

# This Human Business

The new bottom line is social

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# Foreword

## When it comes to business ethics and strategy, a natural synergy exists between award-winning communications agency *Bondy Consulting*, and leading growth and innovation consultancy *The Foundation*.

Both companies strive to embody the principle that for businesses to thrive and succeed - regardless of size or industry - emphasis should be placed on balance in a world that seems to find this increasingly hard to achieve. In particular, humanity seems to be getting lost in the pursuit of business results, when in fact recognising it would enable those results to be more robustly and sustainably achieved. We jointly commissioned this report after realising we shared a lot of views that have arisen from our work. We saw a set of issues that were coming up more frequently and that seemed to be related.

After several lively and thought-provoking discussions, we decided to capture our ideas on paper and to harness some of the latest thinking on human needs and relations as they apply to business.

We saw a number of challenges that we hope can be confronted by looking at things in a different way including:

- Why is it that despite the rhetoric, business seems firmly focused on economic value ahead of its wider value to society - which in itself has undermined value and legitimacy?
- Why is respect for people and the way we work as human beings getting lost in an obsession with inputs and outputs - with consequences for society as a whole?
- Why have many businesses started to work as more of an anti-social machine than a true social network?

The report has been written by the political and social commentator, Anthony Painter, who authored the first UK book on Obama and has witnessed firsthand the power of engaging people in new ways. He draws on this experience - and on a wealth of leading-edge thinking and business case studies - to analyse why and how business can become more human.

This is the result - we hope you enjoy it.

**Jessica Bondy**  
CEO  
Bondy Consulting

**Charlie Dawson**  
Partner  
The Foundation



## **Corporations are social institutions - communities.**

They function best when committed human beings work in cooperative relationships, under conditions of respect and trust. Destroy this and the whole institution of business collapses.<sup>1</sup>

Henry Mintzberg 2007

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<sup>1</sup> 'How productivity killed American enterprise' by Henry Mintzberg, 2007.  
<http://www.mintzberg.org/sites/default/files/productivity2008.pdf>

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# Executive Summary

- The financial and business crises have created economic havoc. They have also led to fundamental questions about the way that we do business: Is business socially useful? Can economies and businesses grow forever? How can lasting value be created instead of recurrent episodes of boom and bust?
- The central hypothesis of this report is that these questions arise not simply as a result of a crisis caused by an unforeseen force of nature; rather they are direct consequences of a way of doing business that has become fundamentally *unbalanced*.
- In order to bridge the gap between expectations and results, financial trickery and an unsustainable trade-off between long-term value and short-term gain increasingly became the norm. In the great depression, it was the failure of business performance to match obscenely leveraged share-values that sparked collapse. This time around it was unsustainable household lending and borrowing that was the spark. The particular manifestation is not the issue – it's the imbalance that, like water at high pressure, will always find a weak point through which to be released.

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# Executive Summary

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- The imbalances that exist in the financial system, between nations, and in the economy are well-rehearsed. But there are serious issues in businesses too. For example:
  - Long v short term
  - Cause (human organisation) v effect (financial metrics)
  - Value to customers v output from producers
  - Market pull v marketing push
  - Sustainable v infinite
  - Influence v control
  - Social v mechanistic
- Short-term, effect-focused, output-oriented, push marketing, finite consumption, controlled, mechanical organisation are not necessarily bad. In fact, many of these approaches are necessary. It is just that there needs to be a shift towards the long-term, cause-focused, customer value-oriented, demand-pulled, creative, sustainable, influence-centred and the social, if business is to be *positively embraced once more. Business must match achievements with realistic expectations and demonstrate that it has a social as well as short-term financial contribution to make.*
- Why did News of the World close? It pursued short term success at the expense of understanding the human reaction to its practises. Why are utility companies so unloved? Because too often they are not transparent which harms trust. Why do 'computer says no' style call centres drive people mad? Because it is about the company's process rather than the customers needs. All these approaches make sense in terms of short term, mechanistic, financial metric-driven processes but it can lead to long-term disaster - as governments step in, the media is alerted, and customers take control sometimes after years of suffering in silence. They are in many ways social failures that lead to commercial failure. There must be a different way - and there are many companies that have shown an understanding of the social bottom line. And they have been successful as a result.
- The key to this rebalancing is people and the missing behaviours are social. This social focus means understanding how humans are motivated and interact. It means understanding ourselves in new ways; out with rationalist, Homo Economicus and in with his sister Homo Empathicus.<sup>2</sup>
- This report references new thinking from the worlds of psychology, economics, science, and politics. It draws on these fields to understand:
  - How people make decisions
  - The value of empathy
  - The importance of creativity
  - The role and value of social networks
- It outlines concrete examples of firms that - knowingly or unknowingly - apply these insights of decision-making, empathy, creativity, and social networking to their business. They are applying human and social learning to create sustainable value.
- We conclude with practical suggestions on ways this new understanding could be applied to help businesses map their way through this uncertain world.
- The challenge is that our economy and businesses have both become unbalanced. The response is to rebalance through applied understanding of the social nature of the organisations that we create. By combining new understanding with a series of practical steps, businesses can quickly begin to make useful changes. This matters because the creation of genuine long-term value depends on this rebalancing. And it matters even more because the broader societal legitimacy of business is at stake.
- Business is not just a numbers game. It is has a social root and social consequences. And its success depends on that insight. That's why this report argues that business's real bottom line is social and considers what that might mean in practical terms.

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<sup>2</sup> See Jeremy Rifkin, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VN9YrRh-LaQ>

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# 1

## Introduction to the report



Following the largest financial crisis to hit the capitalist economy since the 1930s, one word is constantly used to describe our current situation: **imbalance**.

These imbalances proliferate: between finance and other sectors, between the international and domestic economy, between consumption and production, between surplus and deficit nations, between the developed and developing world, and between the wealthy and the materially struggling. There is also imbalance within business itself and it predated financial collapse and recession.

At the core of this imbalance is the concept of business itself. Businesses have conceived of themselves as legal, productive, or financial entities. Actually a failure to appreciate the social basis of business has led to imbalance manifesting itself in several ways and conflicts have emerged: between long and short-term, cause (human organisation) and effect (financial metrics), real value and raw output, pull and push marketing, sustainability and the finite, influence over control, and the social against the mechanistic.

