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Social anaesthesia: A non-profitable short-term fix



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It asks whether the strategic plans for corporate social responsibility (CSR) promote or downgrade such an attitude.

Undoubtedly human life is a complex mix of pain and joy, of friendships and tensions, and of individuality and communality. It is tempting to reduce life to a series of painful calamities and social ills, yet these do not occur in isolation. Human life is too richly complex. While there are social troubles with no imminent solutions, one cannot afford to grow indifferent or deliberately ignore their existence.

This article looks at social anaesthesia as an attitude towards societal deficiencies. It asks whether the strategic plans for corporate social responsibility (CSR) promote or downgrade such an attitude. It is worth reminding ourselves that

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ignoring social needs on an individual or corporate level postpones the problem and is counterproductive for long-term growth.

Part of the human biological system is set up to detect painful stimuli and protect the body. Similarly, there is a human social system that interconnects individuals for their wellbeing. One human reaction is an immediate and empathic response when faced with others' sufferings. The extent to which this response manifests itself is determined by wilful cultivation. It determines and is determined by one's character and impacts relationships. Anyone with a well-developed empathic response will maintain the needed emotional distance that makes compassionate aid possible. This is not a distance that feeds on excessive self-preservation but an inner strength that manifests self-discipline and benevolence.

CSR was born with the aim of balancing self-interest and the common good. The concept of social responsibility has been in existence since the Roman and English laws which oversaw the expansion of both kingdoms. Religion, especially Christianity and Islam, has encouraged social concern and almsgiving. By the 20th century, business managers realised they had a responsibility to balance the maximization of profits with meeting the needs of their labour force and the community. This has grown into exigent legislation that often compels these corporations to give back to communities.

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In 1999, the then UN secretary-general, called for a corporate world that aims at seeing the human face in its global market. This was an incentive for the foundation of the UNGC and other organisations that have continued to remind businesses of their social roles. With increasing awareness of the imperative need for helping communities, the criminal sanctions for non-compliance have also increased. While the fear of punishment has led to better social responsibility, is it really leading to more compassionate individuals? It is the concern for a social responsibility based on compassion that has led to the debates about whether CSR should be a question of legislation or individual corporate ethics.



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For consistent givers, there is the danger of emotional exhaustion or burnout following repeated exposure to suffering. Where there are persistent deficiencies in social structure, a defensive posture may be adopted to reduce personal impact. It is a form of acquired indifference, social anesthesia. It occurs consciously or subconsciously by placing space between oneself and the negative feelings generated by the awareness of poverty, insecurity, and social deprivations. Some emotional distance is normal if one is to help others efficaciously. Yet this cannot be cold or paternalistic.

The term anesthesia is derived from medicine and is essential for reducing pain with surgical operations. Nitrous oxide, a laughing gas, was one of the first anesthetics to be isolated from oxygen by the English chemist, Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). It has anxiolytic, amnesic, as well as analgesic properties. It can also be fatal. Would not it be great to have a quick fix laughing gas for our social problems? Yes! However, it will only deaden the pain temporarily and not change reality. It will be a short-term answer without really being a solution.

In the corporate world, such a quick fix solution would involve feeling comfortable because one has paid relevant fines, settled bureaucratic needs, and promised to help the community somehow, someday. There is no business or corporate institution that can thrive for long in a society riddled with social ills. Bribery and corruption, poverty and insecurity, failed work ethic, and skepticism about the human condition are a few of these illnesses. We need to tackle the inconsistencies that result from a growing, buoyant, or healthy corporate world alongside suffering and incapacitated communities.

When incoherencies begin to accumulate within a paradigm, a crisis results. According to the Kuhnian understanding, a crisis should be followed by a period of extraordinary science or research that ends in the formation of another paradigm. We are certainly at such a moment. There is an epistemological crisis

in the understanding of social responsibility. This should lead to reflections and changes in behaviour. We cannot continue to interpret corporate responsibility as prohibitions and obligations. It needs to translate to socially aware individuals who use their abilities and goods to not only advance self-interest but to develop the common good as a long-term project. It is only in this way that the corporate world will seek and find the human face in its global market.

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