INTRODUCTION

The change of government in 1997 has encouraged questions about both the effectiveness and appropriateness of the utilitarian and short-term emphasis on economic success, profits and shareholder benefits that were the hallmarks of its predecessor. How, and it is indeed how rather than why, should businesses balance short-term economic success indicators with their responsibility, in the long as well as the short term, to all their stakeholders; not just those who own shares but employees too. Additionally, there are questions about the leadership models that are presented by people in senior roles in private and public sectors. Do they reflect the kind of practices and behaviours that they want to encourage in their wider organisations? Are their behaviours the right ones for others to follow – and what should be the ethical approaches for them to display?

The issue for employing organisations is how best to meet their business objectives as well as contributing to society and creating fulfilling environments for their employees. There can be a virtuous circle where organisations recognise their responsibilities to create fulfilling and continuing roles for those they employ; and where those they employ recognise their own responsibilities, individually and collectively, to contribute to the success, financial and otherwise, and well-being of their employer. A new century is an appropriate time to recognise this need for contribution and fulfilment from the organisation and the individual – and thus challenge some of the old ideas seen in the UK during the last two decades of the twentieth century.

Many of the contributions made by individuals will be in the context of their own community, from local to regional to national. But it is at work that people have the greatest opportunity to develop – as individuals and as groups; and as stakeholders, to use a term which has some favour with the New Labour government. As employees, they are part of organisations that survive and thrive by adapting and developing through internal initiatives and external pressures. They may well be encouraged
to develop their own roles beyond the confines of one limited job in order to increase their effectiveness. They are at the interface of all relationships with customers and are expected to cooperate with and support other employees. They may well be shareholders. They are very likely to be members of a pension scheme with its concerns about longer-term investment. They may be customers too. Unlike other shareholders, they have made a 100 per cent investment in the organisation for which they work; all their financial and skill eggs are in the one basket. And there is a reasonable basic assumption that each of us should contribute to the best of our abilities rather than just do the minimum necessary.

That basic assumption, in itself, raises significant issues about what individuals should expect of themselves not only at work but also in the wider community in which they and their families live. It opens up issues about what is right, and ethical, in terms of behaviour and approaches to work. And it asks those who lead organisations to consider what they have to do themselves to provide the appropriate kinds of environment where individuals can grow and flourish. The old phrase of 'job enrichment' can have a much more radical definition than just knowing about one's immediate job. That is where concepts of ethics, empowerment and stakeholding responsibility come to the fore in practical terms.

Is this an idealistic picture of the world of work and the relationship of business to society generally? Is this the kind of work environment which people would like? It is certainly very different from the kind of environment that most people are currently used to, but it is not incapable of achievement. Individuals can act, groups can act, organisations can make the changes involved. Nor is it an environment that is incompatible with a successful and profitable business. Indeed some of the existing financial measures will provide the marks of achievement of different ways of working. Success, and survival, may be the appropriate measures of progress with such different ways of working. A successful division of a US high-technology company had as its mission the objective of growing people; a key indicator, determined by the people themselves, of their success in moving towards their mission was to meet the owning company's profit and return-on-investment targets. That provided some very 'hard' measure of progress for apparently 'soft' visions. And the employees took full responsibility for achieving the targets.

It seems an entirely appropriate and realistic objective to achieve a working environment where people can be fulfilled and can grow themselves and their skills. Growing themselves is a fundamental