

Integral Leadership Review

Volume X, No. 5
October 2010



Does Conscious Capitalism = Integral Business?

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Is Capitalism good? Is it bad? This seems to be a debate happening in the general population throughout the United States and the rest of the world. Clearly capitalism, in and of itself, is value neutral. What is important to me is the ways in which we manifest capitalism. And because of this, it is the consciousness of those enacting capitalist structures that concerns me. The reason why this discussion is so important is quite simply that corporations, large and small, private and public, are some of the most powerful agents of change in the world today. It is not clear to me whether governments have more or less influence over the content of my days than the companies that engage in capitalism worldwide.

The enormous power that for profit businesses hold to shape this planet can easily be seen as a massive threat to all that is good, decent and sustainable in the world. It is also incredibly important to recognize and promote the power to nurture the growth and flourishing of all that we hold dear that these same organizations can wield.

The term Conscious Capitalism is often used to refer to the approach to running a business that attempts to embrace the positive half of the corporate power equation. Yes, all levels (stages) of capitalism have degrees of consciousness and so in a way this term is misleading. But it is the popular terminology that points to an emergent phenomenon in the world's economies and it gets the point across just fine, so I will be using it here. What we are referring to is a decision on the part of the people in charge of an organization to work towards more than just financial gain (profit).

It has become fairly common in business to refer to a 'triple bottom line' of people, planet and profit. Some companies attempt to go further and include the needs of a specific underserved cause or a broader alignment with spirit in general. These attempts to run a business that consciously sets out to serve the greater good may well deserve to be given louder voice in the public discourse at large and specifically in integral circles. Often, this impulse to serve the Kosmos through commerce is more than the 'green washing' corporate America is accused of and is actually coming from an implicit understanding of some degree of systems theory and the interconnectedness of us all that emerges in later stages of individual and cultural development.

It is easy to see something wrong in the world and want to see change happen. This often leads to finger pointing and far too often, if action is taken, it involves a lot of negative movement to stop what is wrong. The other inclination, the one that is manifesting in the Conscious Capitalism movement is one of looking within, feeling empowered, and attempting to create something that addresses the perceived wrong in a creative fashion—in short, entrepreneurship.

Western culture places a great deal of value on creativity when it comes to art, but it is rarely recognized just how creative starting a business is by its very nature. Those who see a lack in the world and step in to actually manifest a previously non-existent product which will fill that void are being creative in the most literal sense of the word. This is something that happens on a daily basis and includes the most mundane objects we use every day. The idea that such an undertaking can and should be the very thing that helps to steer the planet away from suffering and towards a common flourishing is not an entirely popular viewpoint in the West. But should it be?

The healthy skepticism that many feel today toward the corporations that sell them unhealthy food, overpriced disposable furniture and clothing, unsustainable vehicles and other seemingly misguided products is in many ways understandable. Conscious Capitalism attempts to remove blame from a system that is inherently value neutral and put responsibility in the hands of those running businesses. Has there been a degree of failure on our parts (democratic citizens) to create an environment that recognizes the interdependencies inherent in complex systems, such as today's society, and to nurture and champion actions that attempt to better these systems, even when they turn a profit? A better understanding of the symbiotic relationships all living creatures share and our power to nurture this situation might, once we stop demonizing capitalism, very well foster a flourishing of the entrepreneurial spirits capacity for good.

A simple appreciation for the good that for profit business has brought to the world is not a bad a place to start. Arguments can quite easily be made that for profit capitalism has brought more people out of poverty than all government services or charitable causes. What is currently happening in China and India is a clear example of millions being handed the reins for their own lives and steering themselves out of poverty through capitalism. The rampant denial of capitalism's potential to reduce suffering in many spiritually awake communities that simultaneously speak glowingly of non-profits is a failure to recognize the truth of a situation that requires change. One often ignored truth is that the vast majority of non-profits rely on the profits of capitalism to exist. Demonizing one and championing the other is simply not realistic.

Human beings are out of balance. This seems to be a growing consensus. We are drastically caught up in a cycle of consumption. Capitalism has been instrumental in this. But is blaming the system enough? The external signifiers are pointing towards an internal lack of meaning and purpose in the day to day lives of those engaged in capitalism here in the West. Commercialism, which can now largely be equated with Consumerism, seems to have little or no awareness of or responsibility for the many implications of investment, income distribution, production, product distribution, and the eventual disposal of products.

