

Right Relations: A New Corporate Era

By Lorraine Flower

Many scholars of esoteric spirituality discuss the principle or law of Right Relations at length. Dwal Khul (The Tibetan), Alice Bailey, Roberto Assagioli all provide ample food for thought in the contemplation of what this law means and how it can be applied at an individual and collective level. Many religious institutions build their covenants based upon this principle. Others express it as a vision for how they want their involvement with each other to be effected. So what is this principle? What is the value or benefit of applying it in our lives? And how does a principle that is clearly at home within the higher echelons of spiritual teachings apply to the corporate world?

Firstly then, to an outline of the principle itself. The principle of Right Relations invites us to consider our relationship with absolutely every thing and every being in our lives. Essentially to examine our 'relationship' with our family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, our beliefs, our values, our feelings, our politics, our behaviours, money, our country, sexual expression - the list goes on. As we undertake that examination we are encouraged to strive for a balance; a balance between the part and the whole, between our self-focused, individual need and that of the wider community/world; a balance that is often subtle and, at times, delicately poised.

As we work for that balance it is important to recognise that the place of balance is not mediocrity - it is not about shedding strong views, beliefs, relationships for a life of insipid, middle-of-the-road, non-commitment. It is about being able to hold the polarities present in many belief systems and truly acknowledge and know the 'truth' in both polarities whilst not defining oneself by either. It is about being able to express deep, committed love within a relationship as 'impersonal love' knowing that the power of impersonal love is far greater, far wiser, far more balanced, far more committed and unconditional than the sentiment we associate with the more familiar, earthly forms of love because it comes directly from the soul and is combined with wisdom - it is not tainted by the conditional love imposed by the personality or ego.

So, Right Relations is about our relationship with everything and seeking balance within those relationships. Success in the arena of Right Relations requires the adoption of a number of qualities that include: responsibility, understanding, compassion, harmlessness, tangible love, equality, tolerance, humility, goodwill and co-operation.

Each of us knows that if even some of the above qualities were present in every aspect of our individual lives and in every aspect of the world, the world would be a far kinder, gentler place than we experience today. It would also be fair to say that most of us, when considering these qualities at a personal level - that is, by each of us individually - would like to believe that we exhibit these qualities and yet, if we are truly honest with ourselves, we know that our aspiration often exceeds our performance. Given then that we can acknowledge the challenges involved in living according to these qualities at a personal level, how can they possibly be adopted at a

corporate level? The issue here, in my view, is more one of how can they not be? Notwithstanding the struggle that exists, moment by moment for each of us to gradually shift ourselves into Right Relationship with our world, in every dimension, there is evidence that many people are succeeding.

Evidence such as the nature of the global response to the Tsunamis in South East Asia, the earthquake in Haiti, the hurricane in New Orleans and so on. We witnessed an unparalleled response to these natural disasters; fundraising, the use of the internet to search for loved ones, personal pilgrimage, volunteering by professionals to support the rebuilding, the new political responses that are being called for, the appointment of Bill Clinton as the UN Ambassador to oversee the rebuilding of nations and societies in the affected area, the call for the abolition of third world debt. For the first time in history, these events have catalysed the potential for a new approach, a new set of relationships, a new way of responding to our neighbours, recognition that perhaps, after all, we do have relationship with, and a responsibility to, each and every being on the earth.

Other evidence of this global shift includes the responses that emerged immediately after 9/11 (albeit somewhat short-lived), the very powerful peace rallies, debate and exploration of the motives behind the Iraq war and a greater willingness by some to acknowledge the complexities of the choices that face human kind at this time in our evolution.

The human race is changing. Many are finally acknowledging the reality of the interrelatedness of all things. We have seen huge shrinkage in the geographical and philosophical distances that exist between us by virtue of easier travel and improved communications. Advances in communications media and technology through the 20th century have enabled us to gain greater knowledge of, connection with and perhaps even understanding of our world and its inhabitants. Piece by piece barriers are being broken down - the Berlin wall in 1989 through to the trade, social and political barriers within Europe.

As we understand and embrace these shifts, some of them subtle, some very marked, we may notice that the voice of the individual, our voice, is perhaps not yet achieving as much shift within the long established institutions such as politics, religion and of course the corporate institutions, as we would like.

Let us then consider the principle of Right Relations within the corporate world. The list of qualities at the foundation of this principle, are rarely found in the value statements of most commercial organisations and yet the organisations are populated, in the main, by individuals for whom these sentiments would resonate. The very fabric of commercialism has had at its core however, a number of 'truths' that form the cornerstone of its reality: Survival is all about making maximum profits. Sustainability of the company is based on beating the competition - it's about winning. Strength, power and control are vital ingredients in achievement.

