

# A new global ethic

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How leaders who align personal purpose with organisational mission and societal need can have a positive impact on the world



## Abstract

Purpose	This paper explores the potential for business leaders to do good in a way that is fully integrated with their organizational objectives and their personal purpose. In light of major issues confronting society, including environmental fragility, financial vulnerability and the reduced influence of traditional institutions, this paper proposes the need for a new global ethic, and suggests that leaders of global enterprises have a particular opportunity to make a profound difference in fostering such an ethic. It explains what such an ethic could look like, and the organizational and personal competencies required for ethical leadership.
Approach	This paper takes the human person as a starting point for addressing major challenges, rather than the challenge itself, builds on research by contemporary commentators on social trends, and draws on examples of business leaders who demonstrate the required competencies for a new global ethic
Findings	The paper identifies the three key elements that are crucial for effective leadership: to master the art of being human, and to master the art of running a successful enterprise, while becoming a servant to society by fostering a new global ethic within their sphere of influence
Value	The paper identifies the emerging stakeholder concern for profit driven firms to become purpose driven, and shows how leaders who align personal purpose with organisational mission and societal need, can have a positive impact on the world and foster a new global ethic

## Contents

1	Introduction	5
2	Can we build a better world?	6
3	An interconnected world requires whole systems thought and action	7
4	Global business and a new global ethic	8
5	A new global ethic	9
5.1	Hallmarks of a new global ethic	9
5.1.1	Sustainable	9
5.1.2	Timeless Human Values	9
5.1.3	Whole systems thinking	10
6	The opportunity for business leaders	12
7	Hallmarks of new global leaders	14
7.1	Self mastery	14
7.2	Globally aware	14
7.3	Strength of Character	15
7.4	Societal involvement	15
8	Conclusion: The world needs moral leaders	16
9	References	17

# 1 Introduction

Great leaders of tomorrow will excel at the dual task of building successful enterprises and leveraging their success to make a positive impact on the wider societal enterprise, or system, of which they are a part. Leaders will recognise not only the impact they can have on their institution, but the opportunity and responsibility they have across national borders, faiths, and cultures to encourage a new societal ethic based on timeless human values.

Institutions focused purely on their own success and which do not recognise the system in which they operate will ultimately fail. The tangled web of deep interconnections in a complex world can destabilize business and governments in an instant. Great leaders require a vision for both the institution and the system, to ensure both are successful by every human and market measure. Global businesses are better placed than any other institution to make the change and impact that is required. And the leaders of those businesses have potential to effect this change. There is an overwhelming imperative for leaders with courage who will engage with the great issues of our age and help foster a better, more human, future. Such a future would enhance our effectiveness as stewards of the earth and its resources.

The extent of success enjoyed by leaders in the future will be determined by the alignment of their own values and purpose with organizational culture and mission, and placing these at the service of societal wellbeing.

Three tasks face global leaders:

- mastering the art of being human,
- mastering the art of institutional leadership, and
- serving the needs of the world at their point of influence

Whereas most searching for answers to the major challenges before us start with 'solving a problem', this paper proposes starting from the perspective of the human person, and our shared humanity, not those things that divide us.

A person is an entity possessing relational capability – to themselves, to others, to the world and to the transcendent. As a relational being we are members of one large human family, with much in common with even the most dispersed members of this family. From this sense of shared humanity we can then construct a way of relating to one another and to the world we inhabit.

## 2 Can we build a better world?

Although history is fraught with moments and stories of conflict, struggle and inhumanity, large numbers of the current population have enjoyed, until recently, a relatively stable world where much was taken for granted and much was provided. The sense of community, belonging, and meaning that came from membership of trustworthy institutions is fresh in the memory. These institutions, including family and extended family, local and national communities, ethical corporations, and cultural and religious movements, provided the context and framework in which we could live effective human lives. This provided a sense of security, and general confidence that we could get on with our lives with trust in the present and firm hope for the future.

