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Responsible Leaders as Agents of World Benefit: Learnings from "Project Ulysses"

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ABSTRACT. There is widespread agreement in both business and society that MNCs have an enormous potential for contributing to the betterment of the world (WBCSD: 2006, From Challenge to Opportunity. in L. Timberlake (ed.), *A paper from the Tomorrow's Leaders Group of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development*). In fact, a discussion has evolved around the role of "Business as an Agent of World Benefit."[1] At the same time, there is also growing willingness among business leaders to spend time, expertise, and resources to help solve some of the most pressing problems in the world, such as global warming, poverty, HIV/AIDS, and other pandemic diseases. One example of business leaders engagement in citizenship activities is PricewaterhouseCoopers' (PwC) leadership development program called "Project Ulysses" which we present and discuss in this article. Using a narrative approach we ask: "What can business leaders learn from selected Ulysses narratives for acting as agents of world benefit and with respect to engaging responsibly in the fight against some of the most pressing social problems at the local level?" Our contribution is organized as follows. We begin the article with a brief discussion on the role of business leaders in the fight against world's social problems and address some areas of concern as to whether or not business leaders should play a role in fighting these global issues. We then introduce "Project Ulysses" which takes place in cross-sector partnership in developing countries. Following an overview of the research methodology we present four Ulysses narratives which tell us about learnings in the light of fundamental human problems, such as poverty and misery. Each story is analyzed with regard to the above question. We conclude the article by summarizing key lessons learned and some recommendations for business leaders as agents of world benefit.

KEY WORDS: responsible leadership, leadership development, talent development, corporate citizenship, corporate social responsibility, business in society, cross-sector partnerships, Project Ulysses

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The quest for responsible leaders as "agents of world benefit"

Among the key lessons from Enron and other corporate scandals in recent years is arguably the point that it takes *responsible leadership* – and responsible leaders – to build and sustain a business that is of benefit to multiple stakeholders and not just to a few

risk-seeking individuals. The corporate scandals have triggered a broad discussion on the role of business *in* society – its legitimacy, its obligations, and its responsibilities. As a result, businesses and their leaders are increasingly held accountable for their actions – and non-actions – by a multitude of stakeholders and society at large. These stakeholder expectations extend beyond mere compliance with rules and regulations and adherence to ethical standards. Instead, given the power of large corporations in particular, stakeholders expect that business leaders take a more active role and thus acknowledge their co-responsibility vis-à-vis the pressing problems in the world: protecting and promoting human rights, ensuring sustainability, and contributing to poverty alleviation and the fight against diseases, such as HIV/AIDS. There is agreement in both business and society that multinational corporations and their leaders have an enormous potential for contributing to the betterment of the world (WBCSD, 2006). Moreover, active engagement of corporations and their leaders in initiatives, such as the Business Leader's Initiative on Human Rights (BLIHR), the World Business Council for Sustainable Development's (WBCSD) "Tomorrow's Leaders Group," or the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS may be seen as an indicator for a growing willingness among business leaders to spend time, expertise and resources to help solve some of the world's most pressing problems by engaging in problem alleviation at the local level, especially in developing countries where the problem impact is most severe.

Yet, while business engagement of MNCs in developing countries has a long tradition, it has not always or necessarily been for the benefit of local people as we know, e.g., from well-documented cases, such as the Nestlé milk powder scandal and Shell's operations in Nigeria. While the commitment to contribute to solving social and environmental problems is arguably a positive change in business attitude and behavior, a cautious and critical position vis-à-vis this new development remains important from an ethical point of view. There are at least three fundamental questions that come to mind. First, why do MNCs and their leaders engage in the fight against some of the world's most pressing problems? Second, is it legitimate and thus justifiable that business leaders act as "agents of social justice"? And third, if one concludes that business leaders should in fact engage themselves and their organizations as "agents of world benefit," what is a meaningful approach to contribute to problem alleviation and thus the betterment of the world? We discuss each of these questions consecutively.

Should business leaders act as "agents of world benefit"?

The first question addresses the discussion around the underlying *motives* of this engagement: Is it driven by business reasons, such as the desire to satisfy stakeholder expectations, to improve reputation, to increase profits through engagement in new markets? Or, is it driven by concern for social issues and affected people at the local level. While in few cases the business-driven engagement for social issues (*doing good*) might in fact be beneficial for both companies (*doing well*) and people at the local level, we assume that the two approaches – namely the *business-driven* and the *social issue-driven* approach may lead to different solutions. In other words, the motives of "doing good" and thus *the way* business leaders think about their responsibilities in a connected world will have an impact on the quality of the outcome and ultimately also the sustainability of the problem solution.

