Making Business Human-First

Can creative communications help companies forge a bold new path towards human rights for all?

tea & water
perspectives

At Tea & Water we use creative thinking and communications to deliver new approaches to social and economic sustainability issues. In this Perspectives publication, we look at a critical challenge for corporate sustainability leaders around the world – human rights across the value chain.

We challenged ourselves and our network to rethink what's possible when engaging leadership, employees, and communities in conversations around human rights. Going beyond corporate policies, we explore some of the creative approaches that could accelerate engagement, build culture, and drive sustained behaviour change.

Adding their perspectives, a diverse group of industry experts also share their challenges and experience. From a major UK retailer to an artisanal Tibetan textile brand; from an innovative human rights lawyer to a feminist career coach; and from India's biggest garment manufacturer to a 300-year-old English tea brand.

To add your perspective or find out more about our creative communications work in social and economic sustainability, visit us at teaandwater.co.

Foreword

By Rob Cameron, chief executive
and Denise Delaney, director
at SustainAbility

At SustainAbility, we are making the future the cause of our present, working to inspire and enable business to lead the transition to a sustainable economy. Respect for human rights is fundamental both to that transition and to ensuring that the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are achieved along the way.

Business has made impressive progress on the sustainability agenda. But despite this progress, the corporate sector has yet to meet the moral obligation of fully respecting human rights. This is surprising given that respecting human rights has clear business benefits. For example, a progressive approach to human rights can reduce risks in the value chain, build customer and consumer trust, and help business recruit and retain talent.

The thinking Tea & Water has collected and will share on human rights, particularly how to look at the challenge through a lens of innovation and engagement, offers insights for every business. Combined with the tireless work of human rights organisations around the world – from the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre and Corporate Human Rights Benchmark to the Danish Institute for Human Rights, Fair Labor Association, FIDH, Business Fights Poverty and Stop the Trafik, to just name a few – we believe the corporate sector now has the tools, support and partners at its disposal to ensure all human rights are fully respected. And those that do so will be better, more competitive businesses as a result.

With key partners – business, civil society and governments – working together, the world we live in could be significantly more sustainable within the next 15 years. We hope shining a light on human rights will stimulate the necessary improvement and innovation.

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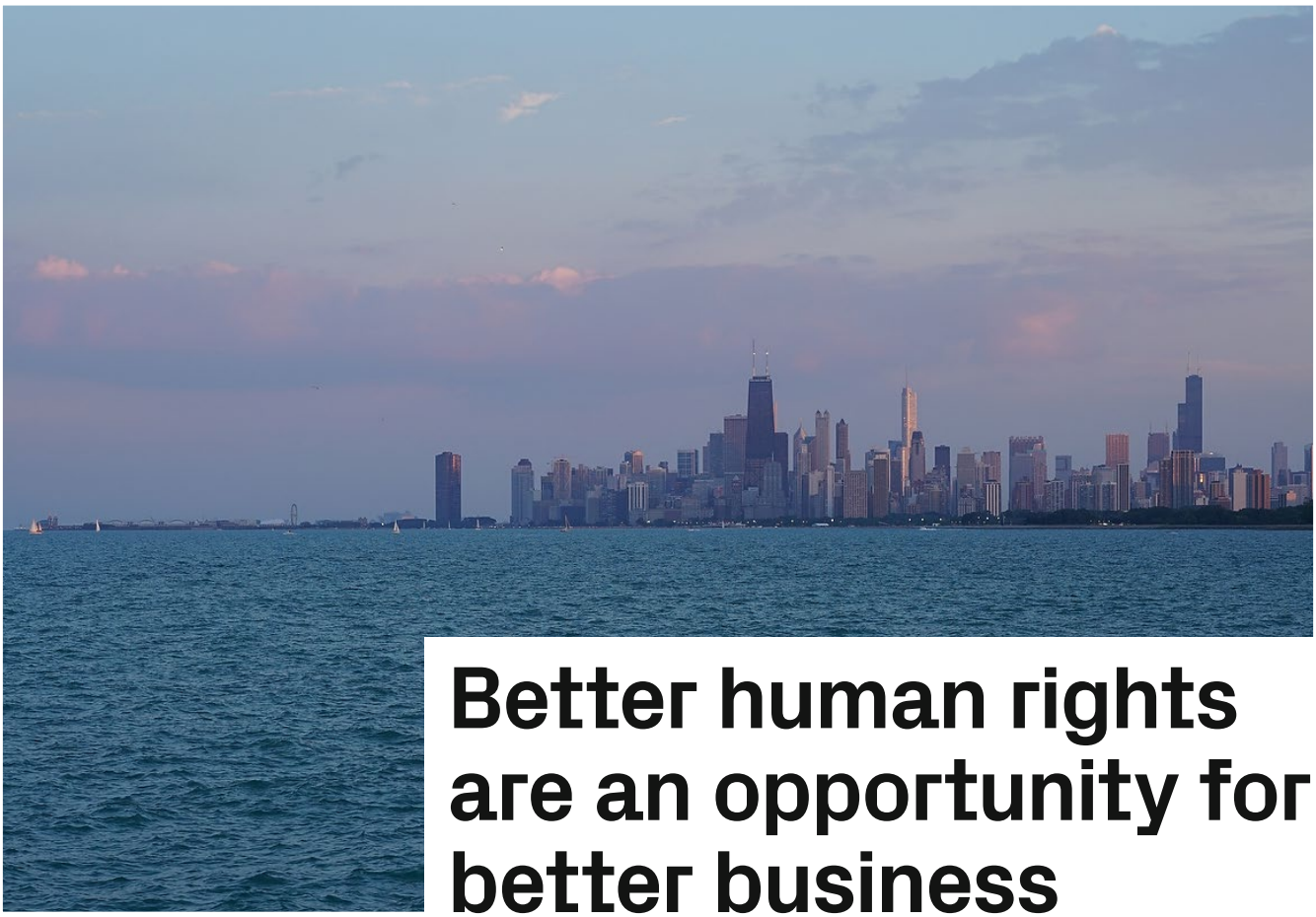


Better human rights are an opportunity for better business

When the East India Company industrialised exploitative business practices in the 17th century, it proved a terrifying truth – that an absolute lack of concern for human rights could be very, very profitable. Despite the increasing number of standards, guidelines, and regulations around human rights in business since then, it's not always been easy to prove that the opposite could also be true.

Looking for ROI is asking the wrong question

But in 2017, we are operating in times unlike anything we have ever seen before. Consumer demand for transparency is at all-time high. Million-dollar marketing campaigns are losing out to consumer video uploads and online activism. (United Airlines spent $220m on advertising costs in 2016, only to see $1bn knocked off the value of its holding company by a customer video of Dr David Dao being violently deplaned). And recent regulatory frameworks now demand risk assessment, due diligence and reporting on human rights from all public companies, particularly in Europe and the UK.

The question is no longer whether to improve human rights across the value chain, but how to maximise the business advantage of doing so

In the business climate we are in today, looking for the financial return on investment from improved human rights might just be asking the wrong question. As it becomes less of a choice and more of a necessity, the question is no longer whether to improve human rights across the value chain, but how to maxmise the business advantage of doing so. It will be the business leaders who can crack that question who will build the strongest, most resilient organisations ready to survive an increasingly transparent world.

The good news for those leaders is that the potential gain from improving human rights does include a financial benefit but the overall returns go far further.

The potential benefits are financial and beyond

A better organised and more respected workforce is more stable, predictable and productive, which reduces the risk of resource shocks and creates productivity gains, all great for a company's bottom line. Legal costs and lost days due to worker or community disputes are minimised and negative financial impacts from backlashes and boycotts become less of a risk. Investor relations teams can leverage this lower risk when speaking to potential investors, as well as being able to target a new base of ethically-minded investors who, as it happens, also tend to be more stable and long-term investors.

In terms of operations, identifying and remedying human rights issues before they happen minimises disruption and lost work time from protests, union action and activism, while improving community relations and building license to operate in local communities. Workers can be easier to hire and retain at a local level and, at a corporate level, overt human rights commitments have been shown to drive staff satisfaction and help attract new talent.

