

Exploring conscious business practice - sensing as we act, reacting to what we sense

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Introduction

Welcome to this special edition of *e-O&P* - on Conscious Business.

These are two words that initially may not seem to fit together. Both bring very different meanings. Our aim is to test and work with these meanings and to explore the implications for organisations, people and practice. In this edition of *e-O&P*, and the next one (Conscious Business, Part 2), we hope to give you a flavour of what 'conscious business' is all about, and why we believe it is an approach with something to add.



Rob Warwick (left) & Pete Burden (right)

What is it? We believe that it is not a thing. Instead, being conscious is a process of being alert and alive to the situations that one is a part of. To talk about conscious business as a thing, along with definitions and labels, is to fix it. Although this might enable us to share meaning it also damages the very nature of being conscious and aware. We are then caught in a bind that affects much of the discussion.

So, rather than give you our definition, or a necessarily over-simplified framework, we would rather that understanding emerges from the process of listening to the contributors' stories and thoughts. We will then be sharing in the process of developing some joint meaning.

By adopting this approach we are valuing the role of our consciousness as editors, and of yours as readers. We have tried to observe the development of our own consciousness as we worked on the journal - compiling it, engaging with the authors and publishers, and in writing this editorial. And we hope you will equally note your own consciousness as you read.

Why Conscious Business is important

People say that 'business isn't working'. They point to 'fat cats' getting richer, environmental damage, lethal working conditions for many people who bring us much of what we buy in the shops, and to rates of 'progress' that seems unsustainable.

However, turning that around, we can also see that business has been a force for good in the world. Directly or indirectly it has led to many of the advances that we rely on in health care, food, housing, education, the internet, computing and so on.

It is our view that business can be more of a force for good. But for this to happen we need to develop and sustain a consciousness by which we hold ourselves and others to account - in our day-to-day work.

Frameworks and schema

This way of thinking about conscious business is different from the schema and frameworks that have been traditionally relied upon.

Consciousness is perhaps sometimes confused with conscience, or with ethics.

We've had Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Corporate Responsibility, ethical business, Responsible Business, Sustainable Business and so on. The UK's Tomorrow's Company project has been running since 1993 - more than 20 years. Many of these approaches have been linked with some sort of ethical or moral schema or framework. These frameworks can then be applied, scored and compared in a form of benchmarking or transfer of 'best practice'. These approaches are no doubt important and they can point to many achievements.

But they also bring problems and questions including: How do we face the challenges of everyday life? Whose view is right? Whose ethics should we adopt?

Rob's experience in becoming a CSR Assessor with the European Foundation in Quality Management (EFQM) also showed him that the time spent focusing on policies, metrics and score sheets somehow meant the day-to-day reality was missing; in other words, this constituted ethics without full consciousness.

There was another problem too: there was a 'distancing' between those who measured and assessed and those who were subject to that assessment. Things become abstract - a score in a box or a few lines of text. To our minds this approach serves to dull awareness and consciousness of how our actions are affecting what is around us. It becomes an inflexible and unresponsive process.

We live in an interconnected world. There are some factors we are aware of, others that we are not, factors that come to affect us today, others in years or generations to come. Frameworks and benchmarking schemes can only get us part way - there is a longer journey and we argue that it starts with a close examination of ourselves and our impact with others.

A good starting point, therefore, is the idea that conscious business is an ongoing process, and that it is embedded in your own experience - where you are. This may be

uncomfortable - it forces constant questioning, and holding ourselves and others to account, as we will see in some of the articles below. It is a struggle that is sometimes accompanied by self-doubt and hesitancy as to how we make sense of what we do in the face of daily problems that challenge us and our values. Indeed, this was the invitation that we offered to the authors - to reflect upon their own role in the situations they describe.

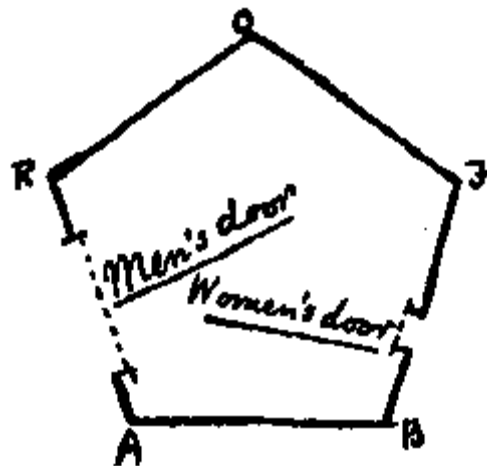
Conscious business has the potential to help us think differently about business; thinking *with* action as opposed to thinking *before* action, paying attention to the logic of business as well as the emotional, feeling and the sense of intuition. We hope the stories in this edition highlight some of that as well.