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This imbalance is a consequence of the limits of a particular phase of capitalism. Over the course of two centuries, the economy has passed from the primarily local and small-scale where relationships formed on the basis of inter-personal trust were the key to value, into an economy characterised by large-scale industrial organisation. This form of industrial organisation could well have reached its limit – hence the imbalance and question marks about sustainability.

What this means is that business - in the context of imbalance - may need to think about how a re-balancing can be achieved. And the missing or hidden component of value is social. Consciously or not, the most effective businesses operate as social networks, and this requires an understanding of the motivations, behaviours and limitations of the human beings that form them.

So these businesses understand the human dimension to value. They may obtain this through instinct or hunch. But there is an exponentially growing knowledge base - economic, psychological, biological, and sociological - to gaining a better understanding of ourselves.

**This report presents some of that latest understanding and research of the way humans are, tracks the real impact of this understanding on the commercial world, and provides practical suggestions for how business might apply this understanding in their own context.**

Businesses are a series of **social networks**. Whatever product or service they provide, their nature is fundamentally about human beings and their interactions. So if there is a change in how humans are understood then that hugely impacts businesses: they are social entities. What's more, understanding business as a set of human and social interactions is fundamental to adapting to the new understanding.

Changes in the way humans are? Have humans changed somehow? Well, yes and no. Evolution takes a long time so our basic genetic make-up is the same though as Edward O. Wilson points out we are leashed to our genetics but it's pretty elastic. It's not new socialisation, however. It is our understanding of human beings that has changed.

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We are in the process of shifting from an outlook that assumes humans to be rather machine-like: instrumental, rational, and autonomous. This way of thinking was associated with the Enlightenment and has gripped our understanding of humans for the last 200 years.

Now research across a number of disciplines - from economics to social theory to cognitive psychology - suggests that things are rather different. It can be summarised in four maxims:

- Our decision-making is just as reflexive as reflective-business must balance both and understand which is needed in each context;
- We are creative as well as rational;
- We are empathetic as well as self-regarding;
- We are socially networked, influenced and influence others.

Humans are also rational, logical, self-interested, and can even be loners (though they will be much less happy and much less productive as a result.) But their decision-making, motivation, happiness, and, as consequence, productivity and consumer demand are also driven by these other *more human* influences: emotion, creativity, empathy and social interaction and influence.

The re-balanced business that this understanding would require is focused on the long-term; relationship and trust-centred; built around empathy rather than power; sustainable; outside-in rather than inside-out; and organic, fast-moving. It is what Umair Haque has described as 'deep value', i.e. it builds value - social, environmental, and economic - for the long-term. It is enlightened and understands the real value that can be identified in leveraging the human, social networks to create new forms of value through what the Harvard business guru, Michael Porter, has described as 'shared value.'

Many businesses are already re-balancing. They have understood that real value is in the quality of the relationships they nurture: internal and external. Such relationships are based on understanding, trust, esteem, openness and creativity. This report explains why, how, and what it means in real terms for business. In other words, it is aimed at helping you to think how you can begin to identify your social bottom line.

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# 2

## The internal conversation



Driving is terrifying for a learner. They are *conscious* of every danger, their own lack of capability, and have little security in their knowledge of the rules and behaviours of the road.

Over time they gain in confidence to the point where familiar journeys - to the kids' school, to the supermarket, to work - become an unconscious activity. When's the last time you had to actually **think** about how to get to Tesco?

Now transport the experienced driver to a foreign country or put them on a new journey and they, in many ways, become a learner again. Suddenly they are conscious of their own lack of control and the dangers or inconveniences that they may face. They become nervous, they slow down, and they become indecisive. These different states are the interaction of the conscious and unconscious, reflexive and reflective, emotional and rational cognitive processes. We make decisions as a result of the interaction of the two. Jonah Lehrer describes this interaction as an 'argument.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jonah Lehrer, *How we Decide*

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Imagine you are driving on a route that you haven't been on before. You approach a roundabout. Generally speaking, roundabouts have two to four exits. However, some wise town planner has designed a roundabout with eight exits.

What happens as you approach? First your conscious mind kicks in which instantly slows down your decision-making. The conscious mind is reflective rather than reflexive. You sweat and you feel uncomfortable so you start to slow down. Yet the roundabout is still approaching and much faster than you like. You have eight options but your destination isn't listed on any of them. Eight is an unfortunate number. It is one more than George Miller's 'magical number seven' of the number of pieces of data the conscious brain can handle at any one moment.<sup>4</sup>

One of three things is now likely to happen. You will either stop before entering the roundabout. Don't worry, everyone who is unfamiliar with the roundabout may stop also. Or you could enter the roundabout and take a random decision and there's a seven in eight chance you will go the wrong way. Or you could end up staying on the roundabout like the American tourists in National Lampoon's European Vacation.

Anyone who travels to many different destinations is now likely to have a Sat Nav. The purpose of Sat Navs is quite simple: to take conscious decision-making out of driving. That is why some people don't like them. These people prefer some conscious control over what they are doing. If they were driving purely using their conscious mind, however, they would be a nuisance and danger to other road users as their decision-making would be very slow and prone to severe error! This explains why overly cautious drivers can actually be very dangerous.

The way humans are and the way they make decisions is of fundamental importance - we are all uncertain drivers facing constantly new situations and can become overloaded very quickly. It impacts the relationship between business and consumers and the internal relationships within businesses - how can business help people through the new and complex roundabout? It has to understand how people actually make decisions.

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<sup>4</sup> George Miller, "The magical number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information." *Psychological Review* 63.

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George Lakoff implores us to place in context the 'old enlightenment' values such as conscious thought, universality, logic, rationality, absence of emotion and value. Instead we should embrace a 'new enlightenment' that also factors in the unconscious, emotional, empathetic, metaphorical, and contextual. The Nobel prize-winner, Daniel Kahneman, and popular psychologists such as Jonah Lehrer ('How we Decide') and Malcolm Gladwell ('Blink') have mapped the conscious-subconscious interactions that determine our decision-making.

Behavioural economists, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, have investigated how decision trees can be re-engineered adapting this knowledge of our cognitive processes in their hit, *Nudge*. Cognitive psychologists such as Antonio Damasio have shown how we become incapable of making even the most basic of decisions if our emotional brain is impaired.

What all these ideas have in common is that they have begun to lift the lid on how humans actually make decisions in terms of the actual cognitive processes. And it's a *conversation* between different aspects of the human brain. Get it wrong and people become confused and disoriented, indecisive or too decisive, make bad choices, and, most importantly, come away with a feeling of dissatisfaction or even resentment. This can result in loss of custom, loss of productivity and even litigation.

