

The future ain't what it used to be

A life-friendly approach to thriving

By Nadine Andrews

The prevailing 20th century winds of success as economic growth are receding as a wind from another direction gains in dominance. Warmed by its considerations for human wellbeing, nature and natural resources, there are signs that it has been blowing for some time: the creation of the Gross National Happiness Index and the Happy Planet Index; triple bottom line accounting and corporate social responsibility; the growth in interest in ecological economics and natural capitalism, biomimicry and cradle to cradle manufacturing models, are just a few examples.

And with new impetus from the current global recession and the shocking collapse of major financial institutions, and from concerns about global warming and depletion of natural resources, this other wind seems to be gathering in pace and strength. Nothing focuses the mind quite like a crisis...

New brooms sweep clean

Research consultancy The Futures Company predict a new 'era of consequences' in the post recovery consumer marketplace:

"Beware thinking that things will bounce back to business as usual. A fundamental value shift is underway. The era of consequences will be guided by responsibility, vigilance and resourcefulness¹"

They expect consumers will look for brands that are less wasteful and more efficient in resource requirements.

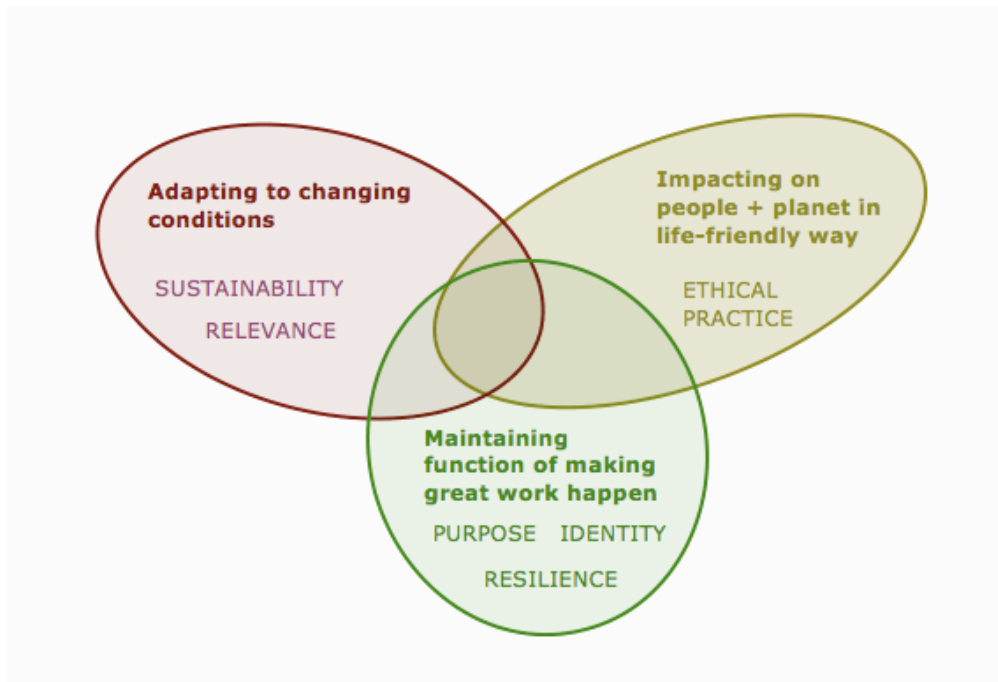
The spring 2010 issue of Harvard Business Review OnPoint is devoted to the topic of 'Make Green Profitable' asserting, *"going green has become a strategic necessity in a carbon-constrained world"*. In an article on understanding the postrecession consumer, the authors anticipate that green consumerism although slowed by the recession will recover and accelerate post-recession. Ethical consumerism will also rebound though much more slowly as people focus on satisfying their immediate self interests before they return to prerecession levels of altruistic spending.

However we look at it, it seems we are on the verge of a paradigm shift that by reconfiguring what we believe to be important in life will set new frameworks for defining and measuring success.

The wind does not break a tree that can bend

I recently worked with the cultural think/do network Mission Models Money (MMM) on their People Theme project researching the competencies that people working in the UK arts and heritage sector need for thriving in conditions of change, complexity, and uncertainty – conditions that are such a dominant feature of 21st century life².

In this research, we defined thriving as the integration of relevance, resilience and ethical practice:



Life-friendly in this context means having a benign impact on quality of life. All life. Akin to the Happy Planet Index description of a successful society as one that can ‘*support good lives that don’t cost the Earth*’ we wanted to ensure that our research didn’t advocate for work practices that would enable people and organisations to thrive but at too high a cost to oneself, to other people, or to the plants and animals with whom we share the planet.