Life in different dimensions

To explore this further we offer a slight detour into the world of Edwin Abbott and his best known work, the 1884 novella [Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions](#). Here he explores the world of different dimensions - starting in a two dimensional world - as illustrated in figure 1.

At one point in the book the narrator, in his two dimensional world, is visited by a sphere. However, because the narrator has not heard of a sphere, or imagined its possibility, he uses his only frame of reference at hand, and so interprets this new object as a line. Both the narrator and sphere think they have a good understanding of the situation – and they do, but they are at cross purposes. Over time you could imagine how this might lead to frustration, lack of trust and a breakdown of any relationship. We draw on this example as a way of exploring the importance of context. It is only by sharing and trying to understand the context, pressures, frustrations and excitement that each of us face that we can we build bridges in meaning.

Figure 1: A house in Abbott's two dimensional world (click [here](#), see page 17)



Perhaps it also points to the **value** of doing business more consciously. Usually business is focused on the outer (societal) outputs including profit. The team and organisation are then considered next. Conscious business also gives emphasis to the inner development of the individual. All three aspects are important and conscious business tries to address them all.

Having lived in a two-dimensional world, suddenly appreciating that there is a three-dimensional is an enlightening experience. For both parties it is difficult to return to their earlier view of the world. This example also points to the process of adult development - and the work of [Robert Kegan](#) and others – concerning how we grow and develop our consciousness through experience.

Moving against the flow

The first three articles in this edition show what can happen when one moves against the flow of the ways things are done, and thought about. It is important to note that conscious business is not just about safety and protection, or about the lower tiers of [Maslow's hierarchy of needs](#). Instead, there are important implications for innovation, solving problems, building confidence, self-development and potentially achieving that goal of building a better world.

The first piece, *The emergence of the Integrative Law Movement*, is by **J Kim Wright**. Kim is a US lawyer. Here she presents a very personal account of what brought her to law and the destructive conflict between people, both within the profession and in how clients were advised to solve their problems. Conflict which initially led her to turn her back on the profession.

She discovered an alternative collaborative and integrative way of practising law that seemed a more effective and ethical way for lawyers to make a positive impact.

This is one facet to her paper; the other has relevance beyond the field of law. Here Kim points to the development of a consciousness that law, as practised in the US, needs to be 'done' differently.

Here pockets of awareness develop separately and gather at their own pace and critical mass. Different norms and sources of enthusiasm within the profession were seen to develop, all addressing a different and more integrative way of practice. This highly emergent process is still underway and gathering pace.

And there is increasingly a sense that these separate ways of working are starting to merge; on the one hand this leads to greater voice and critical mass to affect more change, but on the other there is a tension as different values and ways of working rub up against each other. There are important insights as to how the conscious business (capitalism) movement on the larger stage could develop, gather pace and how internal pressures may come to affect this.

As CEO of Propellernet, **Jack Hubbard** explores consciousness in *Extreme innovations in employee welfare* from the perspective of being a highly commercial and successful entrepreneur in the dynamic digital world. For Jack the subject is less about reflecting on self and more about action. In dealing with the realities of business he describes innovative ways, and ways that continue to evolve, of linking the success of the organisation to those who work with him.

For Jack the subject is most vividly brought to life in making people's dreams come true. Developing a joint sense of curiosity, creativity and adaptability are critical if the organisation is to innovate and address customers' shifting needs; and if those needs are met the rewards are felt by the organisation and its staff alike. This is a virtuous circle that is often broken, as Jack describes, by accountants who have a tendency to see people as 'unpredictable liabilities.' Dreams reintroduce the value of liability.

Dick Davies spent many years working for a large multinational computer manufacturer based in the US. In *Leadership in the workplace: three precepts that will revolutionise work* he describes the development of a project whose benefits were sensed but were difficult to pin down. In the account of the work between his company and another multinational in a different sector, Dick points to the development of trust and ways of working and of being conscious of the interconnected web of possibilities.