The path we are on is not sustainable. A change in direction is required. Most important, perhaps, is the flavor of the intent that creates this direction. Many things must change, but at the root of all change lies the level of consciousness of those making the decisions. It is the consciousness of our economic leaders that must be addressed. The current trend towards demonizing those in power strikes me as woefully inadequate. I hope soon to see those in the integral community leading corporations worldwide. In the mean time I hope to see increasing numbers of integrally informed people working with the large corporations, as well as being driven to create small ones of their own. But it is important to change the way businesses are run, as well as move towards living more integrated working lives ourselves, no matter what our professions.

Increasing the level of consciousness and integrity in our daily working lives is a vital and oft overlooked step. The Buddhist tradition speaks of Right Livelihood; work as part of one's spiritual path. The integration of my spiritual and personal life with my working days is something that motivates me to change the way I work and live. For many the experience of taking what they are experiencing both internally and at home and sectioning it off from those they work with is all too familiar. There is almost an expectation that people in corporate America will 'hide' their family, spiritual practice and emotional turmoil from their business life. Just yesterday I found myself once again on a plane surrounded by people with a cell phone in each hand,

one for work, the other for.....personal business? While I understand the impetus to create this separation I do not think that it is a sign of a healthy and well balanced situation. This working persona that many create is not just a partial excuse for a human being that is damaging to the individual. It is an incredibly powerful persona that is tasked with creating the world our families live in.

I spoke recently with Vanessa Barg, owner/operator of local New York City based raw chocolate company Gnosis Chocolate, to discuss both how she ended up running a business motivated by concern for the world at large and also how this effort affected the profitability of her business. What struck me was just how much heart and spirit there is in the operation of her business, right alongside tremendous intellect. This is the crux of the matter.

When talking about facing adversity in her own life and how she was changed by this challenge she spoke of “seeing that transformation as a flame that can illuminate your entire life ...and then applying that to every area of your life. Business is not different than life.” This integration of personal values and daily working activities is what strikes me as most absent from my and most of my friends’ lives. It is most important for creating the world we want to live in. It is striking to note the freedom she speaks with when discussing matters of the heart and spirit, both when talking about her business and while conducting it.

I was surprised to find out that Gnosis Chocolate does not spend money on advertising. What has gotten their product into over 300 stores is customers requesting it due to the excitement with the companies perceived transparency, integrity, heart around a quality healthy food (yes, raw chocolate is amazing for you!) that tastes great. Vanessa’s effort to create a healthy, handmade product that people enjoy includes a true dedication to the quality and integrity of every ingredient and each step of the manufacturing and distribution process. She details this journey with amazing clarity and transparency online and in person every chance she gets. Much like the much larger company Whole Foods, I consistently hear from Gnosis the message that they are evaluating their relationships with customers, suppliers, employees and nature and working towards getting their actions more and more in line with a sense of providing for the greatest good for all. Neither claims perfection, but both insist on refinement across a very broad spectrum and transparency in the attempt. There is science in their message, but above all I hear heart. And apparently Conscious Capitalism is good business. Metrics that track multiple bottom line business in the stock market consistently show them beating out other businesses in both growth and profit.

Whole Foods is an example of this on a much larger scale. The fastest growing supermarket in the world, Whole Foods inc., steered largely by its founder and CEO John Mackey, is out in front testing many of the practices that might make a business both more integral and more conscious. Their business model explicitly calls for serving not just shareholders, but customers, employees, vendors/suppliers, the community and the environment. They do this through a constantly evolving set of tools deeply informed by both integral theory and Spiral Dynamics. At some point, feeling a lack of community in creating such a business, John Mackey and Michael Strong started the organization called FLOW, whose NY meetings I once regularly attended. FLOW has the tagline ‘liberating the entrepreneurial spirit for good’. Its focus is supporting those attempting to practice conscious capitalism. It is a gathering place for people looking to revolutionize the way that people conduct business.

If you read Michael Strong’s book ‘Be the Solution’ or listen to John Mackey give his Conscious Capitalism speech to a room full of old money businessmen, what you will hear is a deeply nuanced message about how a business can provide the greatest depth for the broadest span with a serious understanding of things such as developmental unfolding, types, the inherent beauty in all things and a very pragmatic business acumen. The primary ingredient that they are wedging back into capitalism is care for the many levels of the spiral. It is a hugely humanitarian effort. But yes, they do refuse that this endeavor be in any way separate from accumulating wealth. Whole Foods rakes in the cash. John Mackey is wealthy, though not as much as any other

CEO of a company Whole Foods size would be. They are comfortable holding power in corporate hands with the recognition that when humans want to create something one of the most effective ways is to be an entrepreneur. This requires both capital and large scale action that businesses are best equipped to enact. All three mentioned above are massively integral thinkers, but more importantly, they are not theorists. They are embodied and creating change in the world that affects millions.