Environmental fragility, financial vulnerability, the privatisation of war, and a raft of complex global issues have unsettled us and introduced a constant hum of low-level anxiety that pervades our lives, with an associated set of questions engaging our mind and heart.

- Who can we now trust?
- Who can we look to for leadership?
- How can we find meaning and purpose?
- How do we make sense of all that is happening?
- Is there a better way of thinking and acting?
- What type of world do we want tomorrow?
- How do we want to live our lives?
- How do we want to relate to one another?

The way we respond to and answer questions like these will have a profound effect on the world of tomorrow, and the legacy we leave for future generations. We are living in “one of the most plastic moments in world history” (Mahbubani, 2008) where the choices we make will create a very different future. Regardless of how bad things appear to be, or what forces seem to be arraigned against us, it is crucial that we choose wisely.

### 3 An interconnected world requires whole systems thought and action

The complexity and deep interconnections of the modern world accelerate leverage, allowing events that may have taken years to filter through systems in the past to now cascade through, bringing down bastions of business and society overnight.

The Global Financial Crisis demonstrated this in stark relief. Personal, corporate and political self-interest, short-sightedness and narrow vision have left us well short of our dreams and aspirations, and left many grasping and searching for what now lies beyond their reach.

I recall meeting with Merrill Lynch executives one Friday afternoon to discuss a business opportunity. No one in that room would have entertained the idea that within a few short days the thundering herd would be halted, cowed and beaten. Lehmann Brothers disappeared over a weekend. Because of complex interconnections between businesses and economies, these geographically removed events had global consequences, hammering national economies, battering businesses, and damaging employees, customers, and shareholders. In hours. Not months or years.

"... despite the unprecedented sophistication of our institutions and instruments, Planet Finance remains as vulnerable as ever to crises." (Ferguson, 2008) Three constants contribute to this vulnerability (Ferguson, 2008):

- the uncertainty and unpredictability of the future,
- the irrationality of human behaviour and fallibility of human thinking, and
- the impact of evolutionary social forces on an economy, leading to an organizational extinction rate in the order of 10% per year

These three factors impact every domain of life, not just the financial arena, and indicate the need for new ways of thinking and acting.

We would be hard pressed to identify any sector that would not benefit from fresh thinking or in which we could not envisage a better way, whether it concerns international relations, the environment, healthcare, education, welfare, energy and water distribution, business, trade, ... All of these are part of the global system we inhabit, and hence require global thinking and global solutions.

## 4 Global business and a new global ethic

Who is best placed to make the biggest difference?

Traditional institutions, such as organised religion and elected governments, have lost much of their authority, creating a moral vacuum in a world that wants moral leadership. But who can take up the banner? Who has the authority, and from what do they derive that authority?

The global corporation is perhaps the one remaining institution that has a global reach, and as such is well placed to be an influential agent for positive societal change.

- It operates across cultures and borders, with a focus on delivering outcomes that benefit all stakeholders.
- Outcomes must be practical, not theoretical, as they are immediately tested against the bottom line
- Business models are adaptable in order to survive. A good business is always asking how it needs to change, grow, develop in order to remain competitive and generate a return for shareholders

Ethical corporations, guided by a new global ethic, don't seek to invade a country, dominate a people, alienate social groups, or impose their will. Firms which are driven by profit at the expense of people or the environment, which seek dominance at all costs, are living by a discredited ethic – and the people who lead such firms put their own reputation and legacy at risk.

Even firms which enjoy great success eventually fail (Ferguson, 2008) and hence should not be wedded to institutional survival, but rather societal legacy. An organization needs to understand its total footprint across environmental, societal, political, human and financial domains. Only those who recognise their place in the wider system appear to create corporations that endure through the generations.