Take, for instance, the problem of access to clean drinking water. An example of a primarily business-driven solution to the problem is Procter & Gamble's PUR, a water purifying powder. PUR is arguably an excellent product which can help people in disaster areas, e.g., following a Tsunami. Yet, it remains an unsatisfactory solution on a regular, long-term basis because it does not solve the core problem, that is, access to clean drinking water. Moreover, it may keep local people dependent on (more or less) expensive "Western" products. Watzlawick et al. (1988) call this a first order solution, in contrast to a second order solution which would aim at helping people to get access to clean drinking water, e.g., by installing wells. A business leader, acting as an "agent of world benefit," would certainly try to find such sustainable, impactful solutions that benefit both business and society alike. Yet, if no win–win solution can be realized the leader would give priority to developing solutions for the benefit of people in need.

The second question concerns the *legitimacy* of business leaders acting as "agents of social justice." Let

us assume, for the sake of the argument, that there is in fact widespread agreement among stakeholders that corporations and their leaders ought to act more responsibly and engage in more active ways in tackling the above-mentioned problems. Is it legitimate that business leaders and corporations act as active proponents of human rights and agents of social justice? The skepticism inherent to this question is caused by the common perception that states are in fact the ''primary agents of justice'' (O'Neill, 2004) and thus are ''ontologically privileged'' (Held, 2005, p. 10) in the delivery of equal liberty, social and humanitarian justice. Yet, O'Neill (2004) gives at least three reasons why states should *not* be considered the primary or sole agents of justice: first, many states in developing regions are simply unjust; second, there are ''weak states and failing states'' that fail to secure the rights of their inhabitants; and third, globalization has arguably led to more porous borders and weaker power of nation states, ''allowing powerful agents and agencies of other sorts to become more active within their borders'' (246 et seq.). O'Neill posits therefore that in instances, such as weak states or oppressive governments multinational corporations cannot simply see themselves as secondary agents of justice; on the contrary: they need to shoulder *active* duties in carrying *some* of the obligations of international justice, e.g., by actively promoting human rights in and beyond their own business; by instituting social and economic policies that ''bear on human rights, on environmental standards or on labor practices, and even on wider areas of life'' (O'Neill, 2004, p. 253); by ensuring transparency and accountability, fighting nepotism and corruption; and by implementing globally respectable social and environmental standards. Moreover, since corporations and their leaders are able to exercise active agency *and* have the capabilities to act as agents and thus proponents of (social) justice in the countries in which they operate, we argue in line with O'Neill that it is not only legitimate for them to do so; but that they in fact bear a *co-responsibility* in promoting human and social rights and social well-being.

Having addressed two main areas of concern – motivation and legitimacy of ''doing good'' – the third question leads us more closely to the focus of this article which is to derive lessons for business leaders from ''Project Ulysses'' regarding the question of *how* to act as agents of world benefit and engage successfully and responsibly in the fight against problems at the local level. This question is based on the assumption that desirable social change requires *responsible global leaders* – leaders who lead with head, hand, and heart; who have a responsible mindset, care for the needs of others, and act as global and responsible citizens. Maak and Pless (2006a, b) understand responsible leadership as a relational and ethical phenomenon that ''occurs in interaction with those who affect or are affected by leadership'' (2006b, p. 103). Pless (2007) defines a responsible leader as a person who reconciles ''the idea of effectiveness with the idea of corporate responsibility by being an active citizen and promoting active citizenship'' (p. 450). In line with this Maak (2007) states that responsible leaders build and cultivate ''sustainable relationships with stakeholders inside and outside the organization to achieve mutually shared objectives based on a vision of business as a force of good for the many, and not just a few (shareholders, managers)'' (p. 331). This can imply the creation of social value and the support of desirable social change (e.g., poverty alleviation, equal opportunity, etc.) at the local level.

In what follows we introduce ''Project Ulysses,'' a global in-company leadership development and service learning program run by Pricewaterhouse-Coopers (PwC), which takes place in partnership with organizations from other sectors in developing countries and aims at developing a mindset for responsible leadership. We then introduce the research methodology which follows an interpretive narrative approach and present four Ulysses narratives which tell about learnings in the light of fundamental human challenges, such as poverty, diseases, and misery. Each story is then analyzed to derive learnings for business leaders for acting responsibly as agents of world benefit. We conclude the article by summarizing key lessons learned and recommendations for business leaders who want to contribute to the betterment of the world by improving living conditions and livelihoods in developing countries.