The confidence of the parties was developed to enable the next tentative step to be made, not with empty promises of certainty, but with awareness of how the group was working together. This, like Jack Hubbard's piece, grounds us in emotional connection as well as in logic. In paying attention to these processes, Dick offers an additional way that organisations can work, or at least become able openly to recognise that these processes exist and have value.

All three of these contributions have in common the way emerging opportunities, conversations and contexts developed and how these were responded to in the moment. There was little by way of the application of pre-given thought or schema. All three experiences, in different ways, communicated a contagious clarity and built confidence that led to further effective action. All - some more overtly, some perhaps less so - leveraged the power of emotion and relationships to build their success.

Part of our premise is that insufficient attention is paid to the importance of these qualities, and to the abilities needed to work with them.

One characteristic that is important to notice is that consciousness enables new connections to be made between people, thus giving careful voice to issues of emotion, rationality and intuition. We can also integrate the arts and science, the physical and mental, order and disorder.

Changing ourselves

The next three pieces build on the clues given by Kim, Jack and Dick, and explore these processes in more detail.

Consciousness in business has the potential to enable vital movements of thought, to see things differently; or, as we saw in the case of Flatland, to see a flat line as a sphere. The articles all share one thing in common: how the views of the authors and those around them made a shift that has resulted in different action.



Picture by Jamie Pyper

Gandhi urged us '... to be the change we wish to see in the world'.

Paul Levy's article, *Developing a conscious small business: an emerging view*, focuses on start-up businesses and fledgling entrepreneurs. Without established structures, histories and cultures, new organisations work differently and it is this that Paul addresses in a novel approach to action learning. Here he explores his experience of running a more open approach to action learning that involves people from small organisations coming along to 'drop in sessions' with different but like-minded people. Different in the sense of companies, markets, customers, but like-minded in the challenges participants face as start-ups and in the interests they share in becoming conscious businesses.

Like Kim, Paul also addresses the nature of a wider community that comes to emerge and how this has a broader and greater impact than had been envisaged.

Alison Donaldson offers us another approach in developing consciousness; that of using narrative to capture the essence of people's experience of working together over a long

periods of time. In *Learning from experience: why history matters in organisational life* she offers this as an additional and alternative way by which we can think of organisations. Our usual frame is one of rationality, logic and managerialism but this hides much of what happened in organisations as people make sense of what they do.

Alison draws on a case study spanning several years that involved the writing and tracking narratives of important events in a large UK-based charity. It is in this process that people can develop their awareness as to how things have come to be as they are - this means taking our experience seriously. Alison prompts us to notice taken-for-granted assumptions that we may otherwise not be aware of.

The enormity of change can lead to paralysis. This is how **Patrick Crawford** felt in realising the challenges ahead for us all when it comes to climate change. It is a paralysis we can also sometimes sense in societies, governments and perhaps in ourselves as individuals. This is the subject of *Climate Change from a Personal Perspective*.

With this challenge in mind Patrick, along with others, set about bringing about change, by introducing a local currency in a UK town. Its aims centred on supporting the local economy and producers and reducing the amount of carbon dioxide emitted to the atmosphere.

The 'act of action' had a different effect from the stick that is often wielded by distant people keen on advocacy and rhetoric - an approach that too often leaves people feeling beaten and powerless. In this process Patrick and his colleagues started to enable concrete change, but there were other and perhaps more important benefits too.

In a way that perhaps defied prediction Patrick became immersed in a greater shared concern. This led to further action and thought about climate change. This new consciousness re-informs his work with a much larger initiative at the other end of the scale - working with the Global 500 - the 500 biggest businesses in the world - on their awareness of climate.

In this article Patrick reconciles the vast, almost untouchable agenda of climate change, with local action that makes a difference, and particularly with an individual's - his own - sensemaking of this. We all have power; Patrick has chosen to use his to facilitate action and connections that brings about reflective thought and helped him create his own context for further development and change.

Conscious Business, Conscious Capitalism and beyond

There is, of course, a broader conversation going on beyond the rather small world we are discussing here. In early 2013 the two of us (Rob and Pete) were invited to a small lunch gathering with Raj Sisodia. Raj is the co-author, along with the Whole Foods Market CEO and great advocate of conscious business [John Mackey](#), of a book called *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business* (Mackey & Sisodia, 2013). Eight or nine of us sat down to lunch in a small London Club in Pimlico. Raj gave us a clear and polished definition of Conscious Capitalism and gave an overview of his research into the subject.

