

Foreword:

Returning Cultural Propriety to Commerce

One of the most exciting trends afoot in both the theory and practice of management is the renaissance of interest in economic embeddedness. Recognition of and attention to the extra-economic dimensions of our marketplace behaviors—the interpenetration of economy and other cultural institutions—is driving much current disciplinary advance and shaping much enlightened intervention. In an era of globalized markets, when increased contact among cultures escalates the opportunity for ethical conflict, the need to chart the moral geography of business activity has never been more pressing. The authors of *Beyond Agenda* undertake just such cartography in this intriguing and provocative volume.

Richard Reeves-Ellington and Adele Anderson present us with a cultural ecology of corporate social responsibility. Because managers are inevitably behavioral engineers or social architects, and because management is often an ethically invasive procedure, theorists and practitioners desperately require a framework for evaluating and humanizing the impact of business on people whose lifeways are touched by the corporation. To build such a framework, to facilitate the “reintegration of business and society,” Reeves-Ellington and Anderson explore the “moral tasks of practice” in local markets and workplaces around the world; the United States, Japan, Bulgaria, Latin America, and Indonesia are given particular attention. Their anthropological perspective of ethical encounters between firm and folk, grounded as it is in field work and library, makes compelling reading.

The authors describe two approaches to ethical systems. The “agenda” approach, a top-down imposition based on “formal, uniform mechanisms” of authority, views actors as statistical aggregates and is insensitive to context. The ap-

proach emerging from “cultural interpretation” is a bottom-up enterprise that recognizes individual agency as locally situated and views actors as particular personalities. The former regime is a deontological one often favored by Western corporations. The latter, a teleological one, is more likely favored by many anthropologists. Integral to the authors’ position is their discussion of leadership styles in such companies as Apple Computers, The Body Shop, and a pseudonymous multinational, Pharmco. Transactional leaders guide organizations that follow a “business” model and adopt a bottom-line attitude to social responsibility. Transformational leaders, who share characteristics of the shaman, guide organizations that follow a “commerce” model and push beyond the bottom line, to embrace an employee and customer welfare attitude to social responsibility. Through illuminating anecdotes and extended case studies, the authors explore the practical implications and consequences of each ethical approach.

What is perhaps most satisfying about this volume is its relentless return to a stakeholder orientation toward corporate social responsibility, and the authors’ emphasis on the need for a vision constructed jointly by those whom strategy will touch. Anthropologically informed managerial practice seeks solutions appropriate to the needs of local, as well as organizational, culture. Everywhere around the planet, we are witnessing a dialectical engagement between cultural hegemony and cultural pluralism. As the forces of homogeneity and heterogeneity contend, managers who adopt a posture of cultural propriety will most likely negotiate radical change in the best interests of their stakeholders. Motivated by a corporate vision that is tempered by an intimate, locally rooted understanding of lifeways, and a profound respect for the integrity of traditional social structures, these managers recognize that an ethics grounded in cultural ecology makes good business sense. Cultural propriety is not simply sound intuition, nor is it relativist cant. Reeves-Ellington and Anderson show us how the stance is developed, tested, and refined in field settings that are collectively the touchstone of anthropology and management alike.

Empowerment is among the greatest challenges we face in the new millennium. Beyond concerns for humane management, consumer satisfaction, and sustainable development, we must discover ways to improve the life chances and quality of everyone caught up in this latest wave of economic transformation. A cultural perspective reminds us that the words “ecology” and “economics” derive

from a common root (*-oikos*) signifying “household,” that all markets are local and that each is comprised not of “others” but of “selves,” and that consequences of our managerial decisions will be the less unanticipated and unintended for our ethnological due diligence. Social responsibility is a shared obligation among stakeholders. Reeves-Ellington and Anderson demonstrate the managerial value of cultural wisdom, and our understanding of ethical decisions is enriched by their demonstration.

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**BUSINESS, COMMERCE,
AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Beyond Agenda

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