However, in the age of transparency and people power, it's possibly the reputational benefit that will be most potent for business. For any brand, its brand value is among its most important assets – and human rights infringements have the potential to seriously damage that value. Nike bore the brunt of the first public sweat shop backlash in the 1990s, at the height of which its brand ambassadors were publicly shamed and the company's stock price dropped by half from 1996 to 1997. (Nike has since transformed its approach to sustainability from a reputational crisis into a driver of innovation, and has seen its stock price rise over 400% in the nine years since it formed its impressive Sustainable Business & Innovation team.) Beyond simply reducing reputational risk, getting human rights right also enables brand teams to take a leadership stance on an issue of fundamental interest to consumers and to build market differentiation around the organisation's commitments.

Communications are a critical tool to drive improvement

Seeing the opportunity is one thing; being able to effectively implement it right through the organisation is another. A well-crafted human rights policy is the start point – and critical for assessing risks and establishing key priorities and mitigation procedures – but in itself a policy doesn't create change. To make sustained progress requires a large-scale cultural shift that brings the entire organisation along on the journey, and that's where powerful communications become a critical tool. Going beyond policies, engaging communications have the potential to impact the way every person in the business engages with, and acts on human rights in the long term. For great corporate leaders, this is where they can play their most powerful role in changing the game on human rights.

Transparency is a great place for leaders to start. As an internal approach it enables businesses to identify where violations are likely to happen and raise awareness of risks across departments. Transparently talking about issues externally also enables companies to avoid becoming hostage to exposés and instead take the lead in conversations with human rights defenders and activists. Bringing these groups into the conversation can build more positive relationships and lead to co-created solutions.

In the age of transparency and people power, it's possibly the reputational benefit that will be most potent for business

Educating employees and suppliers is another simple but impactful communications tool that leaders can deploy. Internal communications that speak at the right level, in the right language, not only drive awareness and engagement but can highlight specific, simple actions towards improving human rights that every employee and supplier can take on. And it is these small, daily changes that add up to habitual shifts in mindset and a long-term transformation. Going beyond educa-

tion and actually exciting employees about the role they play can further transform human rights from a mandated policy into a something everyone can feel good about.

Lastly, of course showing customers you're serious about the commitment is key to building differentiated brand value around human rights. Consistent and honest communication about the organisation's targets and challenges builds a cushion of positive reputation enabling the business to respond positively instead of defensively if and when issues arise. Consumers appreciate honesty so breaking the issue down simply, talking in human terms, and avoiding corporate speak all make a huge impact in perceived transparency levels.

The reality for any big business is that tackling human rights is not only a moral obligation but a corporate imperative. By understanding the potential business opportunity of improved human rights, acting on it effectively, and bringing the whole organisation on the journey, the best business leaders will transform the perception of human rights from a complicated mandate to a route towards building a more resilient business and, ultimately, a more equitable world.

To make sustained progress requires a large-scale cultural shift that brings the entire organisation along on the journey

Céline Gilart

Head of social impact at Twinings

Céline Gilart manages a team spread across Asia and Africa as head of social impact for this 300-year-old English tea brand. Juggling a tough balance of social development, cultural sensitivity and corporate reality, it's no surprise it took a while for her to find enough downtime for our interview.

A French national now settled in the UK, Céline emits a strong sense of compassion. After studying international development and spending a 10-year career in tea and ethics, she says her motivation is being able to make a difference to people's lives.

Here we chat to Céline about how big business can drive social impact for some of the world's poorest workers and whether consumers should care about who makes their tea

Tell us about tea. What are the big social challenges and human rights issues in the industry?

Well, it really depends on which region. That's why we have our community needs assessment, which is a holistic framework to understand the needs of the people in a participatory way. Whether that's to do with nutrition, gender, water and sanitation, livelihoods and so on. The issues will vary whether we're talking about India, China or Malawi. But in terms of trends, living standards including housing and sanitation are things we hear a lot about on tea gardens because we are talking of places where workers are provided with accommodation for them and their families, and the standard would vary. It's quite a basic thing but it can make a big difference to their whole life because having a decent and safe house means they can then focus on other things. The other global challenge is about women and the lack of opportunities, discrimination, and violence they sometimes face.

You mentioned working with the producers. As you don't own your own plantations, how do you influence conditions with those tea estate owners?

Last year, we worked with our buying department to reduce the number of tea estates we were buying from. This was led mainly by ethical considerations, because we wanted to know what was going on in each of the gardens we source from through regular monitoring visits, and having a large number was really difficult.

Photo: Céline Gilart

We aim to work with like-minded producers and to find solutions together

But also, by having a smaller amount of sites, it means we can have more leverage to improve conditions with these producers. Hopefully, we try to buy from the best, both in terms of quality and social standards, but even these can be further improved, which is what we aim to do.

Engagement and leadership from the producer company on these types of issues is also key. That's why we aim to work with like-minded producers and to find appropriate, tailored and sustainable solutions together.

Twinings has a strategy called 'Sourced With Care', that it says is at the heart of its business. What's the driver behind the strategy? Is it value creation or a more ethical motivation?

'Sourced with Care' is a journey to ensure everyone in our supply chain has the right to a decent quality of life and is able to provide for themselves and their families. We do this because healthier, empowered and sustainable communities are essential to ensure strong supply chains, but also because we believe this is the right thing to do. This is about our moral responsibility. We've been buying tea for over 300 years now and we've always been a premium brand. We're all about quality and we see it as not just the quality of the product, but also the quality of life for the people and what goes into farming a good quality tea.

The 'Sourced With Care' strategy is about making a difference but also about raising awareness of challenges in the industry. How important is the second part?

In tea, or generally in commodities like tea, cocoa, or coffee, the issues are so large and so complex that it's not something one company can sort on its own. For example, in India there are girls being trafficked out of tea estates, or in Malawi national minimum wage is set below the extreme poverty line. We try really hard but, equally, we need to work with others, whether that's other companies, NGOs, industry bodies, government or producers. So I think that's why it's so important to talk about these challenges and not shy away. It's about trying to be on the right side of the table, because it doesn't advance anything or lead to any improvement if you shy away from the problem.

Do you actively speak to consumers about your ethical commitments?

We have launched our 'Sourced with Care' website. Until now, every market had its own website and it could be quite challenging to ensure the most recent and relevant information is up there. Now, we have one central social impact website with people-focused content, including case studies bringing it to life and making it tangible for anyone, including the consumer. There's also impact data and details about our work for a more informed audience. But the reason we're doing it is really not driven by marketing, it's more about wanting to do good and being responsible.

Do you think it's helpful to build consumer awareness of ethical standards? Is that going to drive higher standards or is consumer awareness a by-product or good corporate behaviour?

I think companies should do it anyway, and consumer awareness would be more of a by-product. Now you have international frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, as well as national legislation, such as the Modern Slavery Act in the UK and similar ones in the U.S. and France. These are building more and more pressure on companies to behave ethically. So I just feel it should be part of the normal way of doing business. Every product should be ethically produced and it should not be up to consumers to pay more for ethically made products.

What excites you about what's happening in the tea industry at the moment?

I think it's the collaboration, not just between companies, but also within the wider stakeholders, whether that's NGOs, producers, the public sector or brands like us. I think there's more and more desire for cooperation and partnership, and also companies see it as part of their core operations; it is not the same as philanthropy or social investment. So I think that's an exciting time.

Photo: Céline Gilart

It doesn't advance anything or lead to any improvement if you shy away from the problem

5 innovations to inspire stakeholders to take action on human rights

Although human rights topped the rankings of corporate sustainability priorities in the BSR/Globescan State of Sustainable Business 2017, in reality it's been difficult to see how businesses are making genuine progress. The positive impacts of improved human rights stretch from reduced risks in the value chain, to securing and retaining talent, and building consumer trust. Yet the way businesses tackle and communicate the issue hasn't moved on with nearly the innovation or urgency needed.

Even where policies are in place, they are often hard to understand and even harder to implement across complex value chains, while internal communications teams struggle to create genuine engagement or action across vast company cultures. Essentially, the journey from defining priorities and creating policies to actually effecting behaviour change is a challenge that, for the most part, businesses are still struggling to crack.