We wondered the extent to which people in the arts and heritage sector would agree with this values-based definition of thriving and of success.

He who thinks he leads but has no followers, is only taking a walk John Maxwell

Social impact and responsibility to stakeholders must be familiar concepts by now to publicly funded arts organisations, especially those that have grown used to being trained to the trellis of instrumentalism. Expanding the boundary to include as stakeholders non-human forms of life is perhaps a larger leap for arts organisations to make in their day-to-day practice.

Whilst 59% of respondents to MMM’s People Theme survey³ thought that *having a strong sense of social responsibility* was very relevant or important to them getting great results at work (a further 36% saying it was fairly relevant) and 47% that it was critical to their sector thriving, only 28% felt that *actively caring for nature and the environment* was very important to their work and 25% critical to their sector thriving. A fifth of respondents thought that *actively caring for nature and the environment* was not relevant to them getting great results at work.

Although the proportion of those who thought *having a strong sense of social responsibility* was very relevant to getting great results at work is higher than for *actively caring for nature and the environment*, it is still relatively low compared to responses to the other competencies we tested, with three quarters of the list of competencies having a higher incidence of ‘very relevant’ responses⁴.

It is possible that even if people appreciate the importance of *actively caring for nature and the environment* to the sector thriving, it is still being perceived as

'someone else's problem': a quarter of those who said it is critical to the sector thriving also said it was either not at all or only fairly relevant to them getting great results at work.

It seems to me that most of the respondents do not feel a direct connection between success at work and positive impact on nature, but they would probably readily acknowledge that there is a connection between success at work and personal wellbeing.

So what about the link between wellbeing and impact on nature? Well, the People Theme research finds a positive association between personal wellbeing and caring for nature. Just under a third of our sample say *actively caring for nature and the environment* is 'very like me'. This subgroup has a higher incidence of both very high/above average satisfaction with life⁵ and 'very good' mental health than the sample as a whole. This trend also works the other way, with a higher proportion of those reporting 'very good' mental health and very high/above average satisfaction with life saying that *actively caring for nature and the environment* is 'very like me'.

Though not quite as strong, we can also see in the data a positive relationship between personal wellbeing and *feeling a strong sense of social responsibility*⁶. Research into happiness finds that one of the most important influences on happiness is social relationships⁷.

Completing the loop, analysis of The People Theme data also reveals an association between 'very like me' responses to *actively caring for nature and the environment* and *feeling a strong sense of social responsibility*.

But life-friendly impact isn't just about other people or nature: it also refers to oneself. A quarter of our sample work on average 50+ hours per week. Although we couldn't see any direct negative impact of this on their satisfaction with life score, or physical or mental health rating, many survey respondents and interviewees described the high personal cost, for example to family relationships, that working under the pressure of large workloads without sufficient resources can have.

In The People Theme research, the competency that received the highest percentage of respondents saying that this was 'very like me' was *taking responsibility for oneself and one's role in what's happening*. Given what we have just discussed above, it would appear that the boundary that most people in our sample draw around their sphere of responsibility has a fairly small radius in that it does not extend out into social and natural environmental impact.

I would also surmise that the relationships between wellbeing and caring for nature and social responsibility are not widely appreciated or understood in the UK arts and heritage sector.

So we can infer from our findings that the arts and heritage sector is not an early adopter of business models (such as those discussed in Harvard Business Review OnPoint⁸) that value nature and natural resources as capital along with other forms of capital, that recognise the essential interdependence of human economies and natural ecosystems, and that understand this not just for the moral argument but in terms of the value that can be created for the organisation and its stakeholders.

Change is mandatory, improvement is optional

Evidently there is some work to do in influencing the sector in this regard. But what can we expect in the way of leadership from those traditionally recognised as 'leaders'?

We may be encouraged that a slightly higher proportion (8%) of CEO/directors and board members than the sample as a whole thought *actively caring for nature and the environment* was 'very relevant' to them getting great results at work. A similarly higher proportion thought it was 'very like me', accounting for 38% of all CEO/Board members in our sample. But of these, only around half (58%) said *matching words with actions* or *exhibiting behaviour one wishes to see in others* (53%) was 'very like me', which does raise questions about the integrity of leaders in the sector.

A tree is known by its fruit

With regard to the relevance of social responsibility to getting great results at work, the CEO/Board group responded similarly to the sample as a whole.

Respondents who had received some form of leadership training⁹ had a slightly higher (5%) incidence of thinking that *having a strong sense of social responsibility* was very relevant, than the sample as a whole. But their results for *actively caring for nature and the environment* were not significantly different, implying that some shifts in emphasis in the content and/or delivery of leadership programmes are required.