Businesses also shift between 'emotional' and 'rational' states and require both. There are certain processes that they just have to get right and have to be consistently applied. Other things are far more about emotional attachment and engagement. Amazon is illustrative.

There is the rational, repeatable, process-driven side of the company. Bezos sees the 'old world' as 30% service delivery and 70% 'shouting about it.'<sup>5</sup> In the 'new world' this is inverted and companies that can't deliver crumble in a transparent business environment. And yet, there's another social, emotional and creative side to Amazon - and it largely gets this right too.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview by Julian Kirby and Thomas A. Stewart, Harvard Business review, October 200.

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**Our customers don't contact us unless something's wrong,**

so we want that number to move down - and it has gone down every year for 12 years. That's big time process management. We try to implement those kinds of processes in different places. They are most naturally applied in our fulfillment centers and in customer service.<sup>6</sup>

**Jeff Bezos**

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<sup>6</sup> Harvard Business Review, October 2007

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Amazon was fifth in the Which? 2010 customer service survey. Given that it is very rare to interact with an individual at Amazon this is remarkable. What has happened is that the service delivery, the buying choices, the social trust invested in the product reviews and the increasingly accurate recommendations build up a relationship between the individual and the brand. When it goes wrong, it is quickly rectified and the relationship is reinforced. This *emotional* connection ultimately drives value for both the customer and the business.

The appeal of a luxury car is the driving experience. So one might assume that the thing is to design the best car possible - that's the pure rationalist approach. However, there is only so much that can be achieved by improving the in-car comfort and the smoothness of the car's mechanics. It is also about the broader emotional experience. And Audi has decided to go even further than just designing great to drive cars.

Audi has launched<sup>7</sup> a series of performance tools, accessible through an iPhone app and the website 'MyAudiLabs', that give the driver information about the car's performance. For example, by clocking route times it can 'nudge' the driver away from the most congested route. What this information combines is the emotional pull of a better driving experience with the creation of a better decision-making architecture.

Knowing your customers or clients is key. So is knowing your employees. The management guru, Daniel Pink, is explicit about business failings in this regard: "There is a mismatch between what science knows and what business does."

What business often does is appeal to a person's rational sense when it is their emotions that are more important. Or it fails to get the basics right in the search to promote the brand. A business that understands the social nature of its bottom line asks how people are really motivated. It thinks about the nature of the relationships that it forms.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.crunchgear.com/2010/11/03/audi-launches-iphone-app-for-monitoring-your-car/>

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Relationships that work embody trust, shared meaning and mutual support. Relationships that are purely instrumental are ephemeral. The foundation of good relationships is understanding the rational-emotional cognitive conversation. It seeks to create *meaning* through trust generated by getting this *balance* right and responding in the right way to the right need.

Meaning is something more profound than simple loss or gain. This explains why sometimes *oblique* means are more successful than direct means in securing desirable ends. John Kay gives the example of ICI when it shifted its corporate objectives from 'responsible application of chemistry' i.e. a value-set with meaning, to creating 'value for shareholders.' In 2007, ICI ceased to exist as an independent company.

By emphasising shared values and meaning, we engage with people emotionally. It doesn't mean that Amazon doesn't have to have great processing or Audi doesn't have to build great cars. But it does connect with what really motivates us and that understanding brings more fulfilled, happier, more productive workers and more satisfied customers.

Like driving, it is about the right balance between the conscious and the unconscious that achieves that. Emotions, 'animal spirits', the 'passions' were downgraded in the 'old enlightenment' rationalist times but they are central to good decisions and to human motivation. And so is human creativity.

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## Catalysing creative value



A group of Marines entered the Maze Prison where a riot was taking place. They stood in the middle of the prison, removed their helmets, and banged their riot shields repeatedly.

Whether it was surprise, the power of status as the act was a demonstration of authority, or sheer confusion, the riot dissipated and order was restored.”

The above is what is known in the Royal Marines as a ‘dit.’ It is a story taken from Marine history to illustrate certain values and bind the soldiers to a sense of shared history. The Marines have devised a method and organisation which is geared toward the structure of the human mind as an evolutionary pyramid - though it is not articulated in those terms.

Firstly, there is fitness of body and that is the purpose of the gruelling physical training that Marines must endure. Then there is the limbic system which determines our sensory responses to our surroundings. By deploying techniques such as ‘combat breathing’ marines grip their sensory responses and activate their primed decision-making training. When faced with a seemingly new and dangerous situation they will

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refer to their Marine notebook which contains pithy procedures based on organisational learning which determines a response. This is what the marines call *energy* - physical, emotional and mental strength.

Once their physical, sensory and rational responses have been exhausted it is then that they turn to *initiative*. This has a clearly defined meaning: it is about solving a problem given the resources and knowledge that you have. And that is what the Maze Prison 'dit' is about. It was a new situation and the General used his initiative to resolve it. In the business world, this is *creativity*.

The educationalist, Sir Ken Robinson, has given the clearest and simplest definition of creativity and it applies to business:

*"The process of having original ideas that have value... To be creative you actually have to do something. It involves putting your imagination to work to make something new, to come up with new solutions to problems, even to think of new problems."*<sup>8</sup>

So 'value' is intrinsic to the creative process. What business wouldn't want to create value? Robinson goes on to quote the psychologist, William James:

*"The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitude of mind...If you change your mind, you can change your life."*<sup>9</sup>

Glancing down the Fortune magazine list of best companies to work for two things leap out. All the companies near the top demonstrate one of two core factors and probably both: a high level of **trust** between management and the workforce and the opportunity for **creativity**. Examples would be Dreamworks Animation SKG, Cisco, W.L.Gore and Whole Foods.

That these two factors co-exist is intriguing: security and creativity are mutually dependent. Creative people sometimes fall and so need a safety net. A recent Newsweek report on the 'creativity crisis' draws attention to research by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and University of Northern Iowa's Gary G. Gute which has found that: "highly creative adults tended to grow up in families embodying opposites. Parents encouraged uniqueness, yet provided stability."<sup>10</sup> It seems it is the same in the commercial world.