But the opportunity to engage stakeholders in human rights across the value chain is great, in every sense of the word. A huge potential audience exists, whose passion and energy could reinvigorate everything we think about rights within business, and transform it from a niche responsibility into a platform for change across companies, industry and society alike. This audience stretches from senior leadership to employees and from local management to suppliers, partners, factory floor workers and even consumers.

To leverage this potential and create the engagement needed to tackle one of the biggest sustainability issues of our time, we'll have to radically disrupt what human rights means to everyone in the value chain and how we talk about it across audiences. From our experience working across global cultures and value chains, here are our five top tips to inject fresh innovation into your company's human rights approach and move from creating policy to driving behaviour change.

1 Use everyday language for everyday stuff

For most people, the phrase 'human rights' means modern slavery, abused prisoners, and neglected pensioners. It's the language of the UN, Amnesty International and the Daily Mail – it doesn't feel like the stuff of everyday office workers. But in business, 'human rights' in its simplest form means the happiness, comfort, safety and protection of people – all people, regular people. It's everyday stuff, so it's time we used everyday language to describe it.

From 'operational and foundational principles' to simple dos and don'ts. From 'avoiding infringement of the rights of others' to treating everyone with kindness and respect. From 'corporate and collective responsibility' to everyone doing their bit. It's much easier to get the basics right when everyone, at every level, understands what those basics are and why they matter.

2 Make it real – and actionable

Human rights as a 'universal declaration' is a huge and broad-ranging concept that sounds simpler in theory than it often is in reality. However, at least for companies it's often possible to anticipate where rights are likely to become on-ground issues and find smart ways to bring those to life for different groups. It could mean engaging women on their right to equal treatment, supporting suppliers to come up with home-grown ideas to ensure fair wages for all, or sensitising team leaders on minority and LGBT issues. With smart planning and engaging communications, we can hand-pick the groups and areas most critical to the business and turn abstract ideals into direct action for those involved most closely.

3 Get the entire business involved

Ensuring people's rights within a company usually falls to a small number of people in one or two departments. That makes it a problem of the few instead of the responsibility of all. To inspire action across the business we need to make human rights easy to understand, and even easier to act on. Ensuring every employee and partner has a set of simple actions they can do every day will keep it simple for them, but add up to a huge collective impact across the business.

4 Reward pockets of greatness

Great progress often happens in small pockets and it's usually possible to find individuals who are going beyond what's required to promote rights in their own area of work. By sharing those stories widely within the business – and integrating critical issues into performance reviews – we can not only recognise and reward those who are getting it right, but motivate others to build a culture where supporting human rights becomes the collective aspiration.

5 Use the power of consumers

Consumers care about human rights, even if they don't say it in focus groups. For consumers, human rights simply mean going to the store and knowing that the products on the shelves were made with fairness and respect. And who doesn't care about that? It's time to get the conversation moving with consumers and activate their power as agents of change. Those businesses that can lift themselves above the parapet and drive public dialogue will find themselves leaps ahead in the race for transparency and consumer confidence.

Daniel D'Ambrosio

Human rights lawyer, DLA Piper

Creativity and innovation are not words you would necessarily associate with a lawyer at a top global law firm like DLA Piper. But these are the mantras fuelling Daniel D'Ambrosio's enthusiasm for business and human rights law, a rapidly changing area of practice.

An energetic Australian now living in London, Daniel is passionate about changing the way businesses look at human rights. From talking to him, it's easy to see how he succeeds in advising and training everyone from senior executives to internal colleagues.

From using diversity to protect value, to getting corporates and NGOs in the same room, Daniel tells us about the human rights issues and innovations that should be on the minds of today's business leaders

Most companies rely on a policy to protect human rights – but is a policy alone enough to ensure positive action?

For companies, human rights is a journey, not a destination. It must be about developing a responsible corporate culture that understands its place in society and the importance of respecting that society. A policy is an essential starting point but it needs to be embedded throughout the business for it to be effective. When you think about how businesses operate, especially larger global businesses, there are many different internal functions and operations. It must be clear to everyone how a policy commitment, as a statement from the board, affects them and the decisions they make on a daily basis. Otherwise a policy is just a piece of paper. Implementation is key.

How important is engaging the entire company on human rights issues?

Company-wide engagement is key to ensuring a policy commitment is really implemented and core values are embedded effectively. From boards to legal teams to operational staff, everyone has a role, ones that have evolved over time.

Legal teams need to think more broadly than merely complying with domestic laws. They must understand the ecosystem of governance and regulation that influences corporate behaviour. This includes laws, hard and soft, but also voluntary initiatives, international human rights standards, social and moral norms and expectations.

So how do you work across functions and departments to build better awareness of good practice?

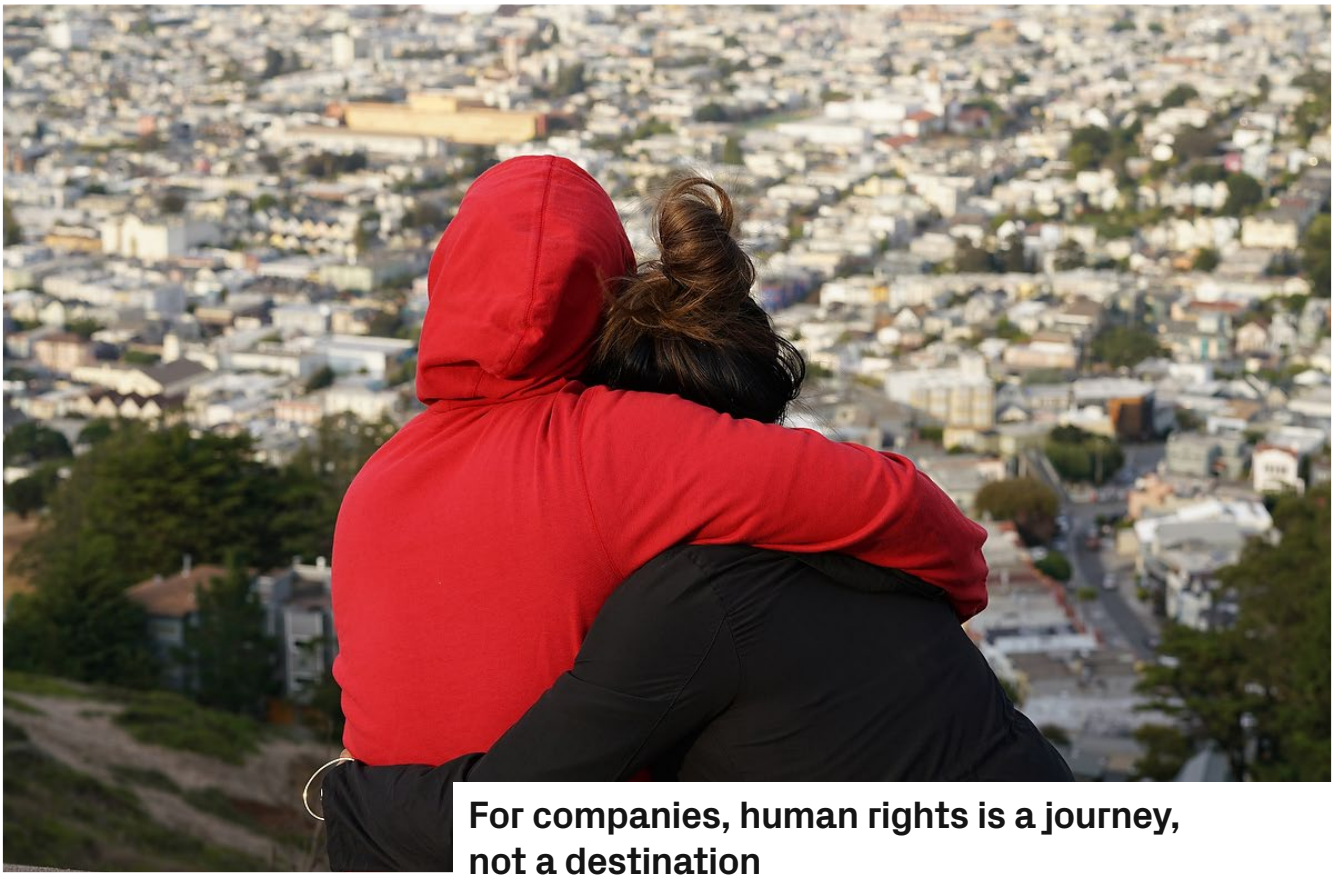
Networks are key, both internally and externally. Within an organisation, while one-way communication, such as emails, enables information to cross a business swiftly, better awareness and understanding is built by two-way engagement across teams and internal functions. It isn't just about telling people what they should do, it's about listening to them to build an understanding of good practice and then share those practices. Crossing internal silos builds efficiency.

