Summary

Three Hands’ recent half day forum, ‘A New Sense of Purpose’, was designed to explore how community engagement is becoming more sophisticated and strategic, and how these changes present new opportunities for both learning & development and linking corporate responsibility (CR) with core business issues.

Forty delegates from CR, sustainability, HR and learning & development roles in a variety of industries attended the forum to contribute to and learn from presentations, debate and discussion. Three Hands takes people out of their usual business settings and into the community and this forum was no exception; it was held at YourStory, a south London charity engaging disadvantaged young people and adults in a variety of mentoring and education programmes. The venue, part of a disused school in Vauxhall, immediately engaged the delegates with the subject matter of the forum.

The first session, ‘Developing people and organisations through community engagement’, was a practical introduction to the partnership between YourStory and Sky by Louise Considine (Bigger Picture Manager, Sky) and Adrian Jones (Chief Executive, YourStory). Louise and Adrian described why there was such a strong fit between Sky and YourStory and how the 23 participants on the Sky Leadership Development Programme developed core skills by working with a group of YourStory’s young people over two days. Adrian also described how the project had a lasting and authentic impact on both the YourStory staff and the young people involved.

Jock Encombe’s (co-author, ‘Meaning Inc.’) presentation, ‘Meaning, engagement and real world connection’, was a mix of theory, research and practical strategy for thriving in the 21st Century. He challenged us to consider what businesses need to do differently in these new economic times and emphasised the need for organisations to develop a strong sense of real world connection, in particular when looking to develop and retain their leaders.
After a short break, when delegates were able to meet some of the young people who attend programmes at Your Story, Marianne Mwaniki (Senior Manager – Sustainability, Standard Chartered Bank) took the floor. Marianne took us through ‘why Standard Chartered core business and social contribution go hand in hand’ by showing us how the organisation’s approach to sustainability is integrated into every part of the business. From their flagship visual impairment programme to smaller grass-roots initiatives, they aim to engage staff at every level. Marianne sees staff engagement in sustainability as a tool for retention, and showed us how Standard Chartered’s Great Manager Programme links sustainability and community engagement with talent and leadership development.

With plenty of ideas and information from these three presentations, Tim ‘Mac’ Macartney (author of ‘Finding Earth, Finding Soul’) led delegates for an hour in break-out groups to discuss where their own organisations fitted on an evolutionary scale of community engagement. These sessions enabled delegates to learn from one another, with particular reference to linking corporate responsibility with staff engagement and development. Each group then reported back on their findings to the forum, which led to a deep discussion on how the current issues of corporate responsibility and sustainability can truly be integrated into business, and how to get ‘the voice of children and future generations into the boardroom’. 
Mark Wade (ex-Head of Sustainable Learning Development at Shell and Three Hands Associate), who moderated the afternoon’s proceedings, brought the forum to a close with thoughts on how we can link up the skills and competencies of leaders to the local and global needs in our communities. The conclusions he drew centred on our need for a mindset paradigm shift to connect as humans rather than as companies and communities.

**Moderator’s remarks – Mark Wade’s summary of A New Sense of Purpose**

A number of themes resonated strongly throughout the afternoon.

The first was LINKS.

- The link between a company’s core purpose and engagement with society
- Between engagement and the skills and competencies they offer
- Between skills and competencies and leadership development
- Between leadership and relating and responding to global and local realities and needs

The second was PARADIGM SHIFT.

- There is a need for a paradigm shift in mindsets and behaviour to recognise the integral nature of business in society and to shift from seeing CSR as a ‘worthy activity’ to ‘the way we do business’
- To shift our thinking from ‘connecting companies and communities’ to ‘connecting as human beings’
• To shift from companies doing things to society, to society’s expectations being the driver to the integration of corporate responsibility into everything we do

The third was ADDRESSING FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS in society.

• Companies need to address the fundamental needs of society as their core purpose. This would ‘set alight the organisation’ and be a powerful motivating force for staff
• Ask society/communities what it is they need rather than assuming or worse providing the ‘elastoplast’ to problems’.

The fourth was JOLT.

• There is a need for a jolt to the systems to stimulate change and drive the joining-up of CSR strategies with business strategies and societal/community needs.

The fifth was getting the VOICE OF CHILDREN into the Board room.

• The critical test for CEOs and their boards should be ‘how would their actions effect the next generation.’ Think what the impact of having the voice of children in the Board room would be to decision making. All Boards should be encouraged to take this perspective when making decisions today. It would help them focus on what sort of society and world we want to pass on to the next generation.

The sixth was COURAGE.

• Do we have the courage to step forward to carry these messages back to our companies? We need to find simple ways to touch people in an engaging way and in ways that do not stretch the organisation too far too early.

The conversation has moved on rapidly in the last couple of years. At a previous Three Hands event (in September 2006) the focus of the conversation was on ‘how do we get better at community engagement for local benefit and through this developing team skills and personal growth?’ Now the conversation is around the very role of business in society and integrating society’s expectations into the core purpose of companies.

This is truly a paradigm shift in thinking and one that bodes well for the future of business in society and the next generation.