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<sup>8</sup> Sir Ken Robinson, *The Element, how finding your passion changes everything*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/07/10/the-creativity-crisis.html>

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The Marines provide this stable base but certain situations require initiative. Companies at their most creative can enter what Csikszentmihlyi calls 'flow.' This occurs in a high skill, high challenge environment.<sup>11</sup> It is a transcendental state that is difficult to attain. Some fall just short. Perhaps the tennis player Andy Murray has so far failed to win any of the grand slam finals in which he has competed because he hasn't reached the level of 'flow.'

It would appear that there is a 'flow-like' state that some companies also attain. Kieran Levis compares the fraught, divided and careless Apple of the 1980s with the company in its modern incarnation. Apple lurched between extremes in the 1980s and 1990s. As Levis puts it:

*"No business can afford to let either wild creatives or hard-nosed suits rule the roost entirely."<sup>12</sup>*

The Apple of the iPhone, iPad, and MacBook is a different beast entirely. It balances the commercial with the creative side of the business. This concept of *balance* is important again: rational-emotional, outcomes-creativity. It is also necessary for a company to achieve a flow-like state where it consistently produces products and services that are innovative and profitable. And it seems that this balance is a difficult one to maintain just as a flow-like state is difficult to maintain for an artist or a writer.

The most effective companies incorporate creativity and innovation into their processes. Google's Innovation Time Off, where employees spend 20% of their work time on projects that interest them, has resulted in 50% of their new offerings, GoogleMail, Google News, and AdSense among them.<sup>13</sup> Toyota-style process innovation is facilitated from a bottom-up process of incremental improvement (so mechanical processes can be creative endeavours too). In fact, creativity is built into the corporate DNA of some of the most successful firms. Japanese dominance in automobile and consumer electronics was built upon it. Masaru Ibuka co-founder of Sony enshrined creativity and joy in the company's mission.

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly\\_csikszentmihalyi\\_on\\_flow.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow.html)

<sup>12</sup> Levis, Kieran, *Winners and losers: creators and casualties of the age of the internet*

<sup>13</sup> <http://lifehacker.com/5497057/set-up-your-own-google+style-20+percent-time-to-try-new-projects>

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To establish a place of work where engineers can feel the **joy of technological innovation**, be aware of their mission to society, and work to their heart's content.<sup>14</sup>

**Masaru Ibuka**, co-founder of Sony

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi 2008:  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly\\_csikszentmihalyi\\_on\\_flow.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow.html)

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W.L.Gore, the materials innovator and manufacturer most famous for its Gore-Tex fabrics, sits in 13th place of the Fortune list. Bill Gore, the company's founder, once said:

*"The objective of the Enterprise is to make money and have fun doing so."*<sup>15</sup>

You almost have to blink at the incongruity of the word 'fun' on a corporate website. The company practices creativity in its organisation. Its structure is flat and project-specific. Leaders are more facilitators than directors. This has been given its own management theory: lattice management. And underpinning this morphing organisational structure is a core ethos summarised on the corporate website as:

*"Because we are all part owners of the company through the associate stock plan, Gore associates expect a lot from each other. Innovation and creativity; high ethics and integrity; making commitments and standing behind them. We work hard at living up to these expectations as we strive for business success. But we also trust and respect each other and believe it's important to celebrate success."*<sup>16</sup>

Here we see the twin elements of success in the best places to work: a balance of trust and creativity. It also incorporates the type of shared meaning that we have seen is so important.

These firms are thriving because they are ahead of the curve. Richard Florida describes this as a 'Great Reset.' We are moving from what the management philosopher, Peter Drucker, termed the 'knowledge economy'.

*"The simple fact is that like physical labour, knowledge work is increasingly becoming either commoditised, e.g. basic accountancy and legal services, or off-shored, e.g. IT, back-office functions, and customer services. In its place a creative economy and 'creative class' is taking shape."*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.gore.com/en\\_xx/careers/whoweare/ourculture/gore-company-culture.html](http://www.gore.com/en_xx/careers/whoweare/ourculture/gore-company-culture.html)

<sup>16</sup> ibid

<sup>17</sup> Florida, Richard, *The Great Reset*

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Daniel Pink describes the move from the information age to a 'conceptual age':

*"The future belongs to a very different person with a very different kind of mind - creators and empathisers, pattern recognisers, and meaning makers...We are moving from an economy and society built on the logical, linear, computerlike capabilities of the Information Age to an economy and a society built on the inventive, empathetic, big-picture capabilities of what's rising in its place, the Conceptual Age."*<sup>18</sup>

The point is that these 'right-brained' skills can't be commoditised and off-shored because they are local, personal, social, immediate and creative. This is not to say that the creative industries are the only growth industries of the future. It is instead to suggest that those firms in whatever sector that understand creative individuals will thrive.

At a most basic level creatives are not motivated in the same way as, say, manual workers. For example, task-related bonuses actually hinder their productivity as it diverts focus from the task in hand. That limited processing power of the human brain floors us once again as we become overloaded, confused and indecisive. Instead, highly skilled creatives are at their most productive when they attain 'flow' in a high challenge environment. As many performers will testify, 'flow' in its most extreme state can mean that even a feeling of existence is suspended.<sup>19</sup> In other words, don't interrupt a creative and don't divert their attention.

Too many businesses, our education system, and, indeed, our social values are engineered towards a 'left-brained' rationalist environment. Harnessing expansive, divergent thinking is key for businesses in the future. The best environments for that are supportive environments that balance divergent and convergent approaches. Supportive organisations nurture a sense of belonging, esteem and worth and they foster empathy.

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<sup>18</sup> Pink, Daniel, *A Whole New Mind: why right-brainers will rule the future*

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly\\_csikszentmihalyi\\_on\\_flow.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow.html)

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# 4

## The value of empathy



**Both evolutionary biologists and cognitive psychologists have increasingly come to the same conclusion – empathy is part of our basic nature.**

So with a bit of thought and by listening to our emotions more carefully we can actually not only benefit ourselves but others also. Luckily, these emotions are entirely natural - and they are present in all primates, not just humans. Our brains respond through mirror neurons to the acts of others and even injustices suffered by them. The cognitive psychologist, George Lakoff, describes how mirror neurons connect us emotionally to others. What they feel, we can do also. The more we feel the more empathetic we become as neural pathways strengthen just as biceps do when someone regularly lifts weights.<sup>20</sup>

A notion of justice is intrinsic to empathy. When two monkeys are rewarded for performing a task but one monkey is rewarded less than the other then the loser monkey will cease to perform the task at all even though they forgo a reward.<sup>21</sup> Empathy is strongly tied to notions of status and justice. This has enormous consequences for any organisation looking to flourish as one of the most demotivating things is an unfair

<sup>20</sup> Lakoff, George, *The Political Mind*

<sup>21</sup> De Waal, *The Age of Empathy*

Empathy is strongly tied to notions of status and justice.

