

Business as a Vocation

Sir Mark Moody-Stuart

The honest delivery of sound-quality goods and services in exchange for money is an essential part of any society and can be a vocation, depending on the approach to the task, and the values that shape how it is done. Businesses can develop civilised communication with customers and between workers of all sorts, as well as trustful relations, contractual or otherwise, across religious, ethnic and national boundaries. Where governments deviate from accepted norms of behaviour, cooperative inter-business relations provide an alternative to an isolationist and exclusionary sanctions regime. Responsible business activities build a private sector not dependent on government; sanctions destroy this private sector and concentrate economic power in the government and its cronies. Business engaged in such efforts should subscribe to principles such as those of the UN Global Compact and report openly on how the principles are applied. The application of such standards demonstrates in practice that eschewing corruption and establishing sound work practices are in fact good business, leading to change.

- Vocation
- Sanctions
- UN Global Compact
- Corruption
- Human rights
- Complicity
- UN Guiding Principles
- Religion

WHEN PEOPLE SPEAK OF A vocation, depending on their own inclinations, they think of it as a religious calling or as a calling to serve. Thus the medical professions are generally seen as vocational occupations in spite of the manifest failures of some members of the group. An artist or craftsman is often considered to have a vocation. I have been present at discussions between my wife and two nationally known politicians of

opposing parties who both, very sincerely and believably, said that for them politics is a vocation. Working in the 'voluntary sector' is also often considered a vocation, although it most commonly involves employment in an enterprise delivering services financed by grants or donations from governments, foundations, individuals or indeed sometimes corporations. In my book I included a chapter on 'The business of not-for-profits' which looks at the various business models of not-for-profit

enterprises, not in any pejorative or critical sense, but to encourage business people, through better understanding of the financial and marketing imperatives of not-for-profit enterprises, to learn to collaborate with them. Such collaboration is important because without the different sectors of society cooperating we will not be able to make progress on many of the important issues of the world.

Why then is it that we seldom think of business as a vocation? Indeed we business people seldom speak of it as such ourselves. A suspicion of and lack of trust in business predates recent scandals, although it may well have been reinforced by them. Of course there are many examples of failure and moral turpitude in business, but I doubt that the incidence of human failing and criminality varies statistically much across various walks of life considered as a whole, from priests through tax collectors, politicians, car salesmen, doctors or not-for-profit activists. Be that as it may, I consider that a person could well be said to have a vocation to deliver honestly to others in exchange for money sound-quality goods and services—from software to heavy engineering and construction, or dare I say it, banking and financial services. The difference lies more in how you do the job, and the values that shape how you do it, than in the nature of the job itself.

When I was a teenager wishing to follow in my father's footsteps as a sugar planter, he advised me against it and told me to 'go and do something else useful'. I became a geologist and regarded applying those skills commercially as a vocation, as much as if I had continued in academia. I have always considered the provision of economical and reliable energy to society as a thoroughly worthwhile task; the fact that in the last 20 years or so we have come to realise that burning fossil fuels has an effect on climate is a challenge to be addressed. We have to meet this challenge while also fulfilling the essential task of

maintaining the reliable energy supplies which are vital for equitable human development and indeed for feeding the growing human population.

I believe that there is another vocational element in the practice of business and that is communication across religious, ethnic and national boundaries. Often this is quite mundane and takes the form of civilised communication with customers or fellow workers of all sorts, as well as building sound, balanced and trustful relations, contractual or otherwise, between businesses. When these communications and relationships work they are a source of profound daily satisfaction which has nothing to do with the money which changes hands. It lies in the human relationship.

When dealing with regimes which have stepped outside internationally accepted norms, whether through human rights abuses or corruption, that flexible body called the 'international community' (which often really just means our own country and its friends and allies, or those who share our particular world view) likes to impose sanctions. This allows us to feel that we are doing something. Very select targeted sanctions against powerful individuals or criminal elements are certainly justified, but sanctions on an entire country and its economy are counterproductive.

For example, the West has imposed sanctions of one kind or another on Iran for over 30 years. In my experience the result has been that every time a sensible commercial arrangement was discouraged by sanctions, its technocratic and business supporters in Iran lost influence to the extremists and government cronies. The imposition of sanctions has aided and concentrated power in an unattractive regime, decimated the commercial sector and put the power of such financial resources as there are in the hands of the government and its cronies. Enthusiasts for sanctions point

to the present negotiations as a successful product of sanctions, but this has come at much human cost to the impotent majority and the creation of bitterness and distrust which provides a poor foundation for negotiations. How much better if we had maintained an ongoing engagement, commercially and otherwise, expanding rather than destroying the middle class and providing a counterweight not directly dependent on government. The same could be said of Syria and also Sudan, where the withdrawal of the Canadian company Talisman was forced by civil rights groups and the Canadian Government. Talisman had initially perhaps made some poor choices, but they had learned a great deal and at the time of leaving were I believe a force for good.

