specialising in culture, leadership and strategy for a digital and more purposeful world.

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After 14 years in the NHS, latterly in strategic change, and a variety of consultancy roles, **Rob Warwick** is now Senior Lecturer in management and leadership at Chichester University. Rob has a doctorate in healthcare policy, focusing on the interaction between policy and frontline practice. His particular interest is the role of narrative in organisations and personal development and how this might be used to explore reflexivity, complexity and power relations in groups and how we can become more conscious of our impact.

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Pete and Rob were guest editors of the Winter 2013 edition of e-O&P, 'Conscious Business, Part 1'.