Externally, building networks with a wide range of stakeholders is important. Relationships with civil society can be a key part of building an understanding and awareness of where human rights risks might lie, and how they can be addressed and remedied in relation to business activities, supply chains and relationships.

What can corporate leaders do to make sure policies genuinely take hold across the business?

Being a responsible business means policy commitments, company values, strategy and business decisions should align. Company values and human rights policy statements must be more than words: if they aren't embedded into the way the business operates and acts then they can damage a company's integrity, ability to compete, and its confidence. It can erode trust in the business with all stakeholders, including shareholders. A responsible corporate culture that aligns values, strategy and policy commitments and reflects ethical and social norms can become a competitive advantage and a serious value-add.

For human rights policy commitments to take hold and be effective, it's also essential corporate leaders understand the relevance of human rights issues to the different functions of the business, its supply chain and business relationships. Corporate leaders need to understand issues from a human rights perspective.



For companies, human rights is a journey, not a destination

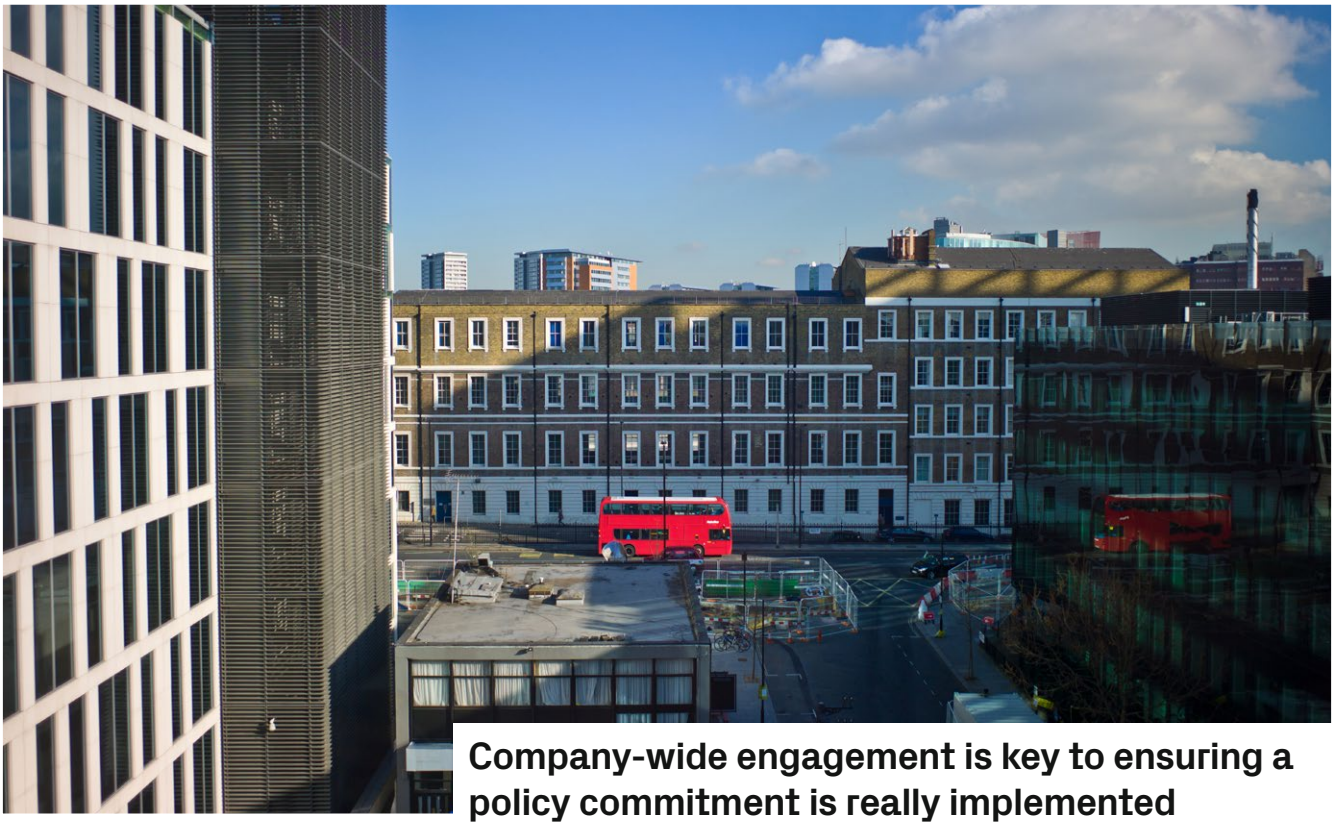


Photo: Tea & Water

Company-wide engagement is key to ensuring a policy commitment is really implemented

This means engaging human rights expertise.

Beyond policies and frameworks, what are the big steps companies could take over the next five to 10 years to improve their human rights approach?

It doesn't take big steps to improve companies' human rights approach. They need to take consistent, small steps over the next five to 10 years to improve it.

One thing companies should consider is diversity, which isn't often raised in the context of improving human rights performance. Not many businesses are thinking about diversity as a tool to protect value and manage human rights risks. But, especially at board level, ensuring a range of views, backgrounds and experiences inform decision making has been shown to improve the identification and management of human rights issues. Policies and frameworks don't change companies on their own; the people behind them do. So having a diverse range of people on board (and on boards) can help ensure policies and frameworks are effective at driving change.

What's exciting about the way the best companies are tackling human rights in 2017?

Building networks with civil society and other stakeholders, including businesses and academics, is an interesting way some businesses are gathering intelligence and supporting due diligence processes. Seeing businesses sit down with civil society organisations to talk about human rights is a development you would not have seen five to 10 years ago.

It isn't just about telling people what they should do, it's about listening to them

Phanella Mayall Fine

Executive coach and founder, Step Up Club

Phanella Mayall Fine is like a force of nature. This is a woman who knows how to present herself, which should be no surprise for someone who co-founded the Step Up Club, a network for women to supercharge their careers and create new visions of success.

Along with co-founder Alice Olins, Phanella's first book, 'Step Up: Confidence, Success and Your Stella Career in Ten Minutes a Day', is a refreshing, rallying cry for all working women, advocating a new way to look at professional progression and a fresh take on what equality looks like in the modern workplace.

We spoke to Phanella about the success of Step Up Club and what gender equality, one of the most foundational human rights, means in today's corporate culture

Tell us about Step Up Club and what makes it special?

I think what we're doing is really quite new. We think of ourselves as a new voice in the women's career conversation, so we aren't just about entering the FTSE 100 boardroom, we aren't just about corporates or creatives, and we aren't just about entrepreneurs. We're about celebrating all women in their careers, whatever their job, whatever their industry.

Alice's [Phanella's partner in all things Step Up] background is as a fashion and lifestyle journalist for The Times and RED magazine. I've been a corporate lawyer and an executive fund manager before I re-qualified in occupational psychology, and I now coach across big law firms and investment banks. So we come from really different ends of the career spectrum but we are united by feminism, by a belief in work-life balance and a belief that people are not currently happy in the workplace.

Many people might look at today's workplace and say we've come a long way, there isn't a sexism problem anymore. So why do you think women still need something like Step Up in 2017?

That's a great question and I'm really quite shocked we still need it. But I think there is a difference between men and women and unfortunately in the corporate world there is still a traditionally masculine definition of success going on, which is about long hours, being the corporate CEO, or on the board. And that doesn't tally with how women, particularly,

Photo: Step Up Club

We are united by feminism and a belief that people are not currently happy in the workplace

but increasingly men, too, feel about their careers. People want balance, they want flexibility, especially young people, and we see this really strongly in all our work.