''Project Ulysses''

''Project Ulysses'' is a global firm-wide citizenship and leadership development program run by PwC

to develop the next generation of global and responsible leaders within the firm and to foster business in civil society partnerships by strengthening the personal involvement of PwC in local communities and by building effective global networks with external stakeholders. The key feature of the program is that participants are sent in multicultural teams of three to four people to developing countries to work on social and environmental projects with NGOs, social entrepreneurs or international organizations supporting them in their fight against some of the world's most pressing problems, such as diseases, poverty, and environmental degradation at the local level (Pless and Schneider 2006).

Program design

The program consists of five phases: a nomination phase, a preparation phase, an assignment phase, a debriefing phase, and a networking phase. Around 20 participants are nominated each year by their territories to participate in ''Project Ulysses'' (*nomination phase*). Participants meet for the first time in a 7-day foundation week during which they get input on the program dimensions (diversity, sustainability, and leadership), form multicultural project teams, and meet with representatives of the partner organizations with whom they are going to work in the field (*preparation phase*). Immediately after this week they embark on an 8–10-week field trip in developing countries where they work with partner organizations from other sectors (social entrepreneurs, NGOs, and international agencies) on service projects (*assignment phase*). Content and objectives of each project are defined in collaboration with the partner organization. Immediately after the field assignment project results are celebrated and learning experiences are debriefed in a review week (*debriefing phase*). The debriefing process aims at helping participants to make sense of their experience and results in presentations of their refined team stories to members of the firm's global leadership team. After this week participants become members of the larger Ulysses network which meets personally every one to two years and consists of more than 100 alumni from all continents.

Contributing to social change by working in cross-sector partnerships

The Ulysses projects are carefully selected by the program office on the basis of criteria, such as geographic location, the impact of the project on local communities, the long-term sustainability of the project, the support of the partner organization, the match of required project skills and participants' expertise, and the breadth of interaction opportunities for participants with a diversity of stakeholders from different sectors and local society, including local and national governments. This cross-sector collaboration is intended to be mutually beneficial with project partners receiving pro-bono access to the knowledge and expertise of highly skilled professionals and the program participants getting access to a work and learning environment that forces them out of their comfort zone (Pless and Schneider, 2006): participants are confronted with fundamentally different realities of human existence which are often shaped by the world's most pressing problems, such as poverty, hunger, HIV/AIDS and malaria, lack of clean water and sanitation, among others. Participants *experience* firsthand what these problems are, they *reflect* on what can be done about them while they provide partner organizations and/or communities with professional services. For many of the partners Ulysses is a ''once in a lifetime opportunity to broaden the perspective on the global challenges of responsible leadership'' as one of the participants put it. In fact, Ulysses participants receive the opportunity to support their partner organizations in creating social value and realizing desirable social change by providing their business knowledge and professional expertise. In these projects they develop for instance solutions for strengthening coordination of local groups and NGOs in the fight against HIV/AIDS (e.g., AMICAALL in Uganda), build strategic business plans for NGOs (e.g., Basic Needs in Ghana) and social entrepreneurs (e.g., Hagar in Cambodia), provide frameworks for income generation (e.g., for the NGO Save the Children in China) and support organizations in expanding their successful operations to other regions and countries (e.g., Ciudad Saludable in Peru or GRAM VIKAS, a developmental agency in Orissa, India).

Moreover, by working in cross-sector partnerships PwC Ulysses participants in collaboration with their partner organizations contribute to the realization of some of the UN Millennium Development Goals, such as alleviating poverty, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, and empowering women, combating HIV/AIDS and other maladies, and ensuring environmental sustainability (UN, 2006).

Before we examine in more detail some learning narratives of program participants and discuss how their learnings can inform responsible leadership practice for world benefit we will provide in the following some information on our research approach.

Methodological approach

In this article we apply a narrative approach to derive learnings from Ulysses participants' experiences. This narrative method is rooted in an interpretive paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), representing a subjectivist technique (and thereby the left side) on Morgan and Smircich's (1980) continuum of approaches to social science.

There are different understandings of the notions of "narratives" and "stories." Boje (2001), for instance, understands narratives as meaningful wholes with a plot and stories as fragmented, incomplete, and incoherent. Gabriel, on the other hand, contrasts narratives – as a more general linguistic form which require words, characters, and sequencing – with stories, which are characterized by two additional qualities: having a plot and at the same time representing reality (2004, p. 64). We understand stories as a specific form of a narrative, which has a plot. While our main focus of analysis is on stories, we also include other forms of narratives like fragments of stories and reflections on situations and/or characters.