Who is building organizations that have a lifecycle beyond tomorrow? Not a five year business plan, as important as that is, but a better world for those who follow many generations hence? Companies that are thinking from the perspective of their societal impact are already changing the world. Sam Walton built his business on a societal idea – helping the people who lived in rural America to enjoy a similar quality of life as those who lived in the cities. (Scott, 2005)

Lee Scott, the former CEO of Wal-Mart, recognized the unique positive societal impact Wal-Mart could have because of its sheer size. Reflecting on the way people in the firm helped out during Hurricane Katrina, he posed a crucial question:

“What would it take for Wal-Mart to be that company, at our best, all the time? What if we used our size and resources to make this country and this earth an even better place for all of us: customers, Associates, our children, and generations unborn? What would that mean? Could we do it? Is this consistent with our business model? What if the very things that many people criticize us for – our size and reach – became a trusted friend and ally to all?” (Scott, 2005)

This thinking led him to propose significant aspirational goals for Wal-Mart with respect to the environment, product sourcing, healthcare, wages, community involvement and diversity (Scott, 2005). The fact that Scott, and Wal-Mart, were criticized about employee relations, putting profits before people, and their genuine commitment to environmental change, highlights the complexities of operating at a global level and having integrity across all domains. Rather than dismiss the dreams as too hard, business leaders have the same opportunity to make a difference by setting aspirational targets.

## 5 A new global ethic

We need a new way of thinking and acting at a global level - a new global ethic for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Perhaps a local ethic would suffice? If we treat one another with respect, conduct business in an ethical way, and focus on deeper purpose and meaning rather than just profit, while taking account of our impact on subsequent generations, we will make a positive contribution to the world. Undoubtedly local action has global impact.

The increasing complexities, ambiguities and interconnections of 21<sup>st</sup> century life mean that we must think *and* act globally, while living locally. It is no longer sufficient to just act local and think global.

To embrace a new global ethic requires adopting a new perspective from which to view our world, our institutions, our relationships and ourselves, in the stream of timeless human values, recognizing our responsibility to the planet, our contemporaries, and the generations who come after us. This perspective recognizes we do not exist in isolation, either as people, nations or institutions, and cannot ignore the impact of our actions on others. Although new, it draws much from the richness of history and tradition.

### 5.1 Hallmarks of a new global ethic

In response to the prevailing ethic of greed and self-interest, which has failed to deliver the world to which we aspire, a new global ethic would include a number of elements:

#### 5.1.1 Sustainable

With our focus on the environmental we can lose sight of the wider dimension of sustainability. "Business is a matter of human service" says Merril J Fernando, the founder of Dilmah Tea, recognizing the deep human links between business and the world ([www.dilmahtea.com](http://www.dilmahtea.com)). An ethic of sustainability includes:

- Talent sustainability, moving beyond attraction, retention and development of talent to create environments and practices that refresh and enhance people for a long and healthy life;
- Organizational sustainability, recognizing that the corporation is part of a wider societal system, and that the long term good of the institution depends on having a successful financial enterprise that has a positive impact on the wider societal system;
- Social sustainability, acknowledging that each person is part of a social network, no matter how disparate or dispersed, and that institutions need to contribute to the preservation rather than disintegration of these networks at a local, national and global level. Businesses operating by a new global ethic assess the impact of their decisions and actions across all sets of human relationships, being very careful to ensure what they do contributes to greater societal well being.
- Global sustainability recognizes that we have a footprint that extends across the environment, the community of nations, and which reaches down through successive generations.

#### 5.1.2 Timeless Human Values

There are a set of universally accepted ethical values which contribute to societal wellbeing, including fairness, honesty, trust, respect for human life, love, freedom, tolerance. (Kidder, 1995). Long term business success depends on practicing these values (Senge, 2008). Straddling these values are questions about truth, beauty and goodness, which go to the heart of what it means to be human.

