



Understanding the values of a nation

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The health of a nation is directly related to the pride its people have in being one of its members, their emotional engagement with what it stands for and their preparedness to work for its ongoing good health. It is not ideological, but it is both rational and emotional. However, at a practical level it is often hard to see what we can do at a national level and much easier to recognise what we can do at a community level.

One way of looking at the health of the nation is to understand what citizens feel is important by measuring the values they hold dear. On 24th January this year Barrett Values Centre and Action for Happiness published the results of a survey of the values of the UK. They found a very high level of dysfunction at the national level, similar to levels experienced in Iceland and Latvia immediately before both those countries collapsed in 2008. Most of the values experienced nationally were fear driven: crime/violence, uncertainty about the future, corruption, blame and drug/alcohol abuse. However as individuals, people said they valued: caring, family, honesty, humour/fun, fairness and independence. They would like national values to be: caring for the elderly, affordable housing, care for the disadvantaged, employment opportunities and accountability. And interestingly despite seeming to be negative in their views of national values their views at the community level were far more positive with quality of life, family, helpfulness, friendship and sense of community all being experienced now.

The key in the list above of desired values is in the word accountability – making that real and meaningful at national, community and personal levels. So what does this mean for **organisations** and for **leadership**? For **organisations** it provides a timely reminder both of the actual role/reputation they have in the communities in which they operate and also that they too are part of the national malaise: not all, but many would do well to look at themselves. Raj Sisodia in his recent book *Conscious Capitalism* writes compellingly of the need for capitalism to remember its wider social roots and obligations: a return to accountability in the wider sense. The likes of Cadbury with Bournville, Lever Brothers with Port Sunlight and the village of Saltaire built by Titus Salt for his mill workers are all examples of entrepreneurial business people believing that they had moral responsibilities as well as those to their shareholders. This is in stark contrast to the belief of Milton Friedman who is famously quoted in 1970 as saying “the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits”. It may be that the myopic following of this credo spawned much of the greed that has pervaded some parts of business ever since. So Sisodia argues for a return to a wider view of valuing and rewarding stakeholders, so that it includes employees, customers, suppliers, the community, environment and shareholders. Arguably serving the first five well is the best way to serve the shareholder in the long term. He reports that organisations following this path outperform the S&P index by 10:1 over periods of ten to fifteen years.

And for **leadership** a renewed focus on accountability would not mean amassing profits and wealth for the benefit of a few, but a wider sense of stewardship, of accountability to Sisodia’s six stakeholders, of living a healthy set of values and holding others to account for doing the same. If business adopts this role their influence not only on the economy but also the fabric of the country could radically alter the way government and politics function. After all, as we noted at the beginning of this article, the values of individual people in the UK are laudable and we would all like to live in a healthy environment in which we can take pride.

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