



Corporate Social Responsibility - An Opportunity in Government

In September 2006 I was blessed with the opportunity to MC an event of the Institute of Public Administration Australia's (IPAA) WA Division, a seminar on "Corporate Social Responsibility: Integrating Social and Environmental Concerns".

June Waters, General Manager, contacted me some time ago to take this on, after reading about my presentation on the topic to the Australian Institute of Office Professionals. As always when I am put in the position of "expert" because I am so passionate about this that I get out and speak about it, I was initially a little awed by her confidence in my ability. Yet I accepted her kind invitation by the end of the telephone conversation before I gave myself time to think about it! Not only that but we had agreed on a time to meet with Margaret, who would coordinate the event, at their office to plan out the proceedings.

As I hung up the phone I thought of the person who first taught me the art of facilitation, Roberta Mead. The best part of what she taught was actually how she dealt with and related to people, always with respect. She would have put a lot of work into preparing for this, to make sure that she delivered the very best she could, and this would have been out of respect for IPAA.

How could I best prepare? The first step would be to be to meet June and Margaret and find out all that they wanted to achieve from the seminar. They are a delightful pair, and June holds the values of IPAA gently but firmly in all that she does. By the end of the meeting we had committed to a very interactive seminar, especially the panel session. They left to prepare the publicity, I left to prepare myself.

A week later a draft flyer appeared in my inbox, introducing me as an "expert". I swallowed as I read on. Perhaps being labelled thus would set the scene for others to come who are as passionate about this as I am...

The notes from Roberta's facilitation course reminded me of some techniques that might be useful here. Then I thought about Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and government. What opportunities could I look for that could inspire the seminar participants to leave with a burning passion for Corporate Social Responsibility?

With this question burning my brain I attended an American Chamber of Commerce luncheon where our Governor, His Excellence Dr Ken Michael was speaking. His always humble and down-to-earth approach is a great credit to him. He spoke of the importance of ethics and values, whatever one's line of work. After his speech I asked him if he would grant me an audience to explore this further, given his long career in government. Not only did he acquiesce but asked his adjutant to remind his personal assistant Muriel that I would be calling to make an appointment!

It took two weeks for her to arrange, but it is testament to the kindness of our Governor that the only time we could find an appointment was on one of his days off. My preparation was to read all his speeches. I must admit to some nervousness as I walked up the steps of the elegant, not-quite-imposing front entrance. The door opened and a smiling face greeted me. Inside all was friendliness, including my admittance to Governor's office. Knowing His Excellency through Rotary from his days prior to this posting made this a little easier. Over the next hour he answered my question with honesty, wisdom and clarity, despite the many tasks he had waiting to be done. The discussion brought to the fore the opportunity that government has to affect the public good, in

a way much more profound than a corporation can, if it will only focus on the ethics and values that underpin decisions and policies to that end. Yet sadly this is not often the case.

The following week I made contact with all-but-one of the speakers (she was having a very busy week!) to find out their objectives, and discuss my ideas to make the seminar as interactive as possible. They were all very committed to the success of this event, enabling me to start drawing together the threads of their passion into an inspiring whole.

The breakfast presentation leading into the seminar was by Linda Hancock, another passionate supporter of corporate social responsibility. She inspired us with her commitment, making a good lead-in to the morning. Once breakfast was cleared away, Stephan Millett of Curtin University gave us a powerful presentation "In Your Face: Response-ability and Sustainability". Stephan argued that the very notion of "public" is under threat, that public policy is not addressing the issue of sustainability and that the capacity of the public sector to act on this is rapidly being undermined. This generated equally powerful questions and comments which were leading to a discussion that could have taken a full day when drawn to a close.

Next Robyn Sermon of Rio Tinto delivered an inspiring story of Corporate Social Responsibility in action by telling us about one element of Rio Tinto's Corporate Social Responsibility program - Community Investment and the partnership approach that Rio follows. Again this aroused much interest from the audience.

Last before the morning tea break was Robert Humphries of the Water Corporation urging us to action with "The Way We Work - Principles-based Decision-Making in the Water Corporation". His thorough coverage of Water Corporation's integrated approach to sustainability, integrating Corporate Social Responsibility into the overall sustainability logic and strategy, drew many questions from the audience.

As we made our way to the coffee urns and muffins I reflected on the wealth of talent and ethics that these speakers represented, and the amazing dedication that they gave to their "causes". I wondered why...And the audience drawn from almost every type of human endeavour had come up with thoughtful, deep insights and queries, making it abundantly clear that they had come along not just to listen but also to interact and learn, together!

After morning tea we held the panel session with a difference. Modelled on the preferred speaking style of people like Michael Chaney, where he is interviewed on stage, our panellists were given space to talk of their own goals and work with Corporate Social Responsibility. Lisa Scaffidi, David Singe, Jim Singleton, Mike Helm and I enjoyed an extremely interactive session between the panel and the audience. I had some questions prepared which I had given the panellists beforehand to think about, but the audience again brought their thoughtful, deep insights to bear on this interaction and the discussion ended with many positive possibilities for people to take away.

In closing I remembered the opening, when we had been asked to remember the original owners of this land, and invited the participants to once again remember them with thanks. Then, taking the wisdom of Governor Ken Michael and of the morning as a whole, I invited them to take away the thought that real, ethical Corporate Social Responsibility is as simple as "Respect for the values that you hold dear, respect for the values that the other holds dear, and respect for the difference."

As I drove home, the reflection that always follows my public appearances filled with images of good, ethical, earnest people looking for ways to work and think for the public good. I should have added that in my close "And this translates very simply into making decisions with kindness. Kindness to yourself, kindness to others, and kindness to the values that bind you." Oh well, perhaps next time...

This seminar had truly been an amazing experience.

Perhaps that's what we make the space to happen when we say "Yes!" to those opportunities which seem just a little bit (and sometimes very) frightening...