**This has enormous consequences for any organisation looking to flourish.**



**Since empathy binds individuals together and gives each a stake in the welfare of others, it bridges the world of direct “what’s in it for me?” benefits and collective benefits, which take a bit more reflection to grasp.** Empathy has the power to open our eyes to the latter by attaching emotional value to them.<sup>22</sup>

Frank de Waal, Biologist

22 De Waal, Frans, *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s lessons for a kinder society*.

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# 4

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rewards system. A just employer will understand the demotivating impact of injustice and respond with real empathy.

The best companies realise how trust and fairness matter in ensuring dedication. For example, the grocery chain, Trader Joe's pays its employees the median household income in their communities.<sup>23</sup> All these things serve to reinforce the service culture - people acquire meaning when their needs are met through an empathetic approach. A sense of just reward is key to fostering this meaning and that is what Trader Joe's does.

It is not only within companies but with customers that many companies have succeeded by tapping the value of empathy. The Classic Car Company had an inventory challenge - how could it expand its pool of cars without the cost of acquiring the vehicles itself? It decided to ask members if they would loan other members their cars in return for loyalty points they could use to rent others' vehicles themselves. It was a staggering success. Their inventory problem was solved and, what is more, the bulk of those reward points remain unused. Members wanted other people like them, with whom there was a natural though not personal affinity, to share in their pleasure, pride and joy despite the risk of damage and deterioration.

So empathy encourages us to take risks that on face value do not seem rational. Once that initial leap of faith has been taken trust can quickly form. The online lender-borrower matching service Zopa is a trust business that asks its members to take that initial leap of faith.

Borrowers get a better deal as the banks and all their costly back-office and risk management is taken out of the equation. For lenders there is a rational benefit - a better return on their investment than if they put their savings in a bank account. But there is also an emotional benefit - they are helping an individual (and cutting out the banks in the process!) This particularly comes to life on Zopa listings where borrowers get to tell their story to encourage lenders to advance a loan. We engage in personal narratives in a way that we can never do with spreadsheets.

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<sup>23</sup> Florida, Richard, *The Great Reset*

Empathy encourages us to take risks that on face value do not seem rational. **Once that initial leap of faith has been taken trust can quickly form.**

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Ironically, the bank business used to be based on the personal relationship of the bank manager and the customer. The modern bank manager is Equifax, the data management and risk assessor. Some firms are looking to rediscover that one-on-one empathetic and trust based ethos.

One of the major threats to trust is the use (and abuse) of personal data. Increasingly, firms collect and use data about people over which they have no control. Transparency is key to developing trust-based, empathetic relationships. The community interest company, Mydex, is developing personal data stores so that the individual owns their own data and can decide who they share it with and on what terms. This has an economic benefit as duplications and scatter-gun targeting is greatly reduced; makes new targeted products and services possible; and, most importantly, rebuilds trust in collecting, sharing and using of personal data.<sup>24</sup>

By shifting power to the consumer, more trust-based, empathetic relationships become attainable. It also makes the customer-business relationship more of a demand pull than a supply push-type relationship which lowers inefficiency and builds deeper longer-term networks and linkages.

In creating deeper, relationship-oriented networks, businesses are able to flexibly respond to their clients' needs. The building supplier, Travis Perkins, has devolved pricing to local managers. These managers know their customers, they can respond to local pricing signals, and they know with whom they can build long-term relationships. Combining local relationships with a trusted national brand is a powerful offer. It calls its pricing policy 'personal pricing.'

At this point the cynic may respond that empathy as driver of both internal productivity and better customer relationships seems too good to be true. And the cynic has a point - individualistic, status-hungry, and competitive behaviour are, of course, aspects of normal human behaviour also. The difference is that now we know that it is just as natural to be cooperative, nurturing, and sharing. The clever business will see greater long-term value in the latter over the former. Again, what we see here is a tension between two opposite forces: the short-term and the long-term. Empathy doesn't preclude competition; it rebalances the firm in the direction of the long-term value of the social bottom line.

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<sup>24</sup> Mydex, *The case for personal empowerment: the rise of the personal data store*

In creating deeper, relationship oriented networks, **businesses are able to flexibly respond to their clients' needs.**

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# 4

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What this means in practice for businesses is that they need to be aware not just of the qualifications and skills of who they hire but also their value sets. By hiring those with a more empathetic value set - and there are specific tests for empathy also - a more cooperative workplace can be crafted. It is also necessary to move beyond the buying habits and socio-demographics of customers - the traditional market research focus. Your customers may value better human interaction with your brand and not just price and product.

Customers' basic needs and preferences could be ascertained by negotiating access to a Mydex-style personal data store. On the basis of a transparent relationship of equals, then a deeper set of commitments can be created for the long-term as Travis Perkins has understood.

Empathy is one thing but when it's combined with the magnifying effect of social networks then companies can create even more value. Empathy is about creating enduring relationships. Social influence is how those relationships can be magnified.

Your customers  
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and product.**

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# 5

## Magnifying social influence



In the fashionable Brooklyn neighbourhood of Park Slope there is a very unusual shop. The Park Slope Co-op has been running since 1973. Its concept is simple. If you volunteer for the Co-op then you get a 20-40% discount on fresh, nutritious, environmentally sound produce.

Through word of mouth it now has 14,000+ members who collectively work, run and define the store's ethos. You have to be a member to shop there.

The UK itself has more than 4,990 independent co-operatives of all types from public services to retail outlets, owned by more than 12.9 million members. There has been a 24.6 per cent growth in turnover over the last three years and 17.8 per cent growth in membership of UK co-operatives.<sup>25</sup> (And in fact a Park Slope-style co-op opened in 2010 in Holborn called *The People's Supermarket*.)

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/the-big-society-innovation-or-slogan-2208494.html>

There has been a 24.6 per cent growth in turnover over the last three years **and 17.8 per cent growth in membership of UK cooperatives.**

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# 5

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The roaring success of the Park Slope Co-op is down to generating the sort of deep commitment that comes from building a social network around a product. It's a shop but actually its business is the social network. People work and shop there for the product, for the prices but also because they are part of something and its local to them and they feel a sense of ownership. This is the power of dense social networks.

