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New DNA of Business*

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Book Review of *The Age of Responsibility: CSR 2.0 and the New DNA of Business*, by M. Visser.

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The Age of Responsibility: CSR 2.0 and the New DNA of Business

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Are companies more a part of the problem or the solution? Is the net impact of business positive or negative? These are a few of the questions Wayne Visser wrestles with in his new book *The Age of Responsibility: CSR 2.0 and the New DNA of Business*. Jeffery Hollender, in the foreword to the book, provides some historical context. In the beginning, responsible businesses were going to save the world. What started out, in the 1960s and gaining momentum in the 1980s, lost focus and succumbed to the

allure of a “philanthropic free-for-all” (p. xiii). The result? Hype, window dressing, “greenwashing,” failed connection between vision and action, and so on. Hollender uses his firsthand understanding of corporate responsibility to illustrate the “problem” with the current business paradigm—trying to effect piecemeal change rather than systemic alterations to the purpose of business; this is a problem Visser suggests CSR 2.0 can alleviate.

Visser explains corporate social responsibility’s (CSR) ability to solve global problems. It is in this macro perspective that his book is situated. Often CSR is solely discussed at its micro level, dealing with individual companies and their practices within an industry, but Visser, looking at the larger picture, offers a new way of approaching CSR. To get at the macro perspective, Visser uses multidisciplinary sources drawing on history, religion, and classic Western and Eastern thinkers. This wide perspective situates the reader in the history of capitalism, while defining key terms, concepts, and seminal thinkers along the way in order to show the connectedness of his views and aspirations to CSR history, while offering something he calls “radical” CSR (p. 9).

Visser’s text suits many audiences. First, undergraduates early in their exposure to CSR would benefit from the case studies provided in the earlier chapters, which cover high-profile issues (e.g., Lehman Brothers, BP). Second, instructors would benefit from the layout of each chapter, specifically the “in a nutshell” snapshot of key ideas; these provide shorthand material appropriate for in-class reviews. Third, CSR 2.0 would help graduate students understand the bigger context and history of CSR and chart avenues for research projects. Fourth, professionals would benefit from exploring how to better situate their business within society by aligning culture, vision, and strategy, and more thoroughly understand communication’s role in the process. Finally, the book is targeted to academics looking to expand their understanding of CSR or begin new lines of research.

The book is divided into four parts. Each chapter, except for the first and last, contains an “in a nutshell” overview that lists iconic leaders, the time frame or catalyzing events in the given CSR period in time, key ideas, commentators, and literature references for that section. Visser offers insightful epigraphs from diverse thinkers to start each part as well as a case study that sheds light on the forthcoming concepts. This layout helps the reader follow Visser’s argument by showing cause/effect in historical events and connecting similar ideas together.

Part I, “The Call to Responsibility,” consists of one chapter, “Our Ability to Respond.” Visser conceptualizes responsibility as a form of sharing (a central element of CSR2.0, hence, its Web allusion), a “counterbalance to rights,” or, more philosophically, “being conscious of the oneness of the universe” (pp. 4-5). Part I establishes the premise for Visser’s argument. He suggests that we judge CSR’s effectiveness as a doctor judges his or her own success: Is the patient getting better or worse? Visser argues that at a global level, “our social, environmental, and ethical health is in decline” (p. 7). To illustrate CSR’s failure, he cites facts about environmental issues (our global footprint and global weather), societal well-being (our global village), and business corruption (our global dishonesty). His solution is CSR 2.0, redefined as “Corporate Sustainability and Responsibility” (p. 7). Last, he introduces his framework for understanding the history of corporations in their relationship to responsibility. Visser presents intersecting epochs, which he calls the “Ages of CSR.” These “Ages” are best described as an evolution, where a company could be in multiple Ages at once.

Part II, “The Ages and Stages of CSR,” presents case studies that reflect the themes of various ages. For example, Chapter 2, “The Age of Greed,” tells the story of the financial crisis from the eyes of Larry

McDonald, a former VP at Lehman Brothers. Multiple examples of corporate greed's destruction are paralleled through the first person case study and Visser's own experiences. Importantly, Visser discusses what aspects built his perspective so that his subjectivity is openly acknowledged. Multiple forms of greed are noted—banking, executive, corporate, and institutionalized greed, all of which, according to Visser, allowed for an age that is unsustainable. In the end, his reflection on “The Age of Greed” leads Visser to wonder whether capitalism is fundamentally flawed.