In the 21st century these are expressed in more politically correct and humane terms than we experienced say in the 1980's and in the case of some organisations there is a genuine desire to construct viable commercial businesses based on more rounded 'truths'. One example is Ben and Jerry's, where central to their mission statement 'is the belief that all three parts of the mission (product, economic, social) must thrive equally in a manner that commands deep respect for individuals in and outside the company and supports the communities of which they are a part'. Another example is Pret a Manger, who are 'determined never to forget that our wonderful hardworking people make all the difference. They are our heart and soul. When they care, our business is sound. If they stop caring, our business goes down the drain. We pay our hardworking, wonderful staff as much as we can afford rather than as little as we can get away with.'

We are also hearing a lot more about Corporate Social Responsibility, the triple bottom line and social/ethical investments amongst many other changes. And yet, at the core of this, the experience by many employees within most commercial organisations still reflects a deep-seated adherence to the 3 'truths' identified above. In other words, whilst there may be greater emphasis on allocating part of the corporate resource to 'good causes', the core value system that sits at the heart of the commercial world has yet to undergo substantial change. So how could we realistically apply the principle of Right Relations to the commercial world?

I believe the starting point lies in the work being undertaken by the scientific community that is 'proving' to the world that we are indeed all connected. This long held spiritual belief is now finding favour with the scientific world. If we can translate that principle across to the corporate world then we could, perhaps, take the first step in a more authentic shift in the impact that the corporate world can have on the whole.

At its most basic level, if a company could first take the idea that 'we are all one' and review how that plays out WITHIN its own organisation it would make huge strides. By examining the interrelationship between each and every employee, unit, team, department and division and looking at the impact of factors such as fear, competition, insecurity, dishonesty, prejudice, disrespect and so on, on how the individuals within these groups feel, behave and consequently perform, commercial organisations would discover a wealth of resource that would transform their bottom line.

So much talent, capability and creativity are wasted when people feel devalued for any reason. How often do we hear derogatory remarks between one department and another or one division and another? How often do leaders emerge from a board meeting shouting the odds because they have 'won' an argument or indeed lost a battle? This type of behaviour is divisive and undermining of the whole.

I feel the second area to focus on is one of responsibility. If every person within an organisation were to undertake to act with a sense of personal responsibility for his or her thoughts and actions it would catalyse a sea change in the experience of each and every employee. By using the term 'personal responsibility' I am referring to the idea that each person be willing to behave in an adult

manner - that in determining a course of action, they consider the implications of that action on the whole. In their statement on Right Relations the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton offers the following: 'In a liberal religious community such as ours, an ethic of right relations is crucial to maintaining a sense of community. Such an ethic requires us to consider the impact of our words and attitudes in our interactions and decision-making, along with considering rights, rules, and principles.'

Clearly, if each person within a commercial organisation were to act according to the above code of personal responsibility along with the basic principles of care and concern for others it would transform the experience for most people within the workplace. This in turn would release energy and focus to generate more creativity, innovation and enthusiasm.

There are many areas where the principle of Right Relations could be applied to the corporate world. The final one that I intend to offer takes us into the realms of other stakeholders. At the core of the principle is the interrelatedness of all things. This is true of a commercial organisation - it does not operate in isolation.

If we consider a couple of its many stakeholders we see that an interesting dynamic often occurs. All commercial organisations have both suppliers and customers. The long-standing approach to these two different stakeholders tends to be almost polar opposite. In the case of customers, most successful businesses recognise the importance of their customers and seek to engage in a respectful and positive relationship with them. In some cases this will be taken to extremes and can manifest in a subservient culture or relationship with these customers - this is often true in consultancies.

In the case of suppliers, however, a different picture emerges. Here, unless they are a supplier of strategic goods/services then, in general, the organisation tends to operate from a position of power and general disrespect. Disrespect for a supplier's time, disrespect for their needs as an organisation, often disrespect for their ideas or values. Imagine the power if in cases, subservience and 'power over' were transformed to mutual respect. By applying the concepts of equality, humility, goodwill and responsibility to the relationships established with these two stakeholders a business would again open a huge well of resource - time, ideas, efficiencies, co-operation, supportiveness, willingness and so much more.

In offering these thoughts, I recognise that there is plenty of scope for them to be viewed as unrealistic - and yet, in my view, a significant minority of the human race is demanding a different relationship with work, with commercialism and with the structures/institutions that provide the goods and services that we rely on in many ways. Companies need to take note and recognise that leadership in the 21st century demands far greater willingness to build authentic and meaningful relationships with every thing and every body.