Human beings have a social brain that is adapted to send and receive signals to others, to reciprocate gestures from others and mimic their behaviour. When we are unable to do these things we feel loneliness which is an important psychological signal that we are potentially doing ourselves harm.

John Cacioppo explains this mechanism thus:

*“Physical pain protects the individual from physical dangers. Social pain, also known as loneliness, evolved for a similar reason: because it protected the individual from the danger of remaining isolated.”<sup>26</sup>*

To prevent this isolation we interact and when we interact an exchange occurs of habit, taste, behaviour, ideas, preferences, and gifts/goods. The deeper the social tie or mutual respect between individuals the more influential and influenced we are. The more connections that occur, the more exchange takes place (and these exchanges are positively correlated with well-being.)

Understanding the way in which we are influenced by our social networks has become a key area of research. Our peer groups can do us good or do us harm. In general, the more socialised we are, the happier we are (though propensity to loneliness has a genetic element also.) However, negative behaviours can spread through these same networks. Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler have shown how obesity, smoking, sexual behaviour, crime, suicide, voting behaviour and financial behaviour can spread through networks.<sup>27</sup>

For example, if you are male and your male friends are fatter than average then it is more likely that you will be too. The real power of these social networks is amplification. Both positive and negative behaviours can spread like a contagion. Just as understanding individual decision-making processes is important, how these decisions are then magnified across social networks is of equal importance.

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<sup>26</sup> Cacioppo, John, *Loneliness: human nature and the need for social connection*

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, *Connected: The Amazing Power of Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*

Human beings have a social brain that is adapted to send and receive signals to others, **to reciprocate gestures from others and mimic their behaviour.**

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Number one on Rachel Botsman's list of ten ways to start building a collaborative brand is:



**Think of your users not as consumers.** Embrace them as members, giving them all the traditional benefits of joining a 'club': status, identity and shared interests.<sup>20</sup>

**Rachel Botsman**

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# 5

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Businesses, public services, and even political parties are beginning to grapple with how to leverage social networks. Rachel Botsman has described the rise of collaborative brands where a community congregates around a brand helping to define it and also sharing in it simultaneously.<sup>28</sup>

That is precisely what the Park Slope Co-op has achieved. It is also what the Classic Car Club has achieved by developing an empathetic link between members. Procter & Gamble has developed an online community Vocalpoint which brings people together with an offer of family, beauty, health and fitness tips and money-off coupons. It has also assembled a community of discussion. It is a brand *hosting* a social network. The top message board post - 'bonding with your son' - has been viewed 105,104 times while the most commented post has attracted 1,305 comments. The site interfaces with Facebook too so members can spread the word.<sup>29</sup> It also allows P&G to get a deeper understanding of its customers and better data on who they are.

In the social media age, it is not dry online web pages to which they will turn. It is testimonials, help boards (Apple for instance makes extensive use of its customers to resolve technical issues on its behalf), Facebook friends, Twitter followers, user reviews. All of these things are different forms of social network. Social media expand the quantity, range, reach, diversity and volume of our social interactions pretty much exponentially.

Erik Qualman writes that: "Only 14% of people trust advertisers, yet 78% of consumers trust peer recommendations."<sup>30</sup> Recent global-web-index data show that, 49% of survey respondents in the UK 'managed a social media profile,' 41% visited a consumer review website, 51% are 'very motivated' to research/ find products online and 41% are very motivated to 'stay in touch with friends.'<sup>31</sup> People use the web as a High Street, a consumer magazine and a coffee shop. Understanding how, where, and when these different interactions take place - understanding the social networks - is central to business success.

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<sup>28</sup> [http://www.collaborativeconsumption.com/assets/Boss\\_Brand%20community.pdf](http://www.collaborativeconsumption.com/assets/Boss_Brand%20community.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.vocalpoint.com>

<sup>30</sup> Erik Qualman, *Socialnomics: how social media transforms the way we live and do business*

<sup>31</sup> <http://globalwebindex.net/>

Only 14% of people trust advertisers, yet **78% per cent of consumers trust peers.**

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These social networks can penetrate even deeper into the 'production' process to the point where the line between producer and consumer becomes blurred.<sup>32</sup> This was called 'prosumption' by the management theorist, Alvin Toffler.

On the production side lies the website InnoCentive where companies post rewards (the incentive) to individuals able to solve their R&D problems (the innovation.) It is open source and crowd sourced. It aggregates what Clay Shirky calls 'cognitive surplus' to find 'solvers' for a 'seeker's' problem.<sup>33</sup> At the other end of 'prosumption' lie websites such as Threadless.com where people submit t-shirt designs and the most popular are printed and put on sale.

To what extent are the visitors to Vocalpoint, aspirant designers of Threadless.com, reviewers of consumer products on Amazon, or members of Park Slope Co-op simply 'consumers'? They are consumers. But they are also advocates, members, brand builders, producers, innovators, designers, conversationalists, help providers, fixers, recommenders, community builders, and in the case of the Co-op, workers and managers too.

Once we reconsider business as a set of contingent social networks all sorts of creative and shifting solutions emerge. Once we understand our social brain alongside our emotional, cognitive, creative and empathetic brain, new and radical business ideas are presented.

Humans are a far more complex and exciting species than the Enlightenment led us to believe. And if we reconsider business as a set of **balanced social relations** in light of the new understanding, radical innovation and vastly improved well-being - becomes possible.

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<sup>32</sup> See Adam Lent and Matthew Lockwood, *Creative Destruction: Placing Innovation at the Heart of Progressive Economics*, IPPR

<sup>33</sup> Clay Shirky, *Cognitive surplus: creativity and generosity in a connected age*

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# 6

## A social bottom line



### Interesting, but what should I do about it?

The purpose of this report has been not only to present new understanding of the way humans are but also to consider its business application. Business is not distinct from the society in which it sits; it is both profoundly influenced by and, in turn, influences it. Business is a key means by which the new understanding gathered in this report can find expression in a different - and hopefully better - society.

You could take a Milton Friedman-esque view of the world: business is there to create shareholder value or to earn profits. That is its social value; nothing more. Michael Porter disagrees and in his concept of 'shared value' argues that by taking a more enlightened approach to social and environmental consequences of business new and less short-termist value can be discovered - and society will benefit.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> <http://hbr.org/2011/01/the-big-idea-creating-shared-value/ar/1>

Business is not distinct from the society in which it sits; **it is both profoundly influenced by and, in turn, influences society.**

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# 6

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By perceiving business as something separate from society it fails to create the rich and dense social networks that create real value over the long-term. It is worth returning to the four axioms of the new business outlined at the beginning of this report:

- Our decision-making is just as reflexive as reflective-business must balance both and understand which is needed in each context;
- We are creative as well as rational;
- We are empathetic as well as self-regarding;
- We are socially networked, influenced and influence others.