According to Kohler Riesman (1993) there are different foci for analyzing narratives: e.g., sociolinguistic analysis to determine the features of a narrative (e.g., Harvey, 2006; Labov, 1982); discourse analysis to unravel the rhetorical construction of speeches (Den Hartog and Verburg, 1997; Potter and Wetherell, 1987); psychoanalysis to interpret dreams (Freud, 1900); or content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). For our purpose we took an issue-focused view to analyze the narratives and thereby followed Weiss' procedure (1995) of data analysis.

All forms of narratives that we analyzed in this study were based on personal experiences of the participants. We conducted and transcribed qualitative interviews with 70 Ulysses participants of the programs in 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006, which represents the entire participant population. We interviewed participants before the field assignment in the foundation week and after the assignment in the review week. The interviews in the foundation week served a dual purpose: firstly, to collect some data on the living and working context of the participants in their home countries and, secondly, to build a relationship of trust with each participant. In the interviews in the review week we applied appreciative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2001) to invite participants to share the experiences they made within the team, with the partner organization and in the larger communities using the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954).

The basis of the data analysis was provided by 23 video-taped team stories and seventy individual interviews conducted in the review weeks of the program. The first step was to search the interviews for narratives and stories that told about situations at the local level that were the objects of developmental initiatives that called for change or provoked thoughts about the necessity of change implying lessons for responsible leaders as agents of world benefit. The selected narratives were then coded by two separate coders (who are familiar with the content of research on responsible leadership) who then discussed their results in order to reach a consensus on what constitutes a responsible learning narrative. The narratives where edited following Weiss' (1995) guidelines (e.g., dropping out conversational spacers and repetitions) with the exception of two rules. First, due to the best-practice character of this executive program we did not disguise the name of the company. Yet, we disguised the names of the participants and the names of the partner organizations. Second, in order to preserve the character of the original speech we refrained from condensation of speech and tried to preserve the personal dialect (e.g. "she is *gonna* bring").

Learning in the field: stories told

The following analysis of selected learning narratives is guided by the question ''What can business leaders learn from the Ulysses narratives for acting responsibly as agents of world benefit and tackling some of world's problems?'' The analysis is based on four stories from four different projects. After having briefly introduced the narrator and the focus of the narrative we present the narrative itself. We then briefly examine the structure of the narrative, discuss aspects of its content with regard to the research question, and derive lessons for responsible leadership practice.

Respecting the way of life of indigenous people: a narrative of undesired conversion

The following story told by a member of ''Team Ecuador'' reflects the team's experience with the developmental practice of their project partner, an international organization that lacks a license to operate in the local community.

> A good example in connection with our project (poverty reduction in Ecuador through the development of small businesses) relates to how the project sponsor was attempting to provide a ''one size fits all'' solution. There were different regional areas and different peoples to consider in the equation. The indigenous people of Ecuador had a way of life that involved communal village contributions for the good of all in the village. No individual wealth. If one prospered in a year, all prospered. If one suffered, all suffered. Historically, in prosperous times with bountiful harvests, great celebrations took place but the concept of attempting to save for less prosperous times was foreign. In less prosperous times of poor harvests, if left without interference, more sickness occurred and, in the extreme, natural selection kept the villages and peoples in check and in balance with the environment.
>
> Our sponsor was intent on assisting the indigenous peoples, along with others, to develop businesses and ''prosper'' in the classic Western cultural sense. In our interviews with representatives of the indigenous peoples, it was clear the question was ''Why?'' The people understood what they were doing, how they kept in balance with the environment – to change was not in their culture. The celebrations in good times were an important part of life – the highs and the lows of the chosen life were reflected in the culture. They did not need or want the value judgment that this chosen way of life could be ''improved'' if they learned to celebrate less in the good times and save for the bad times.
>
> It was very clear that we all need to listen to the perspective of others and suspend our judgment. It was not clear that this message got through to our sponsor or other organizations determined to convert others to their way of thinking.

The story consists of four parts: first, an introduction specifying what the story is about – the questionable ''one size fits all'' solution approach of the project sponsor; second, a descriptive part containing information about the situation of indigenous people of Ecuador; third, a critical reflection on the sponsor's approach which implied imposing their problem perception and solutions approaches on others, reflecting that this contradicts the needs and wants of the local people; and fourth, a conclusion regarding lessons learned, namely that one should not convert others to one's own way of thinking.

