

## THE ART OF COMMITMENT IN THE WORKFORCE

Companies carry ever more weight in our societies. A comparison of the 2008 classification of the largest international companies with that of the world's States<sup>i</sup> reveals that the first 180 economic entities in the world include 116 companies and only 64 States, i.e., the companies account for 64%.

In contrast, in 1990, prior to the enormous economic push delivered by the spread of the new communications technologies, the liberalisation of trade worldwide and the collapse of communism, companies represented only 46% of the first 180 economic entities, or 83 companies for 97 States. The financial crisis of 2008 which forced States to inject hundreds of billions and assume the social, legal and financial cost, also furnishes a measure of the extraordinary influence companies exert.

While the States of the North, having run out of utopias, seem to be playing fire-fighter to the economy, companies are effecting a radical change in our societies: Internet banishes space and frontiers, genetic engineering revolutionises living organisms, while the computer and the mobile phone decompartmentalise professional and private life. The phenomenon should not in itself be a cause for alarm. From the fourteenth century on princes and merchants were forcing the Church – the cement of society at the time – to pull back. The movement became known as the "Renaissance". If the impact of this Renaissance was lasting and positive, it was because the princes and merchants of the time, the Medicis of Florence for example, sought profit as well as the development of knowledge and the arts in society.

Today it seems that companies in the industrialised countries also need to pursue something more than profit. The current mutations in society and the economy impel them to become more respectful, responsible and attractive in order to remain competitive. Given their weight and their influence, these companies could well be the driving force of a new Renaissance embodying values for a better world, but fuelled by liberal pragmatism rather than moral reasons.

Migros is a trendsetter in this regard. As Switzerland's leading private employer with a workforce of over 84,000 in 2008, it owes its lasting success in part to the fact that, since its foundation by Gottlieb Duttweiler in 1925, it has always endeavoured to reconcile profit with the perpetuation of a relation of respect both between producers and consumers and between managers and their staff.

Indeed, responsibility is becoming an obligation for companies in a transparent environment, where they are confronted with well-informed and mobile consumer networks, capable of sanctioning any shortcomings in that sphere. The oil spill affecting the south-east coast of the United States is a case in point. The oil company BP has stated: "We are taking full responsibility for the spill and we will clean it up." Twenty years ago such a declaration would have been unimaginable.

The opening up of the markets entails an increase in the level of competition and in the number of competitors. A company needs to become more attractive, not only to keep its workforce and its customers, but also to attract fresh minds and new purchasers.

In the knowledge economy the determining factor is human. One way of confronting new challenges is for the company to motivate the commitment of its workforce. For Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize for economics, commitment is an instance of a person "choosing an act that he believes will yield a lower level of personal welfare than an alternative that is also available".<sup>ii</sup> The author considers that the link between commitment and work motivation is a central factor, as is the link between motivation

and productivity. To commit oneself is to act voluntarily and to accept a risk. This does not mean working for nothing, but rather to muster one's resources from the inside without external incentives. Individuals who commit themselves give of their best and are more creative. Quantitative incentives are not sufficient to bring out these qualitative values.

How is commitment to be created in the company's workforce? While remuneration policies undoubtedly play a role in commitment, their importance is perhaps overestimated and any excess may even be a motive for becoming disinvolved. On the one hand excessive bonuses sterilise talent, while on the other there is something benumbing about the status of a government employee which allows him to know what he will be earning 35 years from now.

Where work is concerned, commitment emerges when individuals are associated with the overall strategy, when they function in an environment of trust and respect, when they have to face up to ambitious and demanding challenges, when they have the time and when like craftsmen they can control a whole set of processes in their work. Apple has achieved this by creating cross-functional teams active throughout the company that simultaneously manage product manufacture, marketing, sales and finance.<sup>iii</sup>

As for management, a recent study has shown that for workers "the top motivator of performance is ... making headway in their jobs."<sup>iv</sup> The author's conclusion is that managers would gain in efficiency by putting themselves at the service of their teams and scaling down the obstacles that slow their advance.

In the last instance, company chiefs and boards of directors should be the first to be committed: they need to bear in mind that there is a difference in value between managing and creating a company; at the same time they must seek coherence between their own actions and what they require of their staff, establish a balance between their remuneration and the work they do, carry a vision and share it. *Noblesse oblige*.

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founder of *Saisir le temps*®

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<sup>i</sup> Companies according to turnover, "Fortune Global 500" (published in 2009); States according to their GDP, IMF; in billions of dollars.

<sup>ii</sup> Amartya Sen, "On Ethics and Economics", Oxford, 1987.

<sup>iii</sup> Jeffrey S. Young & William L. Simon, "iCon Steve Jobs", page 262, Wiley, 2005.

<sup>iv</sup> Teresa Amabile, "What Really Motivates Workers", Harvard Business Review, January-February 2010.