



LYNNE FRANKS:



Can Corporations Save the World?

My vision of the world is for the creation of a new type of conscious society, where we can live and behave in a way that will bring peace, harmony, and long-term security to this planet and all its inhabitants. In order to realize this vision, one of our biggest challenges is to redefine our ideas of success.

Recently, in the context of a spiritual environment, I heard success defined as “how we can benefit others.” This is a profound idea, but what struck me most was that it is the complete opposite of our traditional way of thinking about success in business. In fact, it feels far more connected to what we think of as the old ways, to the things that we have left behind in our rush forward to so-called “civilized” living.

When we think about the old ways, we think of things like agriculture and tribal community structures that seem far removed from much of our present experience. But these are actually the very things that we need to reconnect to. Technology, and the way we communicate in general, is literally shifting by the day. We continue to develop incredible tools, and yet we can learn from our indigenous people, from our own connection with what I believe is a global memory. For me, the future will have to be about combination. It cannot be about only the newest things, but about the best things. The future that I envision depends upon our ability to combine technology with ancient wisdom and a deepened connection with the Earth, with community, with each other, and with very strong spiritual values.

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Of course, I wouldn't go into a consulting job with a big company and talk about spiritual values, particularly—although more and more companies in the UK are incorporating meditation into the workplace, offering quiet rooms, for instance, and yoga. But there is really no need to get caught up in the language, because spiritual or otherwise, we are talking about values. Labels don't matter when people are saying that they want to run their businesses with integrity.

The shift that is occurring involves community, and it is very much being led by women. Whether they are involved in nonprofits or entrepreneurs starting small businesses that in and of themselves will benefit the community, women in the UK are building a movement of social enterprise that is becoming a very important part of the economy. It is similar to the cooperatives in America, which are actually based on an expanded idea of the old agricultural model. In the original context, the form of doing business was very small and self-contained; but the concept has become much bigger, and we have developed a whole language and applied values that are based in the metaphor of growing things.

Large or small, a business won't stay in business if it doesn't make some form of profit. It has to be commercially viable. But what happens with this profit? How can we restructure our businesses so that they are more in line with the values of the cooperative, tribal, old ways? Women's-led small business has been working actively with this dynamic, but I think it will spread out. Things like cause-related marketing and socially responsible business practices are being adopted by all the big international conglomerates. It used to be only people like Ben and Jerry, before they sold their company, and other small entrepreneurs who were socially conscious. But their strategies are now being taken on board by a lot of large companies. They will always be concerned with making profits—that is never going to change—but they are coming to understand. Even within the context of being responsible to shareholders, it is becoming increasingly important that they work together with the resources of people and the environment.

I am on the advisory board for McDonald's in the UK. They are currently looking at how to turn their chip oil into bio-diesel. And they have just launched a huge program, which I have been involved with, to empower and educate their 16-to-24-year-old staff members. They are one of the biggest employers in the world and they are working to benefit the young people who work for them, even those who intend to move on to other companies further down the line. They are using the technology of the Internet in very interesting ways to support this

education initiative. Instead of looking for the quickest, cheapest way of doing business, they are really considering the long-term situation, which will benefit the world we live in.

I've also been working with Starbucks in the UK on a six-week community project that they developed through my SEED program. Their goal has been to create empowering community initiatives for the young mothers that make up a good part of their customer base. It is the aim of any business to increase its market, but I get the sense that the intentions are quite genuine.

At the moment there are huge drives among both manufacturers and retailers to rethink packaging in order to be as environmentally friendly as possible. In addition to reducing the amount of packaging materials used, many are also beginning to switch to bio-degradables. They have to—it's market driven. One of our fastest-growing supermarket chains, which happens to be cooperative, has also been putting all their marketing energy into educating people about fair trade and organics. Yes, it's good for business, but they also want to be concerned citizens.

The shift is occurring faster here in the UK than in many places; but then, we're a little island. Information moves along here faster. And the media are actively involved, because our challenging political party has taken on the environment as one of their main platforms. Suddenly, the Labor Party—the government—is waking up to it, so now everyone is talking about the environment. There used to be an eight- or nine-month waiting list to purchase a hybrid car, but now they're coming in all the time. In the city, it's no longer considered socially acceptable to have four-wheel drive.

We're living in a changing world, from a business perspective, and some very influential companies are taking this into account. But it is really the small business owners that are leading the shift, because they have the entrepreneurial freedom to run their businesses according to their own values. And when they scale up, they are able to maintain a good deal of their vision. You can see this even in major corporations such as Microsoft, where so much money has been directed back into a foundation. Whether their philanthropy is the result of vision or clever PR, valuable, life-affirming work is being done.

Still, it isn't enough. I always considered myself an optimist, but that is no longer necessarily true. We've done irreparable damage to the environment—the glaciers melting, all those species are not coming back. In order to truly change, we will need to adopt a very different lifestyle. Those of us in the wealthiest countries of the industrialized world are kidding ourselves if we think we're doing

our part. We're sticking our heads in the sand if we think that life in the future is going to be a continuation of the way we're living now. We won't be able to travel the way we have been, driving gas-fueled cars and flying on airplanes at a whim. That is why it is so important that we use technology in the service of our true values. We need to seriously look at alternative resources like solar and wind energy, not only to get around, but also in manufacturing and operations. This is crucial, and I don't know whether we'll be able to change our habits quickly enough.

Consider the fact that in new, emerging markets such as India and China—which are already creating a huge demand for resources such as energy and water—people want what they see that we have. How do you tell someone who has finally seen their family elevate themselves from dire poverty that they are destroying the planet by buying the things we have been enjoying for so long? How do you tell them? These emerging markets are not going to go backward, and they're not going to curb their growth. But we may be forced into thinking differently. We may be forced to change our entire lifestyle.

We are living in a very unhealthy time, but if we can truly learn to live in a different way, we can rebuild a healthier society. I think about the earthquake in Pakistan, the fact that people are still living in tents one year later, and give thanks every day for my well-being and the wellbeing of my family and friends. I pray. But that is really personal growth, personal responsibility. I see everything that way. I cannot divorce business from the rest of life, so I look at my own life and think about where I need to concentrate my energy right now. The program I started, SEED, is wonderful. It is helping lots of people and it has huge potential for growth—but do I really want to put my energy and attention into that? Or do I want to work in a smaller way? How sustainable do I want to be?

The idea of sustainability is incredibly important, and yet it is so often used flippantly, without any clear definition. Even the word “value” has become devalued, because we apply it intellectually without really knowing what it means to us, or what responsibilities it imparts. Sustainability, for me, suggests a situation that supports itself and its community. Nature sustains itself, taking only what it needs. But this idea can apply to individuals, as well, and to business.

As my spiritual teachers tell me, instead of looking outward we must first look within. We must each become as aware as possible in every aspect of the way we live our lives. And if we, as individuals, can find a more peaceful interior, a more spacious way of being, then we will inspire others to do the same. Find that space inside.

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Meditate; spend time in nature or with your loved ones – whatever works for you. We can affect our outward environment, but we must begin with the self.