This story raises the question of the legitimacy of being an agent of social change: Who determines if, and in which direction, a local community should develop. In the case at hand the developmental agency acts without a license to operate from the local people. Thus, if developmental activities result from external pressure with no mandate or legitimacy from local or indigenous people, then social change, inflicted on a community, e.g., by external change agents (i.e., the developmental agency), may be perceived as ''neocolonialistic'' behavior. Put differently, helping indigenous people to develop in a certain direction is not a good enough reason to impose one's own ideas on others, or even to convert them to a certain way of thinking.

Therefore, the desire to support development at the local level requires the identification of a real need for help and a desire to change; good intentions are not good enough. Imposing solutions on others without buy-in and/or mandate may equal despotism and patronage and ultimately undermines the sovereignty of local people and communities. Thus, the morale of this particular narrative is to respect and tolerate the way of life of indigenous people in its own right and to develop collaborative, ''indigenous'' solutions.

A respectful approach would also imply considering the impact of a developmental intervention and asking if the intervention is really going to change the life of people on the ground for the better; as the following critical reflection of a participant demonstrates:

> I had a similar "evolving perspective" during my experience - our work was to conduct a micro-business study of rural villages to provide data and guidance in determining which villages should receive electricity when a hydro-power dam was constructed. We had initially thought that bring electricity would of course be good for these villages and allow for them to be happier and more developed. After some time observing the simple life that they led without electricity and without being connected to the outside world - we began to feel that perhaps providing electricity and connectivity would not be that good an idea since it would likely change and perhaps corrupt this wonderfully simple life that these people enjoyed.

Ultimately, the question raised is: Who determines what a *good* life is? Is it defined in materialistic, quantitative, economic terms and measured in numbers, such as the gross national product (GNP), or in qualitative terms, such as: clean water and an unspoiled environment; life with, and from, nature; intact social and cultural communities; material independence and self-sufficiency; or even happiness? Helena Norberg-Hodge demonstrated in her research on Ladakh how a prospering culture, characterized by happiness and humanity, was profoundly and ultimately negatively changed by Western influences and developmental projects: "In Ladakh I experienced how 'progress' has alienated people from their environment, from each other and ultimately from themselves." (1993, p. 17); and how it led to environmental pollution and isolation, inflation and unemployment, intolerance and envy.

Obviously then, the question "What is a good life?" can only be answered properly by the affected people themselves. Yet, since in many cases they do not have the experience to assess the impact of "modernity" on their lives it becomes the role of a responsible change agent to make people at the local level aware of the consequences and thus the pros and cons of "development." Therefore, business leaders, too, who intend to act as agents of world benefit should be cautious about imposing their own ideas and "expert" imagination on others, not only because this might be criticized as paternalistic and neocolonialistic behavior by stakeholders, but more importantly because they ought to respect indigenous cultures and protect cultural diversity.

Knowing when different is different and when it is wrong: a narrative of incest

The following narrative was told by a member of "Team Madagascar" who struggled with accepting the following local practice.

> We saw many girls starting from ages of 11 already having children of their own, sometimes their very own fathers have fathered these children's children. Is this due to poverty or lack of education or many other factors? As a woman I struggled to accept this condition when I saw many thirteen year olds having a child in the womb and one other being carried on the hip or back. Quite honestly, I was powerless in that situation at that moment – but was very angry.

The narrator starts the narrative by reporting about the local practice of incest with teenage girls. The brief question she asks not only reveals her difficulty but also an unwillingness in finding reasons to explain such an inhuman and degrading treatment of young women depriving them of all chances in life. She concludes the story by expressing her sheer helplessness in the face of such inhuman practices and sharing her emotional feelings of anger that disclose her deep disapproval and mark an overstepping of the limits of tolerance.

This narrative raises the ethical question of how to approach different practices and how to navigate between cultural relativism ("this is how people behave in this part of the world…") and ethical imperialism ("everyone should follow our norms…"). Donaldson (1996) states that the challenge is to find a balanced way between these extremes. In order to approach moral differences across cultures and to distinguish between when different is different and when different is wrong he proposes three guiding principles: first, to respect local traditions, second to consider the context in which she situation occurs, and third to respect core human values and consult internationally accepted and globally binding lists of moral principles, such as the

United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The narrative above is an example of an abusive local practice that clearly violates norms of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, namely children's rights to physical and personal integrity and protection "from all forms of physical or mental violence, including sexual and other forms of exploitation…" (United Nations, 2008). Therefore, "different" in the case at hand is simply wrong.

