
MAKING A REAL DIFFERENCE – CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY¹

by Adrian Henriques

Corporate Responsibility is a growing area. Companies which once polluted our seas, forced people off the land and conned customers are now contritely carrying out environmental due diligence, signing up to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and hoping for a relationship with their customers beyond the financial. Is it making a difference? In another world, psychotherapy is increasingly accepted as a helpful kind of intervention for personal issues, as part of the criminal system and as a support for trauma. Is it making a difference?

This article is about the many parallels between corporate responsibility and personal responsibility. My credentials for writing it stem from the work I have engaged in to help companies change and increase their accountability. I have worked for some years as a campaigner and consultant on corporate accountability. I have also experienced therapy – and now live with a therapist. I will use ‘personal responsibility’ as a way of talking about psychotherapy – I hope that it at least captures an important part of what therapy is.

Companies are people. Actually, companies, legally, are ‘persons’, with many of the rights that people have. There even appears to be no distinction between the two in the interpretation of the new Human Rights Act – it allows companies to complain that their rights have been infringed! Perhaps people are a ‘legal fiction’ too. The comfort of being an individual is often just a brave face for multiple personalities and internal conflicts. Maybe the only difference we can be sure of is that while companies can go on forever, people have to die.

Accountability is about taking responsibility and about transparency. Telling the truth is central. One of the best signs of accountability is the production of a report which sets out what a company has done – good and bad – and what it takes responsibility for. Success in reporting is all about affect. A successful report is one which is believed by the company’s stakeholders. The stakeholders are really the family of social organisations with which the organisation works. In other words they are those who are affected by the company, or who can affect it.

At least one kind of therapy has been labelled the ‘talking cure’. And at least for Lacan², the goal of therapy was for the patient to be able to talk *about* himself while talking *to* the therapist. For others maybe it is about taking responsibility for oneself – and being able to relate that to others. In the end, self-governance is about knowing the impact you have on others, and acting according to their needs as well as your own.

¹ *This article was originally published in ‘Transformations’, the Journal of Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility (PCSR) in 2001.*

² *Lacan, J. (1977). Écrits: A Selection. New York, W.W. Norton & Co.*

For companies, self-governance is also about knowing your impacts – social, environmental and economic – and managing them in a balanced way – taking account of the needs of all stakeholders, particularly the most disadvantaged. Ecopsychology is exploring just this wider sphere of impacts we all have, and which the world has on our personal lives.

What about ethics? There is quite a fashion for corporate ethics at the moment – maybe there is rather less for personal ethics. Nevertheless there are some interesting parallels. Ethics tends to involve following codes of correct behaviour. While some companies have had codes of ethics for a long time, for many, the struggle is to formulate them and then perhaps to live up to them. Similarly there are rules within which therapy is conducted.

If practising as a consultant on corporate responsibility and social auditing are like corporate therapy, then it is not surprising to find the emergence of rules for the practice. Best practice suggests that the key functions of professional bodies in both worlds is training and the monitoring of standards. The purpose being to make sure that the therapy is being done well. And in both worlds the challenge is to prevent abuse without stifling the insight and creativity that lead to change and which are not very naturally borne of rule-bound behaviour.

The process of working with companies to enhance their accountability is difficult. Some of the challenges shared by both worlds include working at the edge of what is acceptable to the client, the constructive use of pressure to facilitate change and encouraging the toleration of the tension between what one would like to be like, and how one actually is. This is particularly hard for companies, for whom the great temptation is Public Relations, also known as ‘spin’. The personal therapy equivalent of this is perhaps the presentation of the ‘false self’, as Winnicott³ has set out. In both cases, the need for real and deep change means the need to face discomfort.

So neither companies nor individuals necessarily want to change. Effective therapy requires the establishment of a therapeutic alliance to overcome the inevitable resistances. Likewise effective engagement with a company requires an alliance with some part of the organisation which is not only charged with ‘social responsibility’ or the like, but actually believes in it. Then it can be possible to bring serious attention to bear on responsibility from other parts of the organisation.

I should like to finish with a small diversion and a vision for corporate responsibility which brings it much nearer to personal responsibility. Except perhaps for the willingness to experiment, which sometimes characterises the corporate world, I don’t think I would suggest that personal responsibility should move towards its corporate equivalent.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa was based on a model of justice based on reparation rather than punishment. It was a process involving the dialogue between the perpetrators of terrible crimes and their victims, mediated by the commissioners. Truth being the condition of reconciliation. The process was both immensely cathartic and very powerful. It must be a key ingredient in enabling South Africa to be as free of retaliation for apartheid as it now is. While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission dealt therapeutically with personal stories in a national context, there is as yet no equivalent for dealing with corporate stories in a personal context.

Is there a possibility of a Corporate Truth Commission? Could companies bear to be faced with the personal pain which some of their actions have caused? Would suffering communities think it worth their while? Would they talk? Would companies risk the legal actions which could result? What would the basis of reconciliation be? Would campaigning organisations take the process seriously?

³ Winnicott, D. W. (1965). *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment*. London, Karnac.

Would the process enable communities and individuals to live in greater harmony and trust with companies? Would companies implement meaningful management systems to control their behaviour in the future? Could there be a change of heart?

The main business of corporate therapy aimed at responsibility, as of personal therapy, is lots of detailed work designed to enable clients to find their truth. It is best when they pronounce it themselves. And yet to make a real difference, we not only have to get them to talk, we have to get them to want to listen as well.

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