Business and people operating by a new global ethic take the time to ask questions such as:

- What is the truth of the matter? What are the facts? Have these been disclosed or discussed?
- What is there to appreciate/enjoy/celebrate in this situation or with this person?
- What is the right thing to do, the right way to act?
- Is this action fair for all involved?
- Are we being honest here, or is something being covered up?
- Are we asking all the questions, or are there particular questions being avoided?
- What are we doing to foster and release human potential and help people live a fully human life?
- Are we doing anything (like low pay or long hours, for example) which detracts from people being able to live a fully human life?
- What are we doing that demonstrates genuine care and compassion for the people we touch through our organization?
- Do we treat people as individuals with hopes and dreams, talents and skills, or as a unit of economic production?
- Are we doing anything that deprives people of freedom, including freedom of choice, and the opportunity to express opinions without fear?
- Are we genuinely tolerant of others point of view, even when it diverges from ours?

It is only when we ask questions such as these that we can appreciate the richness that exists, understand reality, and gain insight into the validity of our actions. And these questions must be asked in a systemic context, going beyond our immediate concern and appreciating the bigger picture and longer time frame, appreciating the breadth and depth of the human project. As we ask such questions we gain a capacity to act in ever better ways, become better people, and contribute to a better world.

### 5.1.3 Whole systems thinking

A new global ethic recognizes that just as individuals do not exist in isolation, neither do corporations exist in isolation. They exist as a part of a larger system and participation in this system should inform their thinking, even if it has negative short term consequences.

An environmental example demonstrates the point. As we face increasing water shortages, it is very easy - and completely understandable - for a local farmer, factory or city to consume water for their own use and survival, while at the same time depriving those downstream from adequate flows of freshwater. Although we recognise the complexities of the problem, we readily acknowledge the local person, business or nation should not act with disregard for other parts of the system, as sooner or later they will pay a greater price. Downstream communities could become aggressive towards those upstream. Whole communities of environmental refugees could move to where there is greater water, hence increasing social unrest and further decreasing water available for distribution. Downstream businesses could restrict supply of goods or services to upstream businesses to gain leverage towards a solution. It is clearly in the interests of upstream communities to act with the best interests of the whole river system. Local users need to appreciate they are part of a

wider system and appreciate the impact of their actions on others who may be far removed geographically and generationally.

Acting purely for the interests of shareholders, customers and staff – albeit good and correct - with disregard for the wider range of societal stakeholders can ultimately undermine even the best run business. Delivering good financial results and caring for staff, customers and suppliers, were sufficient until recently, and will continue to be sufficient for firms who are satisfied with the status quo. But those firms will find they lose staff, customers and market share, and are operating on an unsustainable paradigm. New business models that incorporate societal well being will emerge and prosper. “In the complex world of mounting social and environmental stresses ... more and more large corporations are starting to realize that their financial bottom line is too limited a concept to assure long term survival and vitality” (Senge, 2008)

Business does not exist in isolation from a wider societal system, and decisions made and actions taken have far reaching consequences beyond the business and beyond the moment. They impact people’s lives for successive generations.

Production and distribution of food is another example. The farm gate to the kitchen table is one part of the process: farmers grow crops which manufacturers turn into consumable products, wholesalers and retailers package and distribute to market and ultimately to end users. The wider system includes the environment - both as it impacts production and as it is impacted by distribution and the disposal of packaging and products used in production - financial systems, political systems that subsidise local producers, the poor who lack access to food, ...

Although each part of each system can be run ethically, failing to appreciate the wider interconnected systems can have a negative impact on someone else far removed. If a corn farmer could make more money selling to ethanol producers, would that not be a reasonable action for that farmer in caring for the family and ensuring long term survival? If ethanol use in fuel lowered our impact on the environment would that not be a reasonable action? If corn became too expensive as a food product, and the amount available for food was in short supply, would it still be reasonable to use corn products in ethanol without finding some sort of balance and taking into account the wider systemic impact of actions?

We need a new global ethic that thinks systemically and responds to questions about sustainability for people, organizations, society, in the context of timeless human values. Leading organizations and world class leaders will embrace the opportunities they have to influence societal change to create a better planet and better human relationships.

Although helping the environment is a pressing example of why we need such an ethic, what we require is much bigger than environmental sustainability. We need an ethic that includes a view on resources, community, and future generations.