In conclusion, while tolerance of local practices is an important virtue for implementing sustainable meaningful change in order to improve the lives of people and their living conditions, it finds its limits where human dignity and internationally accepted core human values are violated.

Stop–look–listen and don't prejudge: A narrative of a failed developmental project

The following story, told by a member of "Team Namibia," describes a situation in which the team learns about a developmental solution provided by an international political body which was not accepted by the local community and led to project failure and a waste of financial resources in the fight against poverty.

> It was a political body who had donated toilets to the village. These toilets don't require running water. They work on a filtration system. Essentially they require wind that decomposes the human faeces. And the shantytowns are part of the village that is required to dig some holes in the ground for these toilets to be erected. Holes of probably three feet by three feet or about two yards by two yards. And the toilets were sitting in the council compound because the community had refused to dig the holes. So that's what we heard in the meetings. And you say: "Well how hard is it to dig a hole in the ground when you have probably 60% unemployment in the village? Why can't you encourage somebody to dig some hole, because that does improve the lifestyle of lots of people who live in that community?"
>
> The thing I learned, and the thing that I probably learned afterwards when we were into the second village visit, was something that you get told when you are very young and when you cross the street: and it was the *stop–look–listen routine*. And I remember telling my team mates that if there is one thing that has been changing in me from the first to the second to the third week, it's that I am realizing: I am stopping more, I am looking more, and I am listening more. And this was the one place I had to constantly do it, I really constantly stopped, looked, listened as to what was going on in this community. It was probably a day or two after that initial meeting, when we met some of the people in the community that should have dug the holes to put these toilets in. And I remember asking the question: "Why did you not dig the holes for these toilets? You have to explain this to me, because I am really struggling with why you don't do this for your community." And the individual we were speaking to said: "You know there are some good reasons we didn't dig the holes. One of them is that they were in an area where many of the unemployed youth go and play in, and they use it as a sports area. And they wanted us to dig holes right in the middle of that area. And we said no, not there, somewhere else, but the council wanted them there." The second thing he said was that putting the toilets in place is going to bring more people into the village, who believe they are going to improve their habit of living – and it's going to be actually worse. So, now you start to hear a different side, a different story. And not one that you'd ever turned your mind to, when you were hearing the first story, a day and a half ago. So that was part of the *stop–look–listen and don't prejudge* routine because you don't really know all the facts.

The narrator uses the story of an unsuccessful development project to tell us about his learning how to broaden his own perspective and to understand issues from a different perspective. The narrative consists of three parts: In the first part the narrator introduces the story of the unsuccessful toilet project. In the second part he describes his struggle to understand why the local people did not install the toilet system. And in the third part he talks about his learning and reveals the process that enabled him to understand the indigenous perspective. He calls this approach: "Stop–look–listen." The approach implies not prejudging others and forming an opinion too quickly, but talking to different constituencies (also in the local communities), and observing and actively listening to different voices. This practice allowed him to see and understand the toilet project from a different perspective and to get new insights into the causes of the project failure.

Responsible business leaders who are not only committed to business success but also to the common good and well-being of local communities and

global societies can learn from this story that first, ready-made "Western" solution approaches do not necessarily help affected people (see also Easterly, 2006) and solve the problem at hand. While the intention to engage in finding solutions for a problem is laudable, the toilet story exemplifies that helping people requires more than "downloading" a "Western" solution on them. In fact, it requires, as a starting point, a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, political, and economic context and a desire and ability to understand the mindset of the affected people at the local level so as to develop sustainable solutions *with* them, not for them. Second, observing and active listening to different stakeholders is helpful for developing a broader and deeper understanding of the issues at hand and for learning to see and understand different mindsets.

Reconciling old and new – a narrative of traditional healing

In Subsaharan Africa (e.g., Kenya, Ghana) traditional healers play an important role in the local health care system. They are respected in their societies as eminent authorities in the treatment of maladies and their advice is usually followed. However, this medical advice is not necessarily in line with Western medical knowledge and international standards of human practices and can even be part of the problem as the following example demonstrates. A Ulysses team working in Kenya reported about an appalling and obviously intolerable local practice called "virgin cleansing" that is recommended by local healers and means that "if you have AIDS, the way you can cure the virus is by passing it on to a virgin!" The social consequence is that "the average age of rape victims in that area was between the ages of 4 and 12." So instead of curing a malady healers contribute knowingly or not to the spread of the disease. This has profound consequences for the fight against maladies, such as HIV/AIDS.