The basic contention here is that business functions better, i.e. creates more value, when it goes with rather than against the grain of how humans really are and how they actually interact. If people are motivated in a different way to our assumptions then surely businesses must change accordingly? This means business finding a balance:

- Build for the long term and respond to the immediate;
- Live with complexity but strive for simplicity;
- Create the conditions for value creation rather than simply attempt to micro-manage and control;
- Build mutual trust;
- Respond to individual demand-pull rather than supply push;
- Seek Influence rather than forlornly seek to control;
- *Identify win-win rather than zero sum.*

In other words, business must seek to facilitate social networks of parity and trust. There is commercial value in the creation of such networks.

How should business change? The starting point is simple. Every business should reconsider itself as what it really is - a social network of shared values and interests. Each business has different features but essentially at its core are humans in all their perversity and a complex web of human relations that exist both inside but, critically, outside the firm also.

Out of this conceptual leap, comes a whole raft of practical actions. Here are a number of suggestions. None of these are intended to be a blueprint; they are designed to pose some of the right questions and provide some practical suggestions.

Business must seek to facilitate social networks of parity and trust.

**There is commercial value in the creation of such networks.**

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# 6

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## Consider how your firm's 'left' and 'right-brained' activities may be different and where they overlap

Apply neurological thinking to your business. Divide up your activities and processes into 'left-brained' and 'right-brained' activities. What are the things that are best rational, process driven and machine like? Excel in perfecting them in terms of efficiency. What are the things that are creative, relational and socially networked? Don't treat these things as process-oriented; treat them as conversational. This will change the way you sell, create, innovate, communicate, partner other firms, recruit and reward. For example, set aside some time every month for your own project innovation or for volunteering or pursuing some creative pursuit. Collectively share the outcomes of this creative time.

## Take time to look 'outside in'

No matter how brilliant your people, they will not have a monopoly on wisdom and their assumption, behaviours and actions will be framed by their social context. There will, of course, be insights from looking at your competitors but that has a limitation: imitation may be the highest form of flattery but it is also a good way of replicating another's flaws - just ask the mono-cultured banks.

Instead, why not seek to partner with someone from a completely different context and see how they would approach your key challenges and vice versa? A teacher, Jamie Field Baker, decided she was going to transform a school. She wanted to create 'a whole new school.'<sup>35</sup> She took the school's leaders to, among other places, a wine merchant where they learnt about deep learning through 'play', to a bank that prized customer relationships through 'stories' (dits?) of great service, and to a lab that had created a new code of ethics giving the business new meaning. Stepping out of the comfort zone completely and seeking the insights from others 'outside in' can shatter 'group think' and help create a completely fresh perspective on a business.

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<sup>35</sup> Jamie Field Baker, *A Whole New School*

No matter how brilliant your people, **they will not have a monopoly on wisdom and their assumptions, behaviours, and actions will be framed by their social context.**

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# 6

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## Explore shared value

Corporate social responsibility is yesterday's story. Now firms are actually thinking about how by asking social or environmental questions they can create real value.<sup>36</sup> For example, Nestle redesigned its procurement process to invest in its suppliers and helped manage coffee growers to higher yields - they received secure supplies and their (developing world) suppliers become more productive and profitable. By thinking about the relationships in and around your firm differently there will be commercial and cost-saving opportunities. Marks and Spencer and Walmart have saved enormous amounts by posing environmental questions leading to more efficient distribution systems. Where can your firm's relationships be deepened to create shared value?

## Become a healthier company

Healthier firms create more value. Healthier people are happier and happiness is a key source of value. Johnson & Johnson has seen a return of \$2.71 for every \$1 it has invested in wellness programmes, e.g. stop smoking initiatives etc.<sup>37</sup> Coors reported over a \$6 return for every \$1 invested.<sup>38</sup> Regular exercise is also associated with health and happiness and, therefore, value.

## Be positive

At risk of being very un-English, regular, small, positive actions have been shown to help build stronger relationships. A simple action such as taking time first thing in the morning to send a positive email or two to colleagues, customers or clients can make a real difference - as long as it's natural and authentic. If it feels right then you are more likely to act upon it and it has to be fairly subtle to work - you don't want to seem false or contrived. However, it helps to build the relationship and it makes you feel more positive which improves your own performance- there is a double impact. Positive people are happier and they have denser social networks which act as a support system and network of opportunity. It is important to ensure that small positive actions become part and parcel of what your firm does.

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Porter, *The big idea: creating shared value*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*

<sup>38</sup> Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*

By thinking about the relationships in and around your firm differently **there will be commercial and cost saving opportunities.**

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# 6

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## Rethink metrics

If value is related to the quality of relationships through your firm then shouldn't that be a key performance metric for your employees? Cisco systems have taken this to its logical conclusion: they reward people not only for hitting their targets but also for how well they collaborate with their peers.<sup>39</sup> Those people who constantly invest in high quality relationships will generate value. When a firm conceives of itself as a human network rather than a machine, then its members change their own conception. The point here is that 'scorecards' need to reflect cause as well as effect. Quantitative, output measures are important because they can raise alarms where things aren't performing as they should. They can also drag attention from much of what really matters and create short versus long-term trade-offs that are riddled with perverse incentives. When cause - good social interaction - becomes separated from effect - outputs and outcomes - then this conflict is at its most acute.

## Change your tone

The 'push' mentality harms relationships. A more humble approach to communication places you and your firm on an equal footing with those whom you partner and trade with. This applies to corporate communications as much as marketing or customer services. Be transparent - that is the route to building trust. First Direct - the leading customer services company according to Which? - has trained its staff to pick up the verbal tone and style of the customer to whom they are talking. Such training can work both internally and externally whether you are talking to journalists, customers, suppliers, investors or colleagues. Status differentiation is a barrier to relationships. Eliminate it as far as is possible - change your tone.