In Myanmar the West imposed sanctions on a military government already entrenched in a bunker of isolation while the ASEAN countries and others in Asia continued to trade and demonstrate to the Burmese Government the advantages of an open economy and communicating with its own people. I believe that this, not sanctions, was one significant contributor to the surprising change of tack by the regime.

Fortunately the West, in a common display of flexible principles, never sought to apply sanctions to China, a country perhaps considered too big to be isolated and ignored. The embrace of the market by Deng Xiaoping, coupled with progressive reform and economic growth were thus not in any way impeded by a sanctions and isolationist approach, but were reinforced by openness and engagement.

I therefore strongly support the ongoing engagement of responsible business across national and other contentious divisions, rather than trying to isolate economies and whole populations. I believe this is an element of the vocation of business, along with not just the honest provision of useful goods and services, but coupled with the creativity that has resulted in introducing and improving many things

which have delivered great benefits to society. The key qualifying word is responsible. How do we define 'responsible'?

The elements of responsibility are first the commitment to a code such as that of the United Nations Global Compact whose ten principles are based on the major conventions of the UN covering human rights, working conditions, the environment and anti-corruption and embedding these principles in day-to-day operations. Second, it is the public reporting on progress in the implementation of such principles in the organisation's day-to-day business. The over 8,000 business signatories in 140 countries employing over 55 million people must make such reports or face expulsion from the Compact. Third, it helps if the business has a governance structure which makes it open to public pressure from shareholders, consumers and civil society organisations and which is committed to engagement and cooperation with all other elements of society.

There are undoubtedly challenges and risks in such an approach. These include operating in what may be highly corrupt environments and being subject to charges of complicity with an oppressive regime or individual. Corruption is the easiest to address—no company has to make corrupt payments if it does not wish to, except perhaps in cases of extortion where human life rather than merely loss of business is the price of not complying with demands. The work of John Ruggie, UN Special Rapporteur on Business and Human Rights, has done much to clarify the situation on complicity in abuses. In the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (2011), through his Protect, Respect, Remedy Framework, Ruggie places the responsibility to protect human rights squarely on the Nation State. For their part businesses have to ensure that in their operations they respect the human rights of all they come into contact with. Both governments and businesses

have a responsibility for remedies where human rights are infringed.

There is a more personal risk or potential source of discomfort. If you are a major economic actor you will have to engage with the government, however unpleasant. This is what I call 'dining with the devil'. Martin Luther King said 'You have very little moral persuasive power with people who can feel your underlying contempt'. This is very true—you cannot hope to influence people in power unless you engage with them on a human level. The influence can of course work both ways so a firm set of values is needed. The difficult thing about giving advice to tyrants is that to stand any chance of being listened to the advice has to come from someone who is not perceived as an opponent on all counts, although there may be disagreements in some areas. As a business person I have often found it easy to cooperate with NGOs who acknowledge that business can play a positive role, but who none the less may be very critical of certain actions. It is however very difficult to work with those organisations who regard business and commerce as the root of all evil and whose ambition is that you and your company should cease to exist. I suspect the same is true of your average despot. The objective should be improvement of behaviour and not unconditional extermination. Unless one makes a human connection at some level one is unlikely to be able to have any influence. Equally, it is necessary to demonstrate that there are some benefits or something which could be admired in a change of behaviour. Three hundred and fifty years ago George Fox advised the fledgling Quakers to:

Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.

Those of secular inclination might prefer to replace 'preach' with 'be an example to' and perhaps 'that of God' with 'humanity', but it remains excellent advice.

The vocation of business thus has a strong element of building bridges through principled engagement on business affairs at a human level. In many countries responsible business can demonstrate for example that there is no conflict between good working conditions, having high standards of safety and employee satisfaction and running a profitable and successful business. Similarly, it is possible to demonstrate the benefits of relationships not based on corruption. There may be short-term costs, but in the long term there are benefits on all sides. To me that is indeed a respectable vocation.

- ▶ *Responsible Leadership: Lessons From the Front Line of Sustainability and Ethics* (2014) by Mark Moody Stuart is published by Greenleaf Publishing. You can download the Introduction and find more details at www.greenleaf-publishing.com/lessons



Mark Moody-Stuart was Chairman of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group from 1998–2001 and of Anglo American plc from 2002–2009. He is Chairman of Hermes Equity Ownership Services.

After gaining a doctorate in Geology in 1966 at Cambridge, he worked for Shell in various roles starting as an exploration geologist, living in the Netherlands, Spain, Oman, Brunei, Australia, Nigeria, Turkey and Malaysia, as well as the UK.

He is a director of Accenture and Saudi Aramco, and chairman of the Innovative Vector Control Consortium for combating insect-borne disease. He was a member of the UN Secretary General's Advisory Council for the Global Compact 2001–2004 and was appointed to the UN Global Compact Board and as Chairman of the Global Compact Foundation in 2006. He was appointed a Knight Commander of St Michael and St George in 2000.

He is married to Judy and they have four children. He lives in London.

Please direct any correspondence to jcc@greenleaf-publishing.com