There is a career model called the kaleidoscope model. When it was first published, it showed women on this kaleidoscope career path and men on a linear career path. But when the research was updated in 2013, it found Generation Y [millennial] men are increasingly on a kaleidoscope career path as well. So I think men of my generation and below now want all the things that traditionally have been more feminine. But alongside this, we also want to be very successful and I don't think the corporate world is keeping up – and that's why you see people creating alternative career paths.

Gender equality is a fundamental pillar of human rights and many would assume that for women to be equal to men, they need to become the same as men. What do you think equality looks like in the modern workplace?

To achieve equality we don't need to pretend there is no difference. For example, we have shared parental leave, which is an incredible advance. But nevertheless, there is a difference because only women can give birth, and only women are visibly pregnant and therefore visibly about to go on leave before they do. Women generally, for good reason, are taking the early part of the leave and men take the later part of the leave, so there are always going to be differences, even if we achieve full equality. I think that's the first really important point, to say we're not the same.

The second point would be around everybody being free to live and work in the way they want. This doesn't mean if you want to work two hours a day, companies should have to accommodate it. But it means having a basic respect for things that I believe are human rights, such as the right to a family life, to mental health, and to some kind of work-life balance: to feel well. I don't see this always being honoured in the corporate world. I think when it begins to be honoured, equality will happen more generally because everybody will feel enabled to take advantage of it.

What's going to drive that bigger shift within corporates?

I think it's about two things. It's about a culture shift, which happens when there is pressure – and pressure in an organisation often only comes financially. So that's when shareholders, clients or customers start to say: 'You know what, having that kind of organisation where people are negatively affected by their work in that kind of way is not okay' or 'Actually, that's not an efficient way to engage your employees'. When investors say, for example, they are only going to invest in companies that achieve X on a scale of employee happiness or offer Y, I think that's powerful and creates culture change. And when that culture change happens at the top, it feeds down straight away. The other important thing is training and coaching, particularly for senior leaders, to understand what their employees want and how to achieve it. I see that making a massive difference.

When you look at where companies are heading today, is there anything that gives you hope for the future of workplace equality?

There have been big changes, even in the last 10 years. I do see organisations implementing things like agile working and flexible working policies, and we know from research and practice those are really, really important. In some companies they are being implemented and are really taken advantage of, but in others they are not really being used. When you create those initiatives and then drive a culture that actually encourages people to make use of those policies, it's highly beneficial to your workforce. It's also important to your business success across a whole host of metrics. Many companies are really stepping up and trying to create a shift: the next step is for most of them to get better at creating a culture that supports that mindset change.

When culture change happens at the top, it feeds down straight away

Photo: Step Up Club

It's about having a basic respect for things I believe are human rights, such as the right to a family life, to mental health, and to some kind of work-life balance

From supplier compliance to open collaboration in the fight for better human rights

From consumers and potential employees to international governments, the UN Development Programme, and World Economic Forum, attention is turning towards the importance of fair, respectful treatment in the supply chain. And yet, despite the flurry of external interest, the majority of businesses have struggled to improve human rights effectively with suppliers and partners and to ensure the rights of workers throughout the many layers of their value chains.

Great progress has been made in some areas and industries; the apparel industry coming together to sign the Bangladesh Accord is a powerful example. And yet, in many companies, ensuring human rights within the supply chain remains the responsibility of one or two teams, enforced through compliance standards and audits that aren't always locally relevant, practical to implement, or transparently adhered to. Part of the struggle is that many of those standards are developed without adequate inputs from suppliers and workers. As a result, they create artificial solutions or drive inefficiencies that guzzle time and money without providing tangible value in return. In the worst cases, the compliance process creates an 'us' and 'them' mentality between corporate teams and supplier leadership that makes it difficult to address the biggest human rights issues at the root of the problem.

A great first step would be to stop enforcing, and start engaging

So the question many businesses are forced to ask themselves is how to enforce human rights compliance across an increasingly complex global network if the current system isn't working. A great first step would be to stop enforcing, and start engaging. In other words, a little less stick and a little more carrot.

Collaborative approaches can create bigger impact

By disrupting the entrenched mentality of the 'enforcer' and 'enforced' – and actively engaging employees and suppliers in the process of human rights and equal treatment for all – companies can place greater agency into the hands of its people and its supply chain. Whether it's driving individual responsibility and accountability across local teams through smart communications, or hosting workshops with supplier management teams and their workers, the goal of creating work cultures that prioritise human rights as standard requires collaboration, shared values and lots of listening if they are to work effectively for everyone.

Companies can place greater agency into the hands of its people and its supply chain

When Gap first introduced its P.A.C.E. programme, an empowerment training programme for female garment workers, instead of mandating the initiative from the outside it hosted round-tables with NGOs and the management of its largest manufacturer in India, Shahi Exports. Shahi became an active participant in the programme's development and, because it was developed collaboratively, proactively began to implement it across all its production units, having trained over 25,000 people to date. The company has also been able to prove tangible return-on-investment of the programme, giving Gap a business case to take to other manufacturers. This collaboration was the result of a retailer team seeking to commu-

nicate shared values and drive conversations, instead of simply mandating compliance requirements. The outcome has not only supported workers' rights on the factory floor and benefited tens of thousands of low-skilled workers but it has built a culture of respect between both companies that has positively impacted every aspect of the relationship.

Such collaborations aren't easy. They require open and honest dialogue, strong communications, and the will of many to succeed. But the issue of human rights is so fundamental, and so necessary for a fair and equitable future, that it's imperative we bring these elements together effectively. Through powerful internal communications and equitable engagement with suppliers, collaborative solutions can be found that can drive better human rights and benefit both business and society alike.

Collaborative solutions require powerful internal communications and equitable engagement with suppliers

Louise Nicholls

Corporate head of human rights, food sustainability (Plan A) and food packaging, Marks & Spencer

With over 25 years at Marks & Spencer, Louise Nicholls' professional rise has seen her build its ethical trade programme, and become a director at both the Ethical Trade Initiative and Sedex. She was also part of a team that transformed M&S's Plan A sustainability strategy into a world-class example of sustainability reporting and public engagement.

Louise recently stepped up to lead the UK retailer's human rights strategy along with food sustainability and packaging. In doing so, she's overseen the publication of its first two human rights reports.

We spoke to Louise about why M&S has chosen to speak so publicly about its human rights strategy and the future trends impacting corporate sustainability

Marks & Spencer's human rights strategy is really comprehensive, can you summarise what the approach is?

Every day we make decisions – and we can either choose for those decisions to have a positive impact on people or a negative impact on people. What I'm aiming to do is embed the strategy in such a way that we have more positive impacts on people. What's great is M&S has a culture of genuinely trying to do the right thing by people as it's gone along. So I wasn't starting from a baseline that this is a completely new way of thinking. The human rights piece is taking it on a stage: saying that when we think about people, whether they're in our own operations or they are partners, third parties, or in our supply chain, we need to have one overarching approach to thinking about people.

Is there something that makes M&S's approach particularly unique?

Within the supply chain we've perhaps got a firmer understanding because we've been looking for a long time at the root cause of issues. I think we've got a good understanding that behind saying there will be no child labour, there's a whole set of inherent factors why you might have child labour. So our premise is how we can make sure we've got really good management systems in place that would make it less and less likely to have child labour somewhere in this supply chain.

The same with modern slavery – I don't think businesses set out to think there might be slavery in

Photo: Marks & Spencer

Every day we make decisions – and we can either choose for those decisions to have a positive impact on people or a negative impact on people

their supply chain. But the reality is there's a whole series of factors at play, like much more migratory labour, a reliance on temporary and seasonal labour, and a reliance on third-party providers. It means you've got to have even stronger management practices in place, and a real understanding of where those inherent risks might be. And you've got to be on the ball because the risks are changing all the time.

Your two human rights reports are incredibly detailed compared with a lot of companies. What motivates M&S to talk so openly about what you're doing within human rights?

It is inherently about better business because we know that for everybody, whether it's our own employees or our supply chain partners, if you're in an environment where you feel secure, where you feel you're respected, where you feel you get a fair reward, you will be more productive and you'll be more likely to stay. Therefore, we'll have a better skilled workforce and better quality products. Inherently, you know it makes really good business sense. So part of what we've been trying to do here is to constantly build the business case to invest in people, to recognise they're your most important business asset.

