

# Corporate Social Opportunity: Welcome to the Evolution



By Heather Conn

Red berets, submachine guns, molotov cocktails versus blue oceans, saver soldiers and community consciousness. When people hear the term “revolutionaries,” they might imagine a huddle of camouflaged guerrillas hunkered down in a mountaintop bunker, weapons at the ready. Nowadays though, the term has not only gone mainstream, but attached itself firmly to progressive bottom lines across industries and continents.

The revolution has entered the forum of social business consciousness cropping up in boardrooms, forums, conferences and blogs. Innovative executives use it. So do long-time proponents of corporate social responsibility (CSR). This is not the dilution of a powerful word. It is the meaningful evolution of revolution.

According to Tim Sanders, a dynamic speaker and author of *Saving the World at Work*, we have entered the “Responsibility Revolution” whereby “companies make a difference to society – not just indirectly, by producing jobs and profits, but directly, through their products, through their manufacturing methods and operational systems, through their environmental efforts and community outreach.”

## Tapping the Triple Bottom Line

Today, any organization with a long-term vision for success has already adopted a triple bottom line and the core principles of CSR – people, planet, profit. Eco-savvy consumers and young employees, plus socially responsible investors, are demanding that companies reflect their community-conscious ways, both locally and globally, or they’ll go elsewhere. Sanders warns: “If your business isn’t socially responsible in the future, the forces of good will ride into

the market like the cavalry, surround it, and choke off your supply lines.”

Keen-minded businesses have shifted beyond mere compliance and risk management to a notion of “corporate social opportunity” (CSO). The question they ask is complex while the answers they emerge with are relatively simple. How can we do good for its own sake as proactive leaders, integrating business values, purpose and strategy with environmental sustainability and the social and economic needs of our customers and community?

David Grayson and Adrian Hodges, authors of *Corporate Social Opportunity!*, express this in simple, practical terms: How do we make CSR a “built-in” part of our business strategy, rather than just a “bolt-on” to business operations? Here in British Columbia, forward-thinking human resources professionals, employees and executives are leading the CSO revolution both within and beyond their organizations. Besides environmental sustainability, this can encompass anything from volunteer-driven social projects to a revitalized mission statement. A widespread surge of committed people and organizations, from municipalities and building contractors to universities and non-profits, have embedded their unique version of corporate social opportunity into every aspect of their business. (See sidebar for the characteristics of a CSO corporation.)

What does this paradigm shift mean for HR professionals, organizations, employees and customers in this province? How have “green” and social initiatives affected recruitment, employee retention, team-building and cost savings? Let’s look at a few notable organizations across the province with CSO principles.

## A Healthy Slice of the Pie

About 10 years ago, Dominic and Suzanne Fielden, co-founders of the Rocky Mountain Flatbread Company, were management consultants in Britain. Passionate about social and environmental sustainability, they facilitated strategy and leadership development with large organizations such as Guinness. However, they found that few CEOs wanted to think beyond token organic products and CRS financial audits.

“They were only in business to increase shareholder value,” says Fielden at his inviting, wood-and-earth-tones restaurant in Vancouver’s Kitsilano neighbourhood. “It was so frustrating. We were trying to make these companies make a transformational shift.”

The visionary couple decided to start their own business, targeting family dining and “revolutionizing pizza.” With a triple bottom line in place, they opened their first restaurant in May 2004 in Canmore, Alberta, before moving to British Columbia to open the Kitsilano location in 2006. Their first franchise location opened recently in North Vancouver. The business they do is good on many levels, a simple fact that has found them favour with guests, real estate developers and the larger business and education communities. Wherever possible, their wood-fired artisan pizzas feature local, organic ingredients and eschew all genetically modified organisms (GMOs), trans fats or additives. They compost their food waste. Their walls are painted with non-toxic paint and their tables are handcrafted from reclaimed wood. There is a play area for the kids, family pizza-making nights are a frenzy and business is booming.



Within six months of opening, their Kitsilano restaurant broke even, only to be surpassed in sales by their newest location in North Vancouver. In total, they employ about 70 staff and have no trouble attracting top talent. They look for people's values in hiring and recruitment, says Dominic. "We've been able to attract people who could earn more money in other restaurants, but they resonate [with] the same values. It makes their days more fulfilling." He adds that suppliers tell them: "We like what you're doing."

How do they factor in their return on investment on their social and environmental initiatives? "Anyone exceeding 15 per cent ROI these days is doing well," says Dominic. "We do well. Much of that can be derived from acting responsibly."

At the community level, Rocky Mountain Flatbread Company runs its own education society, conducting school programs to give children the confidence and skills for social entrepreneurship. Partnered with Vancity and Alberta EcoTrust, this non-profit organization has trained 2,000 schoolchildren in five years. "People love what we stand for," says Dominic. "We look at it as giving back to future generations."

