Leaders in world business are the first true planetary citizens. They have worldwide capability and responsibility; their domains transcend national boundaries. Their decisions affect not just economies, but societies; and not just direct concerns of business, but world problems of poverty, environment, and security. World business will be a key actor in the ultimate resolution of the macro-problem. It crosses national boundaries with much more ease than do political institutions and the business corporation is far more flexible and adaptive organization than the bureaucratic structures of government.

Willis Harman, author of Global Mind Change

1. THE SEARCH FOR RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS

Contemporary social research unmistakably shows that people everywhere are starving for leadership... starving to connect with leaders who are believable, trustworthy, and capable of actualizing the changes we need in this chaotic world. Sure, we’ve had “leaders”... but what we need are business people who can take the lead in transforming the character of organizations that have contributed to today’s world trade turmoil... today’s exploitation of people and natural resources... today’s inequalities of educational and economic access... and today’s global stress from an impossible pursuit of happiness through unlimited desires and acquisitiveness.

Indeed, people are looking—although skeptically—for business leaders to exercise true leadership. “Research suggests that the Western consumer has begun to expect more than high quality products and services from corporations. We are, for instance, increasingly concerned about the environment. We worry about the expanding gulf between the ‘have’s’ and the ‘have not’s’ around the world. The public is looking for corporations to demonstrate higher values.”

Is this a call for more “visionary” leaders in business? No—it’s much more than that. More than just being visionary, true leaders must inspire courage, integrity, trust, and personal brilliance in their colleagues. In short, their leadership must be based on their personal character, and must build integrity and character throughout the organization.

The benefits of high-integrity and high-responsibility business fall into three arenas:

1) At the individual level, it is simply soul-satisfying, an exercise of our spiritual nature.

2) At the corporate and community level, it leads to attracting more investors, more business, and more talented people.

3) At the human society level, it increases our confidence and competence in the power of goodness.

For example, at the corporate level, does it attract a greater number of investors? “Socially responsible investing” surged impressively from 1995 to 1997 in the USA. “The assets in screened portfolios—that is, portfolios that exclude, for instance, tobacco and weapons companies or firms that are criticized for their labor practices—rose 227% in two years, from $162 billion to $529 billion. That’s impressive, considering that during the same period the market grew only 84% and the S&P grew by only 60%.”

The case of Charles Schwab & Co. shows the attraction of more business and more talented people. In the 1970’s, Charles had a keen ethical insight that inspired a business breakthrough. He saw that Wall Street brokers were in an untenable conflict of interest: they were supposed to look out for their customers’ investment interests, ye they made more commissions by convincing their customers to make more trades. He realized that hordes of well-educated investors didn’t need advice; they needed reliable transactions. Doubly armed, he set up his company to not to pay any commissions and not to give any advice. His is a transaction company for informed investors, which has kept its position on top of its industry even though it’s not the lowest-cost provider! Its reputation for integrity attracts customers who are willing to pay for the extra trustworthiness.

Today, the company attracts employees who are dedicated to this “high road” strength of character. Indeed, by the mid-1990’s, customers began clamoring for advice on what investment vehicles were best for them. An internal debate raged at Schwab about how to respond. Employees were adamant that the company should not compromise its integrity—that the company’s ethics were the very thing that had attracted them to working at Schwab! Finally they found the right formula for offering information that could help customers make more informed decisions without advising them.

2. THE CALL FOR SPIRITUALLY-BASED LEADERSHIP

So how do business leaders develop and exercise this character? As we will explore, it springs most deeply and most directly from our spiritual nature! And so, the real call is for transformational leaders who base their leadership on their spiritual roots and values.

You might be thinking that “spirituality” is much too soft for the hard world of business leadership. Or that the world is just not ready for spiritual-based leadership, even if it is “practical.” Yet the evidence is compelling… from research around the world, and 17 years of experience by this author/consultant on corporate innovation, having worked with 100+ companies on three continents.