Similar inhumane practices can be found in other medical areas, such as, mental health. The following narrative, told by a member of the Ghanaian team, describes the local practice of chaining mentally ill people – and the role of the PwC team in kicking off a discussion on treatment methods among local healers.

How do you deal with a psychotic who goes wandering in front of cars? That is the question facing the parents of Abu, a 25 year old psychotic who started wandering in front of traffic completely oblivious to where he was. Along with 95% of Ghanaians they turned to a traditional healer who prescribed a treatment of herbs and restraint. The restraint involved Abu being confined to a dark room and having his leg attached to a tree trunk. When we met him on Thursday he had been there for over a month… Restraining patients by chaining them up or attaching them to tree trunks is not unusual. In the case of Abu, his leg was inserted in a hole in the trunk, and then an iron nail inserted to prevent him removing his foot. He had to eat, sleep and spend the day in the room, with the constant weight of his foot underneath a tree trunk. The scene was almost medieval and one that I will not forget easily.

We heard about this case through Walter, a psychiatric nurse based in Wa, where we were staying. Walter administered some tranquilizers which would last six weeks, and this would control Abu's tendencies to go wandering. However in order to secure Abu's release, the traditional healer would need to make a sacrifice of a chicken or fowl, so the next day his parents would pay some money for the animal and call the healer. Only then could he be released. In some circumstances where the family is too poor, BN, a local NGO, have had to pay for the animal to be sacrificed in order to release a mentally ill person from their restraint. We met an association of traditional healers the next day at their monthly meeting, and we raised the sensitive issue of chaining and restraining patients. Before the meeting we had met the chairman of the association at one of our training sessions for BN partners, and at the meeting the chairman stood up and talked to the other healers about the benefits of "white man medicine's" tranquilizers which can stabilize patients without the need for restraints, before they go on to administer herbal remedies. This was the catalyst for a number of other healers to stand up and talk about their experiences combining the "new medicines" with the "traditional" approaches, and this avoided having to chain people up for months on end. Some healers, however, stated they never used the "new" medicines – implying that they did indeed use some pretty rudimentary and backward approaches.

It has become clear from our conversations with many people that there is a real gulf of distrust between the traditional healers and the modern medical commu-

nity, yet the traditional healers are at the front line of care for most of the population.

The story consists of four parts. The narrator starts with an engaging question related to a specific case of a mentally ill person. After having outlined the context of the narrative and the role of traditional healers the narrator describes the traditional treatment in more detail, unveiling the inhumane character of chaining and restraining patients. In the second part he introduces an alternative Western approach (tranquilizers), the conditions for its application being to sacrifice poultry in order to release the patient. He then discusses the role of the local partner organization which is to pay for the animal. In part three he describes a meeting of the team with an association of traditional healers at which they addressed the sensitive issue of treatment and started a discussion on possibilities and experiences in combining "new medicines" with the "traditional approaches," with the chairman of the association acting as a catalyst in the discussion. The narrator finishes his narrative by underscoring the divide between traditional healers and the modern medical community, stressing the influential role of traditional medicine.

While the narrator does not draw a particular conclusion one can derive the following lessons to be learned from this narrative: first, even if Western medicine provides solutions that may alleviate certain cases of mental illness, providing a more human treatment to patients, we cannot expect that these solutions will be readily accepted by indigenous people. Second, if one intends to initiate desirable social change it is necessary to identify local health care authorities. These authorities may not be the "official" ones, at least not on the local level. Third, even if one cannot tolerate the customs and practices of these local authorities, in particular for ethical reasons, it is indispensable to respectfully engage with them and make them allies in search of new ways to change practices for the better. Thus, despite the urgency of many health-related problems, collaborative and sustainable solutions will be long term, not short term. And fourth, the narrative also illustrates that external change agents can play a mediating and facilitating role in supporting the process of developing solutions by forging links between traditional and "Western" approaches.

The moral of the tales…

To answer the question "What can business leaders learn from the Ulysses narratives for acting as agents of world benefit and for engaging responsibly in the fight against problems at the local level?" we summarize in the following some key lessons learned and derive recommendations:

One, if business leaders want to engage in the fight against some of the world's most pressing problems on the ground at the local level and contribute to the betterment of living conditions and livelihoods, they should refrain from assuming that all people in developing countries appreciate external help and in fact want to change their chosen life style. Good intentions are not enough – "doing good" requires more. Most notably, it requires from a responsible business leader to respect and tolerate the way of life of indigenous people and to aim at finding out if there is a need for help and a desire to change in the first place. Ultimately, such practice is also in the interest of time and resource investment and thus efficiency.