## 6 The opportunity for business leaders

Every institution has a level of responsibility to the society in which it resides, whether the corner store in the local village, or corporations with a global footprint. At one level that responsibility is to be a good corporate citizen, and to not damage people, the community or the environment. But at another level the corporation, and in particular the global corporation, can have an impact on society that springs from the deep interconnection between the purpose of the organization, the purpose of its leader, and the needs of the society they inhabit.

There is no shortage of societal challenges that a motivated, purpose driven leader, with the support of their Board and organization, could positively influence – particularly in areas beyond the reach or capability of charities. A plethora of not for profits do very good work on issues like poverty, food, water, energy, medical care, the environment, and a whole raft of issues. But purpose driven leaders can touch major systemic challenges like effective infrastructure, equality of women, fair pay, trade, cultural and racial harmony, global conflict, cross border worker mobility, international tax issues, access to education, technology and medicine, global financial systems. The list is endless, limited only by the imagination of those who take the time to look beyond the institution and see the wider community of which they are a part.

A simple example may serve to demonstrate this concept. In December 1939 Oskar Schindler bought an enamel factory and arranged with local SS authorities for the provision of cheap Jewish labor. After the liquidation of the Jewish ghetto in 1943, and the removal of Jews to the concentration camps, Schindler's workers travelled from the camp to his factory each day. He then became aware of the atrocities being committed.

But what made this man, who was described as a "cynical, greedy exploiter of slave workers during the Second World War, a black-marketeer, gambler, member of the Nazi party eternally on the lookout for profit, an alcoholic playboy and shameless womanizer of the worst sort" (oskarschindler.com), leverage his financial enterprise for societal impact?

"I hated the brutality, the sadism, and the insanity of Nazism. I just couldn't stand by and see people destroyed. I did what I could, what I had to do, *what my conscience told me I must do*. That's all there is to it. Really, nothing more." (oskarschindler.com, italics mine)

Schindler responded at the level of shared humanity, recognizing that it was fundamentally wrong to 'destroy' one another, and then leveraged his position as the leader of the business to make a difference in the lives of so many.

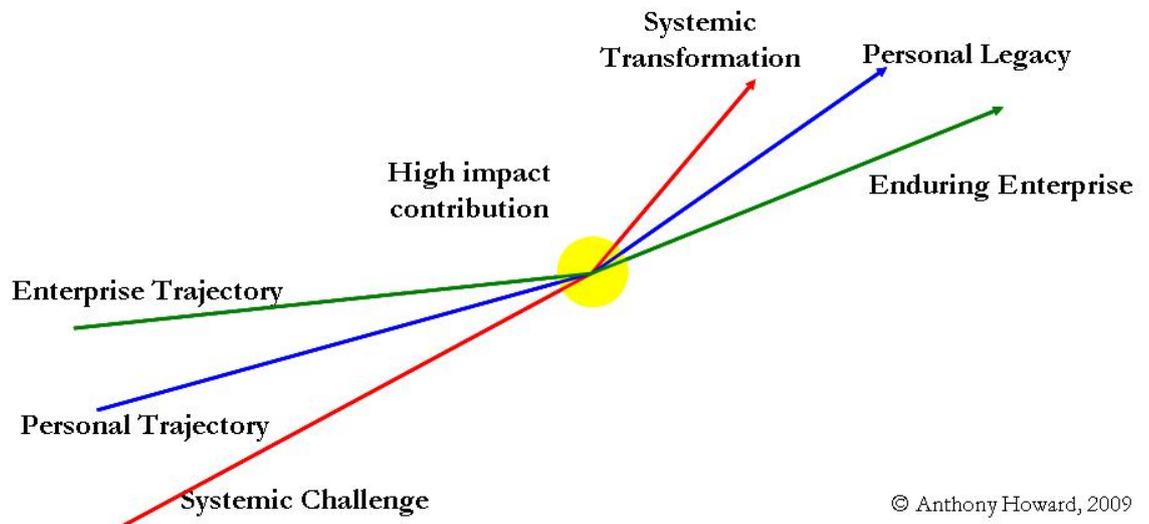
It is not only possible, but essential, to run a successful financial enterprise and have a positive societal impact. The reputational benefits gained from positive action, the attraction this creates to the brand for customers, staff, suppliers and associated stakeholders, combined with the deep spiritual and emotional comfort of serving a greater purpose, in themselves create a compelling reason to act. As people become more concerned, and more aware, of the actions of companies and their executives, hard hitting grass roots campaigns will be mounted against those who fail in their societal obligations. It would be far better for leaders to get on the front foot and have a positive impact, because it is the right thing to do, rather than in response to activism or to manage reputational risk. .