Yes, these corporations are directly addressing the Orange (vMeme) managerial tendencies towards dominator hierarchies full of greed and short sightedness. But this degree of transcendence is practically a given in integral circles. What I also recognize is their ability to directly address the Green tendency towards ineffectiveness in creating structural change. These are action-oriented large scale decision makers with the ability both to hear all parties messages and embody leadership roles in a top down manner. John Mackey models a leadership style that uses power as a means to serve and empower those beneath him.

To move toward Conscious Capitalism requires a serious effort to remove the demonization of corporations that are being run from Blue and Orange and Green. Even when looking at what I am calling 2nd tier businesses, we are each prone to being triggered by those manifestations of the stages of development in these businesses that resonate with shadow for us. It is too easy to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

There seems to be a separation in many people's minds between profit- and spirit-based business on the assumption that profit for some naturally leads to oppression of others. It is not a zero sum equation. Consider that the money that you earn in life will be directly correlated to the value that you provide in the world. Consider the possibility that it is a self feeding virtuous cycle that will empower you to employ others so they can provide for themselves and their loved ones and invite them into this upward spinning spiral of cash and consciousness.

Let's look at this through Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Obviously the difference between acting from deficiency vs. acting from abundance is crucial here. When acting from any of the lower levels (physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem) our actions are less than world centric. The more cash we bring to the table the more potentially powerful our actions are in many ways. So, from these levels, more cash = the more self serving = more potentially damaging to the Kosmos. But if we start looking at the self actualization and self transcendence stages, where Integralites should be spending more of their time, then as long as we have some basic faith in human decency and/or spiritual transcendence as a motivating force for good, why deny people at this level any means of creating change, especially financial? Or, more to the point, why would these people want to deny themselves the means to transform the world from such a highly developed stage? So much transformative power comes from this wealth. We need it in the most evolved hands possible. The world economy is not poised to transcend money quite yet. So why not champion the integral engagement of money?

For most issues, it's the private corporations who are nimble enough to move as quickly as we need, who are free to disregard nations borders as required and relatively easily to remove some from power if they become a truly damaging force. Much of what we need to address in the world, governments are the least effective in engaging.

We can continue separating virtuosity from profit with non-profits. But this is unsustainable. All those donations have to come from somewhere. Usually it's big business operating at a lower level of conscious and satisfying a PR requirement. Let's cut out the middle man. Donations are wonderful, most conscious business make it a core value, but the model it supports is not enough. A for profit business is by its very nature self sustaining. Is it unbelievable that it could also be nurturing of the Kosmos at large?

John Mackey spoke once at a FLOW meeting I attended about listening to others' 'heart song'. He described his true gift (the thing that made him millions) as being his ability to tune into the songs of others' hearts and

help them sing them. What kind of CEO says that? Yes, he has a great business sense as well. I do not mean to discount this at all, but it is not just cognitive development that he credits with his success. It is also his emotional and interpersonal and spiritual lines that he cites. What I seemed to hear consistently in FLOW meetings, from those attempting to run a more conscious business, is how freely they speak about emotions and morals and even spiritual values within a business context. Their businesses all have a clearly defined purpose that transcends and includes profit. This is in no small part why Conscious Capitalism is an integral endeavor: not because all those engaged are explicitly versed in Wilber's Integral Theory, but because they are implicitly living a more integrated life. There is not that separation between the personal and business that, if we are being honest with ourselves, we must see as being a root cause of so many corporations' actions moving so far from the ethics of the very people who run them. How many of us can say that we bring our home into the office with us?

The world teeters on a narrow path with glorious communion straight ahead and chaos on all sides. The steps that must be taken at the global level must first be addressed in our individual lives. The level of each individual human's consciousness must transform in order for the correct steps to be chosen on the international level. Healing the schism that so many feel in our own lives is what the rest of the world needs in order to deal with the current world crisis/potential. A sense of both responsibility and empowerment is required. We need to put our hearts and souls as firmly into the workplace as possible. This is where the majority of our waking life is spent.

So, is conscious capitalism a form of integral business? Not necessarily. Will integrally informed people feel compelled to practice conscious capitalism? I, for one, truly hope so. It is too important an endeavor to delay bringing the highest stages of consciousness to bear.

About the Author

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