Our first report was about putting down what we'd learned about human rights, and what we'd learned about the inherent risks and good practices to address those risks. This latest one was really about saying it feels really complicated but it doesn't need to, because actually these things are interlinked. So if you've got good governance in place, then if you focus on those three core areas [in the report] – tackling modern slavery, tackling in-work poverty and encouraging a more inclusive society – we will inherently start to address the human rights issues. And from my perspective, if I can simplify the process to explain it internally, I will have much more likelihood of getting people to address it in our supply chain.

How important is it to get those reports out publicly, rather than them being internal strategy documents?

Well it's not going to be much good if it's an internal strategy because an awful lot of the people you want

to affect are your partners and your supply chain, so you need to be outwardly communicating. It's so complex and so many times the conversation is kind of bite-size pieces, three or four sentences to explain something. This is too complicated for that and therefore it was about putting in one place a really good explanation of it. Going forwards, I think it should now sit back into the sustainability report and then back into the annual report, because it has to be interlinked rather than looking at it in its own realm. And because human rights and environmental issues increasingly are going to overlap.

But within communications, the big part that is so vital is building awareness and understanding of why this matters. And that's about finding really good training programmes that help to do that. We've run an internal programme putting ethics in the spotlight for our buying teams, in which we'd use news clippings and they had to guess where these issues had occurred – so really practical, quite fun, interactive workshops. And with the supply chain we run a mixture of workshops throughout the year and we'll run conferences that get people to stand up and share what they're doing – and we give awards for recognising it. We also do 'Seeing is Believing' days, where suppliers can go and experience a gold factory [M&S's highest factory rating]. Sometimes it's easier when you tangibly see something or hear a CEO of another company stand up and talk about the business case and that gets hearts and minds going.

But it's about understanding there's not one route of communication, it's about a multitude of communications. Some will have more relevance for some organisations than others and that's what we're trying to do here – to stimulate it via a variety of routes.

M&S's sustainability strategy, Plan A, is very consumer friendly and widely publicised – do you think there's a consumer demand to know about ethical practices?

What's really interesting is our [online] supply chain map gets a fantastic amount of hits. You

Photo: Marks & Spencer

If I can simplify the process to explain it internally, I will have much more likelihood of getting people to address it in our supply chain

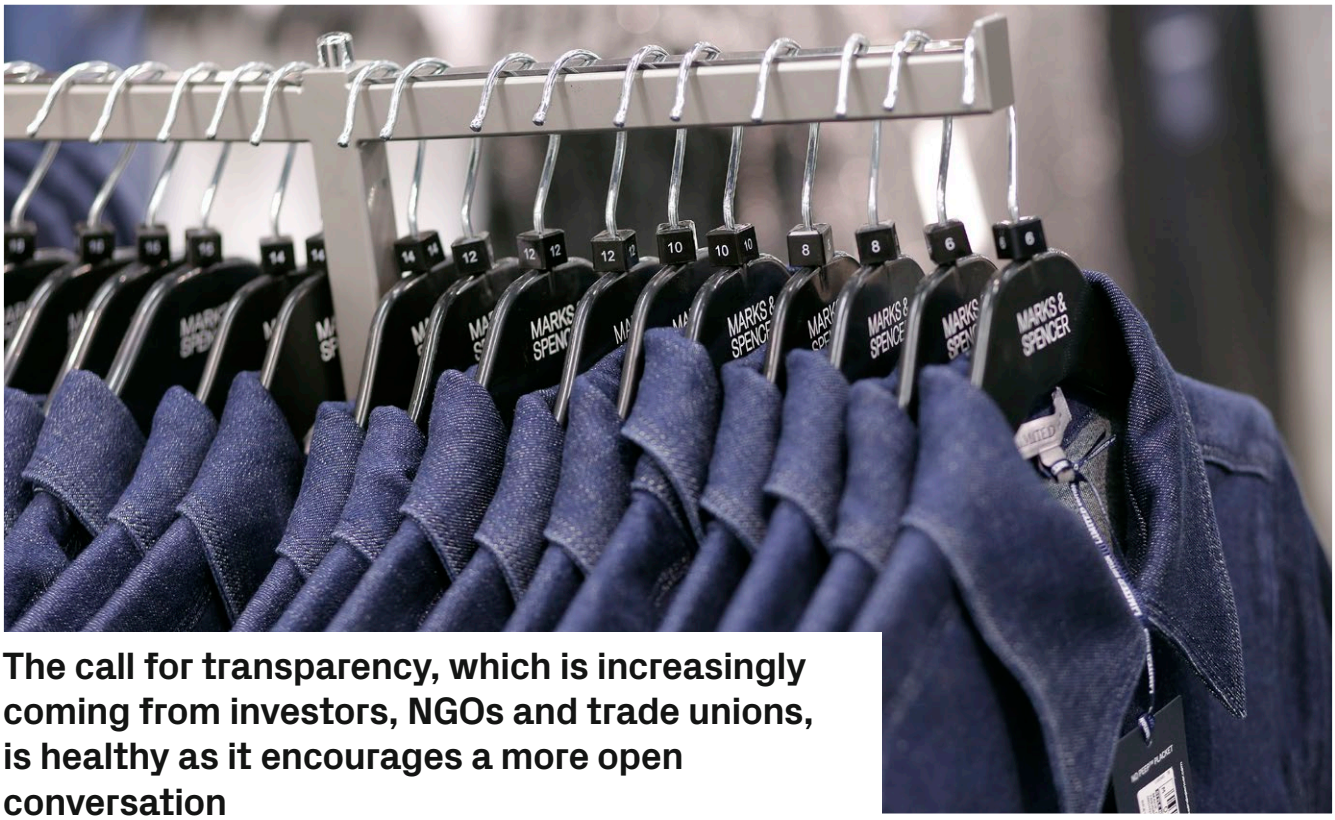


Photo: Marks & Spencer

The call for transparency, which is increasingly coming from investors, NGOs and trade unions, is healthy as it encourages a more open conversation

can get down to the road name and then you can work out, oh, so where my mum and dad live, that's where M&S's chocolate comes from! This seems to have had some resonance with people but I think it's fair to say the expectation from customers is that Marks & Spencer will have this covered rather than them being incredibly interested.

The call for transparency, which is increasingly coming from investors, NGOs and trade unions, is healthy as it encourages a more open conversation, sharing and benchmarking, which I think is actually quite helpful. Most commercial businesses are quite competitive and if you can see you're not doing as well as a competitor it will encourage a better conversation in the boardroom, which hopefully encourages businesses to push themselves a bit harder.

What new trends or innovations are exciting about the direction businesses are moving in?

I think it's really exciting that an awful lot of sustainability plans are having a complete reboot. Something like science-based targets, where we've all gone away and done our own homework and then we see we're coming out in not dissimilar places, are really interesting. I also think the move to recognising that business has to do good for society – that equality and society are important and business has a role to try and drive more resilience into communities. We're doing some interesting collaborative work in this space, which is exciting.

I think it's also recognising it can't be just about our activity but how we measure better social impact – and again, it's quite interesting to watch how other people are looking at this. We've looked a bit at the use of mobile technology because you want to get a wider sense of what's changing. You know, maybe looking at block chain and some of those other routes towards getting better data insight, to see how that can inform us, and whether we are genuinely moving the dial.

We've made some great headway but we need to make a hell of a lot more headway in the future, and technology is going to play a really key role in helping us do that.

Anant Ahuja

Head of organisational development, Shahi Exports

At the other end of our consumerist world of fast fashion are the garment workers propping up this industry. And one big player is Shahi Exports. It manufactures clothing for around 40 of the best known high street brands globally, and is India's largest garment export firm.

Family business Shahi has 56 factories across India and 100,000 employees, 70 per cent of whom are women and many are migrants. Much of its workforce comes from poor socio-economic backgrounds, with low education and literacy levels. So the challenges of managing such a huge workforce are immense.

In an industry plagued with exposés on sweat shop conditions, child labour and worker rights issues, Shahi is trying to carve a path as a leader in responsible business and fair working conditions.

So much so, it has invested in a world-class innovation lab to experiment and find worker welfare interventions that could be scaled across the entire garment industry.

