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Learn the top 5 errors responsible entrepreneurs make



CSR for HR: A Necessary Partnership for Advancing Responsible Business Practices

Carol Sanford [December 1, 2010](#) Business Development

On Monday I explored the value and utility of using the narrative form of writing, drawing on fiction in business books. And building from Steve Denning's theories and writings, the author of **The Leader's Guide to Radical Management:**

Reinventing the Workplace for the 21st Century and **The Leader's Guide to Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative**, I postulated that story-telling is so powerful, as he says, that it calls for explicitly being very above board about the message. And in fact, that reflection on the message ensures an authentic engagement. And avoids the subversive potential of stories.

Today, I want to look at one book in depth, using this approach, Elaine Cohen's recent book, **CSR for HR: A Necessary Partnership for Advancing Responsible Business Practices**

Cohen says that the message behind her book, that people are the only means to achieve success in the CSR world. And the more success you want, the more people you have to involve.

And at the end, I will look briefly at another book, with a workbook approach as well, but not related to CSR. **Uncommon Sense: One CEO's Tale of Getting in Sync** by Andy Kanefield and Mark Powers.

I have to start by telling you that I am not much of a fan for the majority of Human Resources programs. I think most, like incentives and 360-degree feedback, are based on false assumptions about the working of human motivation and ability to change. Most HR programs are designed to compensate for bad work systems and management systems design. By this I mean, people are indirectly connected to the meaning of their work and therefore have little motivation or inappropriately focused sense of direction, by way of intermediated experiences via managers. With self-organizing teams, and the lack of such intermediation between people and their customers, behavior changes in a more fluid way without such programs. When a person can see the direct effects of their work, they care more directly. Without such connections, back up measures are needed to "manage" them.

I think I could say that Cohen is looking at a similar concern when she proposes that each person in the organization needs to be directly connected to the business of corporate social responsibility. Cohen wants a more "hands on" experience in the lives of people.

A second problem that I have with most HR programs is that they tackle one issue at a time, splintering people into reacting persons, whether managers having to engage people, or as employees, having to be engaged. For example, there are programs for performance reviews, sales incentives, strengths finding, benefits management and behavior management, among others. These programs are managed as though they are separate items in the life of a person, rather than integrated in each person. Again, bad work and management systems designs make it seem there is a need to manage all these and they seem like separate concerns. In a responsible business, people are self-managing in regard to the whole of themselves and these “concerns” show up in an integrated way for each person via their personal development plan tied to the business strategy. I write about this extensively in [The Responsible Business: Reimagining sustainability and success](#).

Again, Cohen states in her introduction, that the splintering of responsibility into an issue-by-issue pursuit (e.g. carbon foot printing, community contribution, and cause marketing among others) you fragments the organization. Cohen advocates that they must be integrated into the culture of the business. The only place I disagree with her at all, and it is in degree not intention, is that “corporate social responsibility” is a fragmenting idea on its own. But that is my book, not hers. Generally, she and I are after the same debilitating practice of isolating, fragmenting and dividing up the business leaving ineffectiveness to follow right behind. And then more programs to manage each of the side effects follows.

What Cohen offers is a detailed execution plan on how to embed CSR into the way of managing people. And since this is contrary to the majority of business practices, she let's us watch as a manager, Sharon, goes through the discovery process of how much more powerful and even efficient this is, than the fragmented programmatic method. She is engaged by Arena, who serves as the Socratic teacher and coach in Sharon's discovery. This allows Cohen to unfold a little at a time, of the changes necessary to shift to the integrated approach, which we eventually will come to see as much simpler. And as a Great Lover of The Body Shop story, it is wonderful to have it used as an integrating story to follow.

We watch Sharon, our exploring manager, in her transforming mode discover how everything she does will change. And we see how her reservations and confusions get reconciled. What we get is an introduction to a different kind of workplace where dialogue and engagement form the basis of decision making, all necessary to employees taking more CSR responsibility into their daily lives. Arena, as Cohen's voice, leads her manager through existing programs of employee rights, reward and recognition, health and safety, recruitment, training and development, communications, community involvement and working for the environment and we get to watch what the new world would look like in each of these familiar programs. In other words, how can each become a part of the normal activities of HR., but with CSR embedded. Again, I think some of these programs need to go away, but if they are to stay, they will have more responsibility conversations in their wake from Cohen's approach. Sharon even looks at how to change job descriptions and evolve an employee experience through their entire life cycle in the company. You really get the feeling of what it would be like to see CSR from the shoes of a fully engaged employee. On separate pages, inserted as an interlude of sorts, we get the workbook our transforming manager is exposed to and see how it might be used in our business. The story mode gives us time to reflect on questions that are likely to be bugging us also.

In additions to the philosophical and practical foundation for her recommendations in new practices, Cohen provides a roadmap for the new infrastructure that will be necessary to connect employees with stakeholders in a this more direct and integrated way and a roadmap to build a plan. And the of stories of real companies that

are woven in to the manager's learning experience, ones who have taken on the new infrastructure and practices offered, gives us more confidence, that this is not all hypothetical.

In the end, Sharon is not only won over, but becomes an advocate. The workbook that has been laid out through the book, gives an easy way to review the how-to but with the story still in our mind. Somehow the story telling mode makes it feel more doable.

A look at Uncommon Sense. It is also a narrative with a set of managers who take on a set of five questions (purpose, signature strength, vision, culture and process. The questions let's them discover a simpler means to have a business plan that might position them for more distinctiveness and aligns them across the organization. Then they can build a business plan to communicate to their stakeholders. It is really a workbook with a story telling mode as the instruction guidelines. It is less complicated in its telling and likely can serve as a way to engage an imaginative mind. The questions are ones that a small business that has been around a few years and is ready to take the next steps in a local market would find helpful. The questions are not brain science, but are better foundational questions than those offered.

Which leads me to one question. Do narratives as business books work better for simple ideas? I think that is true when the intention is to convey a specific method, which requires a lot of 'how-to'. When the story is more complex, the how-to much move into the background. It is likely why Ayn Rand's books were best sellers. And which are still selling well. Not because of the message in her books, but the immersion into an experience out of which we extract our own ideas. I think both of these books have something to offer, but did not rich the level I am still waiting to see, which is a compelling story that offers a counter to the elitism of the few that Rand offers.

On Friday, I will post in interview with Elaine Cohen on her book.



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About Carol Sanford

Carol Sanford is a business development consultant and educator to Fortune 100 executives and Rock Star Entrepreneurs, the author of the multi-award winning books The Responsible Business and The Responsible Entrepreneur.

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