Of the 81 competencies, qualities and attributes¹⁰ that were identified through The People Theme research as playing a key role in thriving in conditions of change, complexity and uncertainty, we selected 12 as having particular relevance for those who wish to influence through leading by example. The first four of these I have discussed already:

- *Sense of social responsibility*
- *Actively caring for nature & the environment*
- *Matching one's words with one's actions*
- *Exhibiting/modelling behaviour one wishes to see in others*
- *Helping others feel comfortable with change*
- *Motivating others*
- *Challenging others in supportive ways*
- *Willing to hold others to account*
- *Taking responsibility for oneself and one's role in what's happening*
- *Acknowledging one's mistakes to others*
- *Co-creating conditions where others can excel in their own ways*
- *Reaching win-win solutions*

All of these competencies would need to be drawn upon by leaders to shift the arts and heritage sector into a new way of thinking and working in order to have an intentionally life-friendly impact on people and planet.

In addition to these, there are various other competencies that we tested that I would identify as especially relevant to life-friendly practice:

- *Strategic thinking, considering the impact of actions from multiple perspectives, questioning assumptions and existing frameworks, seeing the bigger picture & working at the level of detail*
- *Working/negotiating across boundaries, appreciating the value of diversity, asking questions to open up possibilities, being open to other perspectives*

and ideas, being open to being challenged, being open to changing one's mind, using feedback to learn & improve

- *Managing relationships: feeling empathy for others, being insightful about people and situations, being perceptive of others needs & preferences, handling conflict, building mutual trust & respect, actively listening, drawing one's own boundaries & rules of engagement, communication skills*
- *Self awareness about one's own preferences, prejudices & limits of one's control*
- *Resilience (self acceptance, coping with uncertainty & ambiguity, being positive & optimistic, motivating oneself, seeing problems as opportunities)*

Exploring the degree to which all the above competencies, qualities and attributes were perceived to be possessed by our survey sample is beyond the scope of this article, but is discussed in depth in The People Theme full research report (see www.missionmodelsmoney.org.uk).

The People Theme research did not measure absolute possession of competencies for thriving but rather self-perceived possession and relevance.

But it is not merely whether people think these competencies are important or even whether they believe themselves to possess them, but whether they actually use them to good effect. Through the research I have come to understand how people draw on their competencies, qualities and attributes in different combinations and extents in different situations and that people's ability to do this well is influenced by a variety of factors not entirely within their control. Some of these factors relate to personal contexts (e.g. state of health or personal life), some to work contexts (e.g. the culture of the workplace) and some to the wider world (e.g. social trends, political agendas and funding priorities) that influence the environments that individuals and organisations operate within.

Confidence emerged as the major theme, cited unprompted by one third of respondents as a factor affecting their ability to draw on their competencies to good effect. Self-confidence is at the forefront of a growing body of thinking about organisation behaviour, and is increasingly being identified as one factor that carries some to achievement and, when missing, causes others to fail, or even fail to try¹¹. Self-confidence has been found to affect performance by impacting on our motivation, our perceptions and our thought patterns¹². In other words it can generate self-fulfilling behaviour.

There are ways of growing confidence in the life-friendly vision as a way forward for the sector, and help embed these approaches into organisational structures and processes, for example by:

- Continually highlighting the urgency and necessity for new business models that enable individuals and organisations to thrive in life-friendly ways,
- Providing a shared vocabulary for talking about the kinds of competencies, qualities and attributes required
- Offering guidance on how to develop these competencies and qualities in people

The Happy Planet Index's associated Charter for a Happy Planet¹³ calls for governments to:

"Measure people's well-being and environmental impact in a consistent and regular way, and to develop a framework of national accounts that considers the interaction between the two so as to guide us towards sustainable well-being"

I think we can expect that at some point in the not too distant future, measuring wellbeing and environmental impact will become a condition of funding for arts organisations in the UK.

Necessity is the mother of invention

Rather than passively waiting for this to happen and being frustrated with the results, I am embarking on a radical new journey with the Chinese Arts Centre in Manchester as a live case study to find out just what being life-friendly really means for an arts organisation with an international remit.

We will explore:

- The processes and resources involved in artistic production and presentation and their life-friendly impact from multiple individual and organisational perspectives
- How the Chinese Arts Centre decides where to draw a boundary around its responsibilities to people's wellbeing and impact on nature and natural resources
- What solutions there might be to make the processes life-friendly
- How to reconcile different cultural values, especially when working internationally (e.g. preferences for control over/living with nature, or competitive/cooperative social relationships)
- How to develop required competencies and influence contexts to create conditions that enable competencies for life-friendly practice to flourish and be drawn upon to good effect
- What the key challenges are and how to overcome them
- What the implications are likely to be for the Chinese Arts Centre and its stakeholders were it to implement these solutions and interventions and integrate life-friendly values into the organisational genome
- How to evaluate life-friendly performance in a meaningful and useful way so that the organisation can learn and improve

Our aim is to develop a practical model applicable across the UK arts and heritage sector that can be used to understand the implications of embracing life-friendly practice including its opportunities and costs, and offers guidance on how to go about doing it.