Anant has built Shahi's organisational development team and heads up its corporate social responsibility. He is a passionate problem solver, genuinely excited by worker welfare and being part of a company like Shahi. We talk to him about all this, and why better welfare is good for business

What drew you to Shahi when you first got involved?

I studied abroad in the U.S. and hadn't considered what was right under my nose at home in Delhi: a business that was already pretty progressive in the modern Indian economy. Anyone who knows a little about the garment industry would realise this is an important industry for development and employment, it can really directly address a lot of key development issues.

To come back and discover this was very inspirational. And I just thought, let's innovate, think about solutions, put as much attention on this as we do on production, and then see what happens. That's what motivated me.

It's a very competitive and also controversial industry you work in – so responsible, ethical practices and innovations are more important than ever. How do you feel?

It's easy to imagine the garment factory as your stereotypical sweat shop, with child labour. There have clearly been a lot of issues in the industry, so the stereotype stems from a real place. But when I was interviewing factory managers and production heads, the feeling was that Shahi's weakness was its level of liability, because of the volume of employees. It took me a little while, but I realised this is actually our strength: we have a huge population and it is a captive audience.

If you're an NGO or even a government organisation and you want to do P.A.C.E. [Personal Advancement and Career Enhancement, a life skills training

We have a huge population and it is a captive audience, I realised this is actually our strength

Photos: Karthik Shetty

programme originally created by Gap Inc.] for 100,000 people, you have to mobilise those people but also try and retain them for its duration. At Shahi [which has already trained 25,000 workers in P.A.C.E.], we have a labour force that comes to work every day and expects to get paid, but how we allocate their time is up to us. So in some ways, the development work we can do is way more powerful.

The Shahi philosophy on worker welfare is interesting. You believe better welfare is good for business and have been doing research with two U.S. academics to prove that correlation, launching the Good Business Lab so learnings can be scaled to other manufacturers.

No single intervention is going to solve all issues around worker welfare but this approach really excites me. The labour market here in India is broken – there are issues preventing a lot of potential growth and success, both for the population as well as firms. The same problems affecting companies are also affecting workers. And essentially it's preventing both from advancing. Solving these problems is a win/win situation that is an important development tool but also a business tool. We realised this is really the space we want to work in.

It's very hard for anyone to make the claim that their work programme is effective and doing what they want it to do because no one is making gold standard research one of their main goals. But by leveraging these professors' skills, we are able to do this. It is about frontier assessment methods, crunching a bunch of numbers, and knowing for real if P.A.C.E. is effective.

A happier worker, who feels valued and invested in, is surely always a more motivated and productive worker?

I think it's a common belief but it is very difficult to prove why someone is happier. On the assembly line in our factories, each worker has a task, say attaching a collar or the sleeves. They are literally doing that all day, so we can check targets versus efficiency, and objectively measure.

That's what's so amazing with P.A.C.E. A programme with no technical aspect to it, that teaches female workers about communication, managing their time and so on, has seen them become 12%

more productive than workers who didn't go through the programme. That's a huge amount, and you scale that up across an organisation, it's massive.

What are the challenges for manufacturers in communicating effectively across an organisation of Shahi's size, with 80,000 factory workers speaking different languages, with different literacy levels?
It's a new area we are starting to explore and really understand its importance. We have such a diverse group of employees. There are factories where more than eight or nine languages are spoken. It's a real challenge to deal with.

Our factories need to function like community centres. We have all these woman coming here, and a lot of them are working for the first time. Many don't leave their homes very often, and are kind of isolated. They are often away from their own family, living with in-laws, maybe feeling a little trapped. And if you can create this safe space for them, this escape, I think the next level to build on is this community-centred spirit, where people care for each other. Make it a place where women can come to be safe, protected from a lot of things that the industry has a reputation for. But more than that – there is the opportunity for them to learn, develop and grow. Whatever they didn't have as opportunities in their lives growing up, at least here at Shahi, to some extent, we can give them that perspective and experience.

Of your 100,000 employees, around 70,000 are women. What priorities do you have to consider with such a female-centric workforce?
Research in India has shown female labour force participation is going down. Ten years ago, it was around 35 % (which is already pretty low) and it's now around 29 %. It has a lot of implications for the development of a country. How do you grow your economy if half the population is locked out of the workplace?

But the garment industry is socially acceptable for women to work in, and traditionally they've filled

Photo: Gaurav Karki

Our factories need to function like community centres

these jobs in high numbers. It's not a high-skilled job so the barriers to entry are low, you can quickly learn. So this negative trend is reversed in our industry – we're hiring more women and obviously the scale we are hiring at is huge.

I feel we are in a really unique position, with the power to do a lot, so providing employment is the first step but we obviously also want to offer high quality jobs and provide careers.

Our factories have always been in cities, so workers would migrate from rural areas and it would be a lot for them to deal with. Now, the management strategy is really complementing a lot of what the Good Business Lab is doing. Instead of bringing the workers to our cities, we are going to bring the factories to our workers. If the barrier for women to join the workforce is that they not allowed, or not comfortable moving to cities or travelling far, we can now set up a factory walking distance to their village.

Manufacturers often lack a strong voice in global conversations around industry standards as they are so heavily dominated by Western brands. Can you see a better way for retailers and manufacturers to communicate and work together on factory standards?

Definitely. First of all, the auditing process is not effective: this whole idea of compliance, of buyers setting the rules for suppliers or you don't get their business. I'm not saying it's totally wrong as it can force people to rethink a lot of things, to be more considerate. But buyers need to be saying, okay let's come to the factory, identify what we're uncomfortable with, what we think doesn't work, and how we can improve it. Rather than identify issues and if there are any, run away from them. How is that helping anyone?

I've noticed the best programmes may be initiated by a buyer but clearly come from a diverse group of stakeholders, including the supplier. If you look at P.A.C.E. and how it's developed, GAP came to us in 2006/7 with this idea of soft skills training for women, explaining why it thought it would be effective and help. But it wanted to work with us to do it. We felt that was cool, there were round table discussions, NGOs involved, and all kinds of people. There were committee meetings, intense debate, and at the end of the day, a training course that's become a flagship programme in soft skills for women.

What innovations are you seeing or would like to see in the next five years to improve conditions and rights for workers?

First of all, I think the lab is proving that improving your work environment in certain ways can benefit you directly to your bottom line.

Some brands have been really progressive, saying, we need to move beyond compliance, we want to get past all these issues so we can work on bigger things. At Shahi, we're proposing to set up an experimental factory, where we guarantee bookings for the next three years from a certain supplier, then essentially run this experiment where we pay people more, track productivity, track everything, and see what happens. What we are learning is that maybe the best way to improve worker welfare is to give them more money. They may be poor, but that doesn't mean they're stupid. They may have better ways to improve their life or at least customise. A worker may not need the medical healthcare we can provide; they may need it for school or elsewhere.

Obviously technology will help us monitor things better. But I almost feel like because the culture and relationship between supplier and buyer has been compliance based, that's almost made us weaker in some ways. The buyer has basically conditioned us to believe, or to act as though we don't care about our workers, as if we need the buyer to tell us to care about them. But can you imagine the kind of innovations from the people who are seeing the workers every day?

The best programmes may be initiated by a buyer but come from a diverse group of stakeholders, including the supplier

Making transparency an ally in the battle for human rights

Tackling human rights in business is no longer just an internal process of supply chain compliance. With transparency reaching an all-time premium, it has become a major market and industry priority. Consumers are bearing their teeth around the globe, taking action online and offline against companies with poor human rights records and questionable sourcing ethics, spurred on by media-savvy activist groups fulfilling their own brand of retaliation against unscrupulous companies.

The struggle for business is that getting human rights right, throughout the value chain, is vastly complex and requires the supplier ecosystem and wider industry to come together over many years. Even companies with strong, long-term strategies are open to the risk of exposure, prompting many corporate leadership teams to keep the issue out of public view and bury it within the policies of sustainability and procurement teams. But the difficult reality is that the longer a company keeps its human rights skeletons in the closet, the greater the potential risk of exposure.

It's when we disrupt the narrative of public exposé and turn transparency into a tool for open engagement and dialogue that companies can begin to safeguard corporate reputations and take a leadership position in the battle for human rights, even if it's a battle that's not yet won. And companies that are able to take this lead will also become the strongest voice in the eyes of consumers, driving a conversation that matters, not just for the business but on a societal, human and global level.