In a discussion of the “The Age of Philanthropy” (Chapter 3), Visser presents a case study of John D. Rockefeller and Standard Oil. Visser chronicles philanthropy's tradition across time and cultures to include institutional philanthropy, foundations, and venture philanthropy, spotlighting high-profile examples of the biggest givers world-wide (e.g., St. George's Bay Company, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Bill Gates). Nonetheless, this age is not concerned about business responsibilities as much as the responsibility of the wealthy to give back, thus precluding deep systemic change.

“The Age of Marketing” (Chapter 4) is also illustrated through a salient case study, this time of John Browne, the former CEO of BP. Browne's cost-cutting led to health and safety failures, which the new CEO Tony Hayward attempted to resolve, only to become the scapegoat for the 2010 Gulf spill. BP's actions demonstrate the “magic tricks and military tactics” (p. 84) that Visser suggests define this stage of CSR. He cites well-known examples, such as big tobacco, “greenwashing” by General Electric, and the anti-global warming lobbying body, Global Climate Coalition.

Visser analyzes “The Age of Management” (Chapter 5) through a case study of Cadbury. Because of John Cadbury's Quaker views, he used his business for social justice. He envisioned drinking chocolate as an alternative to drinking alcohol; from this perspective, his company had an ethical social purpose. Visser's discussion of “The Age of Management” has the most content depth, with multiple business cases and history insights, more closely resembling the content found in a textbook (e.g., Archie Carroll's CSR Pyramid). Visser discusses everything from the history of usury to the industrial welfare movement to shareholder supremacy/activism and corporate governance. Finally, Visser discusses “three curses” of CSR 1.0: CSR that is peripheral, incremental and/or uneconomic (p. 123).

The final “Age” of CSR that Visser discusses is “The Age of Responsibility” (Chapter 6), an “Age” he analyzes using Ray Anderson, a self-reported “plunderer of the earth” and the founder of Interface (a carpet tile manufacturer), as a case study. Anderson has begun to reform his business in the way of CSR 2.0. It is this section of the book that inspired the “new DNA” referenced in the title; Visser argues that the four responsible bases of the CSR 2.0 “DNA” (p. 149) are value creation, good governance, societal contribution, environmental integrity. Visser also uses the case study in “The Age of Responsibility” to introduce the metaphor of CSR 2.0 (Web2.0), arguing that it is collaborative in essence, operates on five main principles: Creativity, Scalability, Responsiveness, Glocality, and Circularity.

Visser details each of these five principles in Part III, “The Principles of CSR 2.0.” For Visser, these principles are critical to true systemic change, and getting CSR into the (new) DNA of business. Chapter 7, “The Principle of Creativity” uses Anurag Gupta from A Little World, a microbank that provides banking opportunities to India's poor, as the case study. For Visser, creativity is needed to solve the complex social, ethical, and environmental problems plaguing the world today. Visser introduces “creative destruction” (p. 167), which explains the interplay of destruction and innovation through which new products, companies, and entire industries are created. Epitomizing this dynamic are the

opportunities afforded to social entrepreneurs through organizations such as Ashoka and the Skoll Foundation, organizations dedicated to supporting social entrepreneurial efforts.

To illustrate the “The Principle of Scalability” Visser uses Wal-Mart as a case study (Chapter 8). Wal-Mart makes sustainability and responsibility scalable because of their sheer size. Visser discusses the problem with ethical consumers, and suggests that the invisible hand of the market has been preoccupied with “self-pleasuring” (p. 203). Borrowing Chris Anderson’s “long tail” (p. 206) metaphor, which explains that selling less to more people is the essence of big business, Visser suggests that the “Long Tail of CSR” is about extending the reach of CSR and its ability to solve specific social problems. Finally, Visser connects Prahalad and Hart’s “bottom of the pyramid (BoP)” (p. 208) as an example of true scalability but suggests a more democratic approach for companies to enter that market. Crowdsourcing, whereby “technology has shrunk the gap between professionals and amateurs” (p. 215), is suggested as a democratic way to use collaboration to solve complex problems.