This research is truly (though not literally) groundbreaking as it seeks to synthesise all the currently disparate models for evaluating wellbeing and impact on nature and natural resources in a way that is suited to arts and heritage organisations. Drawing upon biomimicry and 'cradle to cradle' approaches, it goes way beyond the usual scope of carbon-neutral aspirations.

Research like this will go some way to make the life-friendly wind blow a little stronger in the sector. But we can expect it to face some challenges.

Every path has its puddle

Research shows that competitive societies such as the UK tend to place a high value on winning, getting ahead, individual achievement and personal success, and measure success narrowly, often in terms of material success. In other more cooperative societies there is a higher value placed on interdependence and long-term social relationships. Quality of life is more important than winning or being Number One¹⁴.

So it may be that organisations are overly focussed on short-term self-interest, not recognising that:

*"In a non-zero-sum world you do not have to do better than the other player to do well for yourself"*¹⁵

Co-opetition strategy explains how we simultaneously compete and cooperate at work:

*"Business is cooperation when it comes to creating a pie and competition when it comes to dividing it up. This duality can easily make business relationships feel paradoxical. But learning to be comfortable with this duality is the key to success"*¹⁶

The best way to succeed, it says, is to let others do well, including your competitors.

Organisations may also believe that life-friendly practice is not part of their core competency and regard it as a distraction from what they do best (an argument used to critique triple bottom line reporting).

Another challenge is if the benefits of life-friendly practice seem too indirect, or if one's impact on other's wellbeing or on nature feels too remote and disconnected from day-to-day life.

However, I am generally a positive and optimistic person (along with 58% of our sample) so I take heart from the prediction that altruistic behaviour in western countries will return postrecession and continue - even if slowly - to grow.

As 40% of the sample are also quick to see problems as opportunities and 50% like to seek out challenges, I expect the wind will pick up and we'll see the UK arts and heritage sector get activated in improving its impact on people and people.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has Margaret Mead

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NOTES

¹ The Futures Company, A Darwinian Gale white paper 2010

² See <http://www.missionmodelsmoney.org.uk/programme/21st-century-people/> for more information about The People Theme research

³ MMM People Theme survey was completed by 254 people working in a diverse range of fields in the UK arts and cultural sector

⁴ We tested 81 competencies in total, the average result for a competency being 'very relevant' to getting great results at work was 67%, the median was 69%

⁵ Using the Satisfaction with Life Score by Ed Diener

⁶ Personal wellbeing and caring for nature

67% of those who said *actively caring for nature* was 'very like me' rated their mental health as 'very good' compared to 55% of the total sample. Using Ed Diener's Satisfaction with Life Scale, 73% had high or above average satisfaction with life (SWL) compared with 65% of the total sample.

36% of those who rated their mental health as 'very good' and 34% of those with high/above average SWL said *actively caring for nature* was 'very much like me' compared to 29% of the total sample.

Personal wellbeing and sense of social responsibility

61% of those who said *feeling a strong sense of social responsibility* was 'very like me' rated their mental health as 'very good' compared with 55% of the total sample. 68% had high/above average SWL compared with 65% of the total sample.

61% of those who rated their mental health as 'very good' and 58% of those with high/above average SWL said *feeling a strong sense of social responsibility* was 'very like me' compared to 56% of the total sample.

⁷ Understanding SWLS Scores by Ed Diener

⁸ Harvard Business Review OnPoint spring 2010 issue 'Making Green Profitable'

⁹ Including Clore Leadership Programme fellowships and short courses, and Cultural Leadership Programme training

¹⁰ For the full list of competencies see The People Theme research report, which can be accessed at <http://www.missionmodelsmoney.org.uk/programme/21st-century-people/>

¹¹ G Hollenbeck, D Hall, Self-confidence and Leader Performance, *Organizational Dynamics* Vol. 33 No 3 pp254-269 2004

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Happy Planet Index: Charter for a Happy Planet, <http://www.happyplanetindex.org/engage/charter.html>

¹⁴ G Ferraro, *Global Brains*, 2002

¹⁵ R Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1990

¹⁶ B Nalebuff & A Brandenburger, *Co-opetition*, 1996