A new global ethic creates a particular moral imperative for those in positions of corporate leadership. Business leaders who operate by a new global ethic, embracing a societal issue that transcends themselves and their organization, will drive change that echoes through history. No longer is it sufficient to work for purely institutional goals such as profit, market dominance and stakeholder return. The failures in the financial system, with their consequent impact on the societal system,

give perhaps the clearest example of the deep interconnections that exist between business and society and hence the opportunity that exists for business leaders to embrace, rather than avoid, societal leadership.

“What meaningful contribution can I make to the world in which I belong?” is perhaps the most compelling question of our age. We cannot fully exist without understanding this purpose. Finding the answer to this question shapes our choices. And for business leaders it is more compelling and carries greater societal significance. Business leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have an opportunity to define their time, in the same way that great religious, political or military leaders did in the past.

The focus of great business leaders needs to be bigger than the here and now, bigger than the institution, towards building a better world, not just a better business. And this is done by aligning one’s personal purpose, corporate mission, and societal challenge. Finding this alignment creates an impact point that leverages the contribution of individuals and the enterprise of which they are a part to transform wider societal systems, as shown in Fig 1.



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Fig 1.

## 7 Hallmarks of new global leaders

Global leaders operating by a new global ethic will define themselves in a number of important ways. In addition to mastering the art of business, creating sustainable enterprises which operate by timeless values and employing whole systems, they will exhibit a number of personal traits:

### 7.1 Self mastery

The work of leadership starts from within. Many people are appointed to positions of leadership, but those who are recognized as leaders do so because the light of leadership shines from within.

Any leader must firstly master themselves before assuming a role of leadership over others. Leaders who have done this hard work - which is never ending - are a delight and privilege to follow.

Personal mastery involves more than a deep sense of self awareness, recognizing one's strengths and weaknesses. It involves 'mastery' over oneself and our deep seated desires to act for pleasure and self-interest. As humans we always act for what is perceived to be good – and that is where the challenge lies: making a distinction between what we perceive to be good, and what is actually good. Real clarity about this is the result of years of hard personal work and self reflection.

A child, for example, perceives some foods as being good for them, and others bad, and sometimes lacks control over how much they eat of what they enjoy, such as ice-cream or cakes. Responsible parents recognise the need to balance enjoyment and health, and teach the child what is actually good for them, and to exercise restraint around what they eat. Over time the person begins to appreciate what is truly good for them, and eats more wisely. The current obesity epidemic provides ample evidence that some people have not learnt self-control with regard to food. It is a lifelong journey to understand our deeper desires and tendencies, and become master not just over what we eat, but the full range of human emotions, desires, and characteristics. And even at the end of a life of constant reflection and learning, we could still find ways for further growth and development.

The effort to learn what is true, good, and beautiful is a life long work. Self reflection alone is insufficient, as we need some form of guidance to help us choose more wisely. This guidance can come in the form of parents and authority figures, friends, mentors, wise guides, ... One of the reasons athletes benefit from having a coach is because they cannot see themselves in action. Although athletes have a mental model in mind of their movement, only the external observer can add the necessary objectivity to provide deeper understanding and guidance.