Visser discusses the third principle of CSR 2.0, “The Principle of Responsiveness,” in Chapter 9. His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales is the central example for this principle, but the chapter also looks at the contradictions between word and deed of various pharmaceutical companies’ (e.g., Oxfam, Cipla, GlaxoSmithKline). Visser sees nongovernmental organizations as a major player in this arena, suggesting 10 “futures” (pp. 241-243) of civil society organizations as more central players in making a difference. Overall, Visser argues that responsiveness requires Web2.0 collaboration, both literally and figuratively.

The fourth and fifth principles of CSR 2.0 are discussed in Chapters 10 and 11, respectively. Chapter 10 presents AIESEC, an international organization dedicated to youth leadership development, as an example of “The Principle of Glocality.” Visser demonstrates that CSR varies greatly in shape and form across countries. In essence, this principle reflects thinking globally but acting locally. By having a “native capability” (p. 262), companies can maintain global objectives (those universalities that transcend cultures) but diversify their means locally.

Chapter 11 details the “The Principle of Circularity” using Patagonia as a case study, with their “Footprint Chronicles” illustrating each step in the supply chain. Visser illuminates the concept of “cradle to cradle” (p. 296) via holism, systems theory, and spaceship earth. According to the principle of circularity, zero waste is possible, pointing to a radical perspective on recycling. Visser points out the value of “full cost accounting” (p. 295) with examples such as Nike, Timberland, Seventh Generation, and Coke illustrating the idea that waste products become “food” for new products. Overall, the examples in Chapter 11 point to new ways for companies to “live more considered lives” (p. 285) with responsibility in their DNA.

In the final part of the book, Part IV: “Our Ability to Change,” Visser discusses visions of a “matrix” of change and possibilities for making a difference. Chapter 12, “The Matrix of Change,” provides visions of two very different worlds we could be heading toward, depending on the version of CSR we adopt—the world of the oasis or the plains of the Serengeti. The chapter details Visser’s Matrix of Change with an axis of time and another of agency, which allows for four types of change: Invention, Intention, Evolution, and Revolution. Chapter 13, “Making a Difference,” provides an argument for why and how to make a difference. Visser discusses “cultivating radicals” by pointing to historical examples (e.g., Lao Tsu, Buddha, Jesus, Nelson Mandela). He also highlights four types of CSR change agents: *experts*, who help through providing advice and engaging in projects; *facilitators*, who focus on team building and transferring knowledge and skills to participants; *catalysts*, who initiate change, influence leadership,

and are big-picture thinkers; and *activists*, who fight for just causes, leaving a legacy of improved conditions in society. Regardless which of the four types of CSR professional one may be, Visser argues that CSR can fill the “existential gap” (p. 346) created by a lost sense of personal meaning and job satisfaction due to our focus on economic growth.

Overall, *The Age of Responsibility: CSR 2.0 and the New DNA of Business* provides a framework for understanding important CSR theories, concepts, and scholars in today’s global business environment. Visser makes a strong argument founded in the theories of seminal CSR scholars from Friedman to Freeman, Karnani to Bakan covering most of the concepts that a textbook would, while moving the reader through history and practices toward the ultimate realization that change must occur now, at macro and systemic levels. The philosophical overtone of the entire argument, especially the opening chapter, “The Call to Responsibility” and the concluding chapter, “Making a Difference,” suggest that this book is meant to educate a variety of people with diverse backgrounds, and ultimately aims to motivate readers to become part of the solution. At the same time as it is engaging and insightful, the book also serves as a serious resource for scholars and professionals alike. Scholars from various fields (e.g., management, sociology, psychology, communication, ecology, and environmental studies) will find the content of the book useful for research and teaching. The case studies offer salient and insightful analyses of ways to succeed or fail, and Visser’s key concepts, ideas, matrixes, overviews, and histories are all appendixed in the beginning of the book, providing quick reference for research or classroom use. In short, the philosophical, motivating, and inspiring tone of *The Age of Responsibility: CSR 2.0 and the New DNA of Business* reflects the reality of the message, which is as salient for a college freshman as it is for a CEO.