Two, ready-made "Western" solutions do not necessarily meet the needs of affected people and solve problems at the local level. To be accepted, such solutions need to be developed *with* local people, not *for* them. This requires an understanding of the context (economic, cultural, and political) and the mindset of the affected people and a willingness to engage with different stakeholders. Observing and active listening are qualities that can help responsible leaders to get a broader and deeper understanding of the issues at hand and to understand local people, their practices and mindsets.

Three, while tolerance of local mindsets and practices is an important virtue for changing lives and living conditions for the better it finds its limits where human dignity and internationally accepted ethical standards and core human values are violated. Therefore, knowing when different is different and when different is wrong is key – this competence can in fact be learned in real-life experiences like "Project Ulysses."

Finally, while it is important to know the limits of tolerance it is important not to condemn people but still to be willing to engage *with* them to find ways to change practices for the better. A useful role of business leaders as external agents can be that of

facilitating and mediating the process of developing solutions by forging links between traditional and "Western" approaches.

Conclusion: developing responsible leaders as agents of world benefit

In this article we derived lessons learned from selected Ulysses narratives to inform business leaders with an aspiration to become "agents of world benefit" about a responsible approach to contributing to the public good. The analysis demonstrated that the role of agent of world benefit is a demanding one requiring an understanding of the complexity of social issues, a reflective and responsible mindset, and interpersonal qualities for interacting with different stakeholders and generating solution approaches. Due to the enormous responsibility that comes with this role and the fact that interventions at the local level often have an irreversible effect on the life of indigenous people, as Norberg-Hodge's research demonstrated, a systematic preparation of leaders to take over such roles is imperative. "Project Ulysses" offers a learning context in which program participants can personally experience what it means to work with diverse stakeholders at the local level and to get engaged with those people who are directly affected by some of the world's most demanding problems; and what it takes to contribute to tackling social, humanitarian and environmental problems and to searching for sustainable solutions. It is also stressed in the service learning literature that such assignments bear the potential for moral development (Boss, 1994; Markus et al., 1993), for developing a greater tolerance for diversity (Dumas, 2002), for raising awareness of social issues (Kolenko et al., 1996) and for encouraging civic and social responsibility (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Fleckenstein, 1997; Gabelnick, 1997; Godfrey et al., 2005; Lester et al., 2005; Morgan and Streb, 1999).

Yet, as our experience as researchers and facilitators in the Ulysses program shows, no learning experience is without limitations. In order to fully and systematically leverage the program's potential for developing responsible business leaders (as agents of world benefit) the development of a reflective moral and responsible mindset needs to be defined explicitly as a key learning objective. Moreover, for developing a responsible mindset it is not enough to send participants on experiential projects in developing countries and debrief their experience along general dimensions, such as leadership, diversity, and sustainability. It is also important to provide a systematic *moral learning approach* throughout the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) and to coordinate the interaction between concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation accordingly in order to support the process of transformation of experience into learning.

Thus, with respect to systematically developing business leaders as agents of world benefit through a service and experiential learning methodology – as in "Project Ulysses" – the following actions ought to be taken: providing ethical input in the foundation week (program foundation), for instance on moral thinking, responsible leadership frameworks, and models on ethical decision making; debriefing in systematic ways participants' experiences with a focus on moral encounters and situations from which moral learning can be derived; in our case in particular lessons learned with respect to acting as "agents of world benefit." This requires coaches and facilitators with an educational background in philosophy or business ethics who can facilitate ethical discussions around participants' narratives and help them to derive lessons learned as demonstrated in this article. To close the learning cycle it is helpful to foster and support further experimentation and action of participants in their home territories. This stage can also be accompanied by coaches and facilitators who foster ongoing learning with regard to responsible thinking and acting.

Learning experiences like "Project Ulysses" have the potential to further responsible leadership capabilities and capacities around the world. Participants experience outside their comfort zones how some of the world's most pressing public problems impact people on the local level. They discover that the "right thing" might not always be the right thing to do, and that ethical behavior, or leading responsibly for that matter, "is not so much a matter of having exact rules about how we ought to behave, as of recognizing the relevance of our shared humanity in making the choices we face" (Sen, 1999, p. 283). As such, these experiences are just the beginning, and not the end, of developing responsible global leadership.

Note

[1] "Business as An Agent of World Benefit" was the title of a conference which was hosted by Case Western Reserve University in collaboration with the Academy of Management and the UN Global Compact in Cleveland, OH (October 24–26, 2006).

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