The same is true for learning about ourselves. We need to put ourselves in situations and with people who can provide new insights that replace more limited insights, comment that breaks off the harsh edges, and learning that opens whole new worlds.

People who demonstrate self-mastery also demonstrate a high degree of integration of their physical, spiritual, moral and emotional dimensions – a sound foundation for leadership.

### 7.2 Globally aware

Leaders operating by a new global ethic of sustainability, whole system thinking, and timeless human value, need to develop their awareness and consciousness of the world, of cultures, nations and businesses. This task cannot be delegated, or gleaned only from reading. Real appreciation is gained from moving outside one's comfort zone, visiting places that are not on our normal radar, looking at businesses in quite different industries, talking to people who are not part of our

traditional network. Someone somewhere is doing something that will impact our world and your business in the near future. Globally aware business leaders spend at least two weeks each year getting out and seeing the future, expanding their thinking. Bankers could visit brewers. Miners could visit retailers. Not for profit CEOs could spend time with technology entrepreneurs. The list is endless and only limited by imagination. Company Boards should insist that the CEO spends time away from the business building global awareness. Any CEO who resists this is showing evidence of a limited perspective and a closed mind.

### 7.3 Strength of Character

Great leadership is built on strength of character, which is exhibited by a set of good habits that would be helpful for others to emulate. These include honesty, meaning the person is trustworthy; integrity, which means what they do matches what they say; and authenticity which means their feelings, values and purpose are in alignment with their actions. In addition they demonstrate traits such as resilience, courage and generosity.

### 7.4 Societal involvement

Leaders operating by a new global ethic recognise that it is not up to someone else to act, and that as a business leader they act as a catalyst and already make an impact – for better or worse. Hence they make wise choices about where they can have the greatest impact and align themselves with influential agencies, whether from media, think tanks, political parties, regional or global forums, universities, not for profits or religious groups, to support them in this work.

Involvement will be shaped by answers to the following questions:

- What is my sphere of influence?
- What is the societal need that I will embrace?
- How will I lift my level of thinking to that required to answer the challenge?

## 8 Conclusion: The world needs moral leaders

In a speech to students at the University of Capetown Robert Kennedy observed that a "great burden of responsibility is thrust upon this generation" (Kennedy, 1966). He continued with one of his most quoted phrases. " those with the courage to enter the moral conflict will find themselves with companions in every corner of the world" (Kennedy, 1966)

Our parents and grandparents described Communism and the Vietnam War as moral conflicts. Subsequent generations have latched onto other issues that have the potential to damage the world if poor choices are made. Climate change is seen by some as perhaps the biggest moral conflict of our age.

But is it? What are some of the major moral conflicts confronting us today that business leaders, operating by a new global ethic, could impact for the better?

- What kind of world do we want to both live in and leave for our children?
- How do we view work, and the people who do the work?
- How do we view our fellow global citizens, while respecting them as members of particular faiths, cultures and nationalities?
- Should quality of life come before quantity of profit?
- How much is reasonable profit?
- How do we peacefully integrate complex, opposing cultures and social worlds?
- How do we ensure equitable distribution of profit, and recognise and reward all workers appropriately, avoiding stratospheric salary packages? Which business leaders will have the courage to step up and say "we are paid too much?" *and* work to change remuneration practices?
- How do we ensure people are treated as human beings with inalienable rights, rather than as economic assets to be used for productive outcomes?
- How can we embrace systemic life-cycle thinking in the provision and costing of goods and services?

Moral leaders engage with moral conflict, within themselves, their society and their world. They do not stand back and let others face the big challenges. Business leaders can play a vital role in these issues, being singularly well placed to have significant impact for good. They can stand idly by and allow others to agitate for change, however those who step up and engage with these issues will create an enduring legacy for themselves and their firms.

Today's societal challenges ask for business leaders of courage and conviction to master the art of being human, and to master the art of running a successful enterprise, while becoming a servant to society by fostering a new global ethic within their sphere of influence.

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