Future gazers and social analysts like Raj point to the big underpinning trends: an ageing population - a good thing in terms of consciousness, perhaps - the feminisation of the workforce and maybe even the development of new technologies.

From Raj and others you'll also find [evidence](#) to show that companies that follow a broadly conscious approach outperform their competitors in the **long-term**. Another important source in terms of behaviour in business is Fred Kofman (2006). In both you will see perspectives of the micro (the personal) and the macro (the organisational) at work.

Hidden in both these approaches are suggestions that there is more to conscious capitalism (or conscious business in the UK) than the confident rhetoric might imply. John Mackey, a highly successful businessman, seems to be a sensitive, rounded human being. We would not claim to know him well but our sense is that Conscious Capitalism - the movement - is as much born from the power of human [vulnerability](#), emotion and intuition as it is from business plans, logic and the 'rational'.

Behind it, if you look, you may also find the world of Ken Wilber, Clare Graves and others.

And of course beyond Conscious Business and Conscious Capitalism there is a whole world of [related initiatives](#). These range from meditation to government policy, from new ways of thinking about money, to the learning economy and employee ownership. These are all part of a wider trend towards improving the way business is done. Some of these may be conscious, some less so.

We believe the trends Raj identified are playing out under many other labels.

But what is Conscious Business - am I any the wiser?

So, after all this, maybe we should again return to the question of what is conscious business? We have offered some different thoughts and have invited you to draw your own conclusions based upon your experience and context. But all of us have to take ownership for what the world means and what we intend to do in it.

If you look you will find communities of practice, places where you can learn and develop your skills and engage in conversations that will sustain you. Pete started one with one of his business partners, **Jamie Pyper**. It is called [Conscious Business UK](#) and is described in *Conscious Business in Action*. You are very welcome to come along.

We hope that we have built some shared understanding between you as the reader, the authors and us as guest editors to take the next meaningful steps. These steps have no certainty or guarantee of success but are an important opportunity for us all. We hope they help in the process of raising consciousness in business. The conversations that we hope to have stimulated here will continue in the Spring 2014 edition of *e-O&P* - 'Conscious Business Part 2.'

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And finally to Alison, Dick, Jack, Kim, Patrick, and Paul who gave up their time to share their thoughts with us.

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Kofman, F. (2006) *Conscious Business - How to Build Values Through Values*. Boulder: Sounds True Inc.

Mackey, J. and Sisodia, R. (2013) *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business*, Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

Suggested reading

- [Beyond the Corporation: Humanity Working by David Erdal](#)
- [Betterness by Umair Haque](#)
- [Culture Shock by Will McInnes](#)
- [Employees First Customers Second by Vineet Nayar](#)
- [The Seven Day Weekend by Ricardo Semler](#)
- [The Art of Happiness at Work by the Dalai Lama](#)
- [Immunity to Change by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey](#)
- [On Becoming a Person by Carl Rogers](#)
- [The Subtleties and the Exploits of Mulla Nasrudin: Two Volumes in One](#)

About the guest editors

Pete Burden

For more than 30 years, Pete has worked in many businesses in several industries, mainly those severely disrupted by social change and technology.

Several successful, innovative, and sometimes ground-breaking groups and organisations have emerged.

He founded Conscious Business UK, a fledgling community-run organisation that helps spread experience of Conscious Business practice in the UK.

He is also a founding partner of CBP, a business consultancy which works with purpose-led, entrepreneurial businesses on strategy, structure, culture and leadership.

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After 14 years in the NHS, latterly in strategic change, and a variety of consultancy roles, Rob 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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The cover picture

As with the traffic jams in the picture, many in the business world trundle along following the fads and trends created by those immediately ahead. This in turn may develop into a lack of awareness of how these practices are affecting them, their colleagues and stakeholders. The effects are felt both now and have implications for the future.

As we see with the cyclist, being aware of their own practice and attitudes means conscious people and organisations can hold themselves and others to account, and be more aware of what is happening around them in the moment.

They are agile, able to weave their way through the congestion of 'the ways things are done around here' and to produce results that are sustainable; to be profitable, and to reduce harm now and in the future.

Photo by: D.J Clark