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<sup>39</sup> ibid

The 'push'  
mentality **harms**  
**relationships.**

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# 6

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## Open up the conversation

Too often firms have seen consultation and democracy as threats to good decision-making rather than aiding it. That is a short-termist view. There are many democratic mechanisms that can be used within the firm to increase the legitimacy of decisions that are made and bind people to those decisions. The benefit? If people have a greater sense of ownership over their working lives they are more creative, committed and generate more value. For example, Whole Foods consults its workers to give a permanent position to a new employee following their probation. Credo credit card donates 1% of its revenues to good causes and consults its customers about which ones. Co-operatives work on this principle: a share is a vote. Deep involvement and a sense of ownership can contribute to long-term value for the human business.

## Identify key moments that matter

There is a narrative to good relationships and it is a story with key moments of inflexion. A friend in need is a friend indeed. It is important to understand the key moments where relationships go wrong to learn from the past and to identify the key moments of stress where a different approach can further nourish your firm's social network. For example, if an error has been made how do you deal with it in a way that isn't back-covering and actually meets the needs of the client? In a time of crisis, how does your firm engage in the type of combat breathing that the Royal Marines practice? What mechanisms do you initiate to manage those moments that matter that every firm faces?

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**That is a short-  
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# 6

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## Read the books that have influenced this report

This is not an academic exercise but the ideas that mean the human business makes commercial sense are all out there and readily accessible. There are tons of examples, a huge evidence base, and practical recommendations that can help turn an 'old enlightenment' form into a successful human business. The authors that I would particularly recommend are: Daniel Kahneman, Umair Haque, Henry Mintzberg, Daniel Pink, Jonah Lehrer, George Lakoff, Matthew Taylor, Rachel Botsman, Shawn Achor, Michael Porter, Richard Florida and Frank de Waal. There are many others quoted both in this report and in the recommended books themselves. By reading these books you and your colleagues will have a better understanding of yourselves and each other and the nature of value in business. It will help to get the most out of your business.

This report has deliberately kept away from the prescriptive. It has presented a series of ideas that are often simple but together constitute a powerful new understanding of people and business. It is intended to contribute to the discussion of where business goes from here.

There is not a single business to which these insights won't apply. And those that apply them in the most balanced, creative, empathetic, socially networked fashion possible are those who stand the greatest chance of success.

It's not just a numbers game. It's far more interesting than that. It's about rethinking business and understanding its social bottom line. **And such thinking is creating new value and creating better business.**



# Biographies

## Bondy Consulting

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Award winning Public Relations agency Bondy Consulting advises companies on how to create and maintain value through the ways in which they communicate.

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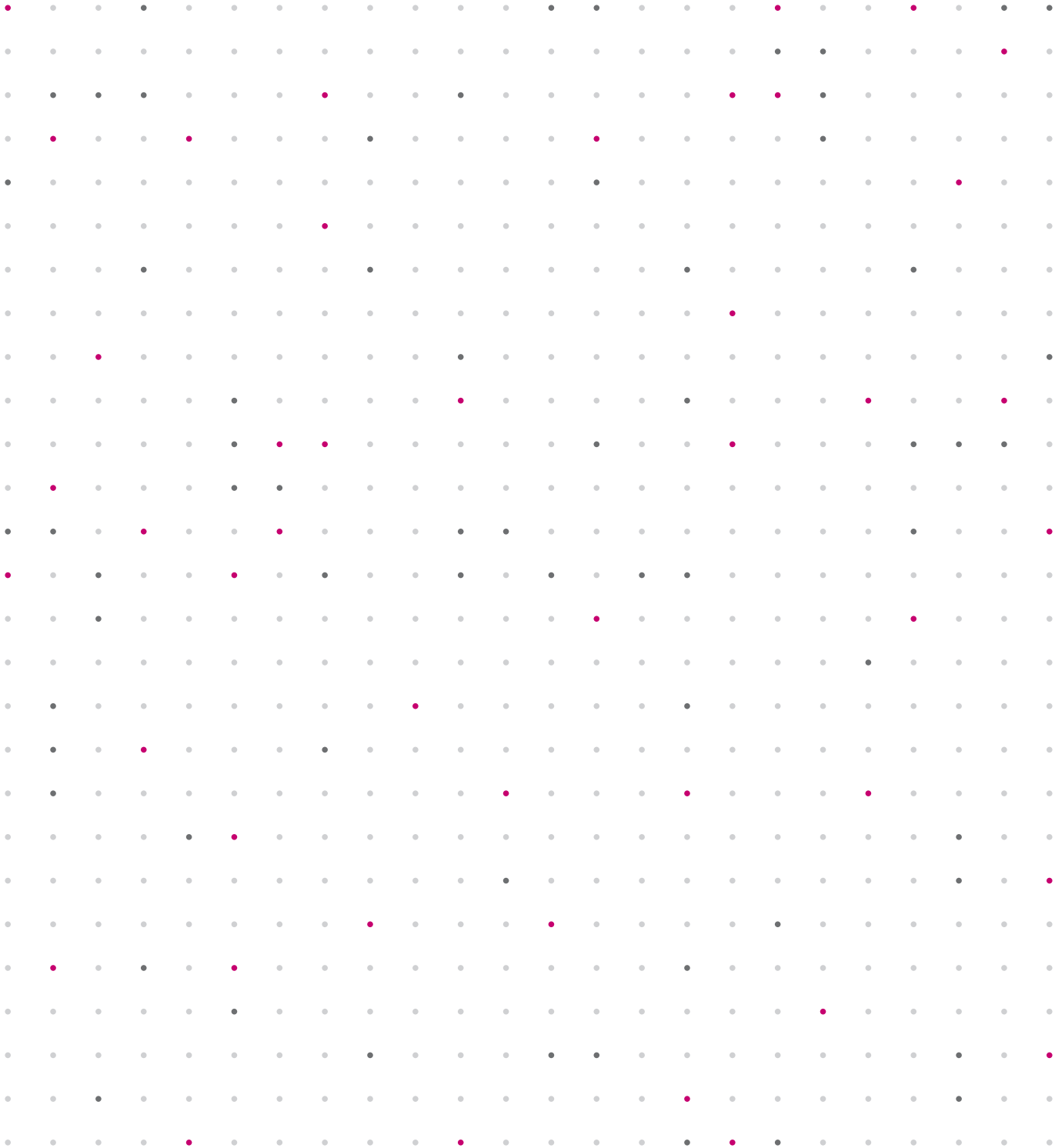
## The Foundation

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We are a Growth and Innovation Consultancy, helping businesses grow more quickly, into new areas, or fend off threats.

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