Consumers are bearing their teeth around the globe, taking action online and offline

Taking control of the conversation

When Tesco took the decision to be the first retailer in the world to publish its food waste data in 2013, it disclosed a shameful level of wasteful practices and rightfully drew criticism from consumers, activists and the media alike. But in putting its head above the parapet it also distinguished its own voice in the issue. Consumers and special interest groups were, for the first time, seeing transparent and honest data instead of hearsay and alleged reports. And activists were no longer banging their heads against a closed door; the door was open and they'd been invited in. In being the first to acknowledge its negative role, Tesco executed a well-orchestrated, thought-leadership campaign and went on to become a critical voice in the fight against food waste, driving the credibility of its public Community Food Connection initiative in the process.

Equally, when Paul Lister, from Primark's ethical trading team, took to the stage for a Q&A at the Trust Women Conference in late 2016, the questions came thick and fast – and few were complimentary. Primark's pricing strategy and involvement with suppliers inside the Rana Plaza complex that collapsed in Bangladesh had raised questions over its ethical commitments for many years. To face those questions head-on in front of a heavyweight audience of women's rights and modern slavery experts was brave and, at times, uncomfortable. But by simply standing up and sharing its experience honestly, Primark is already changing the opinion of critics, activists and industry stakeholders and lending credence to its CSR and ethical trade strategy in the eyes of those who would have normally been most critical.

The longer a company keeps its human rights skeletons in the closet, the greater the potential risk of exposure

As companies' sustainable strategies become more sophisticated so must the communication of those strategies to drive positive impact at every level. For human rights that means opening the debate transparently and building a strong voice instead of a closed door. It means educating consumers on the complexities of the problem and being honest about progress, ambitions and targets. And it means inviting the activists into

an open dialogue that demonstrates a clear position; making companies the target of collaboration and action instead of protest and exposure.

The battle for better human rights is far from won but those who are able to leverage transparency and open dialogue as tools for positive action will find themselves leading the charge across industry and society, and ensuring their voice is heard positively from the factory floor to the shop floor.

Those who can leverage transparency and open dialogue as tools for positive action will find themselves leading the charge

Kim Yeshi

Founder, Norlha Textiles

It's not often you speak to someone whose energy and passion stays with you for months after the conversation is over. But that's the effect Kim Yeshi has. Over the phone from the far reaches of the Tibetan plateau, Kim makes a deep impression; a calm soul achieving incredible things in one of the world's remotest regions.

As the socially-minded mother in the mother-daughter team behind Norlha Textiles, a luxury brand of yak wool products, Kim's philosophy is at once uplifting and pragmatic. The brand combines a commitment to community development with a focus on old-fashioned values of quality and timelessness, aiming to prove that social businesses can have a place in the modern fashion marketplace. Launched 10 years ago, Norlha Textiles works with local materials and creates employment for traditional nomadic communities, providing new opportunities and delivering economic security, especially for local women.

We spoke to Kim about her philosophy on fair working conditions, post-recession luxury consumers, and her dream to enable other villages to recreate the success Norlha Textiles built

What's your personal approach to sustainable business and how does Norlha embody that on an everyday basis?

For us, what's most important is how we treat the people who work for us. When you build a business there are always three elements – the business owner, the makers, and the end customer. What I could see happening a lot was companies where the owners are happy because they make money and the customers are happy because they feel they're getting a good deal. But the people who make the product are in between, getting squeezed, and there's really no regard for them. And I feel that's the basis of all these companies which keep looking for cheaper and cheaper places to work. They don't have factories in the countries they come from – for example, if you're Swedish you don't produce in Sweden. They outsource to places where it's as cheap as possible so the customer can get a €20 dress.

We work with a small number of people, 120 employees, which is very small when you think of a big company. If you want to do that and pay people well, to take that middle factor and give it importance, then your product becomes more expensive. And if it becomes more expensive it has to be something people want to buy because we're not an NGO, we work through the laws of the market.

You supply to some high-end global fashion labels. How do you justify the higher cost of your products to them?

Photo: Noriha Textiles

For us, what's most important is how we treat the people who work for us

I don't justify anything, I just go to them and ask whether they want a certain product and if they think it's worth it, they'll buy it. We're not trying to sell ourselves in a social way, we're playing the real game. Labels buy it because they want your product, that's the only way you're going to make it in business. And the story is going to be an added benefit that they can pass on.

Some clients aren't interested [in the story] but we've stopped working with most of those clients now. We felt we have a story and a very special product and it was getting drowned by their whole thing and we weren't appreciated. So about three years ago, we tried to launch our own brand and we're now doing direct sales, which is much more profitable for us. That way people can get the story and the product.

So is the story more important for your direct customers than retail customers, or are they still just looking for a great product?

Of course. The product is selling but then people like the story, so the story kind of illuminates the product. It's a product with a real story but it's also a real product. Some people have a great story but not much of a product and they use the story to sell it, but we have both. So we use that to build a customer base, which we've started doing through our website. We've done a lot of work and it's been really growing. We're putting all our effort into that now.

There's a lot of talk about transparency and how consumers should be more aware of where their products come from. Do you think that's important?

If we talk about our product and all the qualities and characteristics it has, this gives the client more reason to appreciate it, and I think it's important to educate the client when they're holding something of a great quality. You want to be able to tell them why that product is so great and usually they'll be interested to hear about it as they have to spend quite a bit of money on it.

That's why by selling directly we can be even more transparent and it's in our interest to do that. We've got nothing to hide, on the contrary, we want people to know so they can realise what justifies the money they're paying and what makes it something they can truly cherish.

Have you seen any shifts in the way your retail and direct customers interact with the products they're buying?

Very much so. After the financial crash, instead of losing clients, we actually gained them because people started turning away from very glitzy things and looking for more true value. Customers felt that if they're going to spend money they want to spend it on something real. And we found we were able to build our first customer base on that concept. I think people got a bit disgusted with brands that are just names and there's nothing behind them. People who have a lot of money can buy anything, but then all of a sudden they want to buy something they feel is real. And they started going back to the old values of real quality, when people spent a chunk of money on something they truly valued and wanted to keep for a long time. This is something that doesn't exist in fast fashion. You buy a few things and you keep them forever, that's what it was like when I was a child. So it's kind of bringing back that concept.

So what's next for Norlha Textiles? What keeps you moving forward?

We're already fairly vertically integrated, we only really buy the raw material. But we'd like to build on this, which includes the cleaning process, the de-hairing, the spinning. We'd like to do that ourselves, so we can control the quality even more and become even more unique. So we're trying to raise some funds for that.

And we're hoping we can inspire people in other villages to invest in building small factories like ours. Then we could help them by giving them products to make and marketing those products, because the problem is they don't know how to market, how to set up a managerial structure.

We're constantly being approached by people who want to set up a factory in their village but they have no idea how to do it. We'd like to have a role where it enables other people to provide employment, as that's the biggest need in villages.

Photo: Norlha Textiles

We're hoping we can inspire people in other villages to invest in building small factories like ours

Photo: Norlha Textiles

We've got nothing to hide, on the contrary, we want people to know so they can realise what justifies the money they're paying

Human rights will likely remain one of the most complex and critical business issues of our time. And as the journey towards rights for all continues, creative approaches and open communication may prove to be vital tools in making every business truly human-first.

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Insights in this issue were gathered and written by Laura Quinn for Tea & Water

Interviews were conducted by Laura Quinn and Eve Reed for Tea & Water

Editorial direction by Eve Reed, London

Content advisor, Harvey Kipnis, New York

Design of white paper by Carolyn Steinbeck, Berlin

Website design by Simon Zirkunow, Offenbach

Insights photographs by Noah Sheldon, Shanghai, New York (Noah Sheldon is represented by Tea & Water Pictures)

Font Px Grotesk by Nicolas Eigenheer for Optimo, Geneva

Think before you print.

Very special thanks to
Anant Ahuja
Daniel D'Ambrosio
Rob Campbell
Denise Delaney
Céline Gilart
Phanella Mayall
Louise Nicholls
Kim Yeshi

And many thanks to you for reading Tea & Water Perspectives