#### A Certified Success Story

Summerhill Pyramid Winery in Kelowna was the first of only two wineries in the province to make wine from certified organic B.C. grapes and also has a broad goal: to convert every winery in the Okanagan Valley to a certified organic operation. So far, it has provided education

## Building Blocks of CSO

Here are the key characteristics of a CSO corporation, according to David Grayson and Adrian Hodges, authors of *Corporate Social Opportunity!*

- **Purpose, vision and values:** People throughout the organization co-create these, then articulate and align them with responsible business practices. Leaders and senior managers fully believe in and live these values. The company intensely communicates its purpose, vision and values, which it constantly reinforces through culture, processes and rewards. It incorporates the purpose, vision and values into everything from recruitment to training to performance objectives to due diligence procedures for assessing business partners.
- **Mechanisms for whistleblowers:** These are in place to indicate any gaps between stated values and those lived.
- **Effective CSR tools and processes:** These are used to prioritize risks and opportunities

## Tips For Tapping Into CSO

In today's business world of "ecopreneurs" and "green collar jobs," how do HR professionals engage a workforce around CSO thinking and initiatives? Tim Sanders and Peter Senge offer these tips:

- Look for like-minded people in your organization.
- Put your aspirations on the table.
- Connect your efforts with your management team.
- Teach, don't preach.
- Follow up relentlessly.

associated with CSR. They provide a framework for deciding how to reach decisions and ensure that these are consistent with corporate values.

- **Effective, top-level decision-making processes:** From the board down, the organization makes efficient decisions. It has a way to capture and codify knowledge to ensure ongoing improvement.
- **Effective stakeholder engagement processes:** These proactively seek any corporate social opportunities and encourage them through building trust, openness and empathy.
- **Ethical code:** This addresses relationships with stakeholder partners and determines the risk and rewards in exploring corporate social opportunities.
- **Appropriate performance measurement:** The company adequately measures and reports its performance and has processes for correcting gaps and learning from gaps that emerge.

- Welcome skeptics into the fold when they eventually convert.
- Unleash the power of many and build a movement.
- Create a network.
- Mentor your leaders.

**Remember:** A company damages its credibility if it does not "walk the talk." If employees are not engaged, CSR becomes only a public relations exercise ("greenwashing"). Adine Mees and Jamie Bunham of the Canadian Business for Social Responsibility express this as an equation:  $CSR - HR = PR$ . □

ONE IN  
THREE  
CANADIAN  
EMPLOYEES  
IS STRESSED  
OUT

REGISTERED  
CLINICAL  
COUNSELLORS  
CAN  
HELP

We're your ally in improving employee health and productivity at a national level.

The BC Association of Clinical Counsellors represents over 2,000 registered therapists (RCC Designation), who are highly trained (Master level masters) and dedicated to providing the highest standard of professional counselling services.

For additional information on your individual needs or the needs of your organization, please call 1-800-909-6303 or visit our website [www.bc-counsellors.org](http://www.bc-counsellors.org).



and support to help at least a dozen farms convert to an organic operation, paying top dollar for the fruit produced.

Ezra Cipes, the company's chief operational officer, says, "Everyone living in the Okanagan Valley is a stakeholder in the industry and agriculture that affects our ecosystem, especially our lake, which is our drinking water."

A member of The Land Conservancy, Summerhill Pyramid Winery has set aside 20 of its 80 acres as wet land nature

**"It gives them something to be proud of, and a larger sense of what the 'bottom line' is."**

preserves, providing habitat for birds and local animals. The company operates an on-site organic vegetable garden, which produces food for its Kelowna restaurant and catering facility. Its permaculture techniques use organic mulches and keep carbon and nutrients in the soil; this removes the need for petroleum-based equipment such as tractors and rototillers, which produce carbon emissions. In the future, the company hopes to reclaim and sterilize its glass wine bottles, saving a huge carbon footprint in production, transportation and recycling costs.

Cipes points out that going organic makes great business sense; organic wine is the fastest-growing segment of the industry worldwide. The company, whose food and beverage department hits more than two million dollars in annual sales, employs 60 to 120 people, varying by season. As Canada's most-visited winery, Summerhill Pyramid hosts more than 1,000 guests daily in high season.

As with Rocky Mountain Flatbread, the value alignment with employees is strong. "Every employee is drawn here because of our commitment to being organic," says Cipes. "It gives them something to be proud of, and a larger sense of what the 'bottom line' is. They are not only working for the proprietor, they are working for the land."

The company's newest line of organic wines has been released in cooperation with *Get to Know*, a charity run by artist and environmentalist Robert Bateman. For each bottle sold, Summerhill donates one dollar to this charity, which strives to promote children's enthusiasm for the natural world, hoping that they will seek its preservation for future generations.

"Business is not nuts and bolts," says Cipes. "It's a personal expression of what mark you want to leave on the world. It's a creative act."

For both Rocky Mountain and Summerhill Pyramid Winery, the extensive media coverage they have received, and subsequent word-of-mouth promotion, has translated to dramatic savings in advertising and marketing.

This past summer [2009], Summerhill owner Stephen Cipes, Ezra's father, won a Sustainability Leader of the Year award from Kelowna's Chamber of Commerce and Okanagan College's Students In Free Enterprise. This honour recognizes

Looks can be deceiving

Don't let looks deceive you –  
get the whole story ✓

What we do:

crim. records . credit reports . ID verification . international security . education verification . professional accreditation . employment history . driving abstract . references . investigations . exit interviews . bankruptcy

GARIBOLDI

garcia

800.355.5044  
garcia@gariboldi.com



businesses and leaders who successfully integrate environmentally sustainable practices into their operations. Stephen, a former New York developer, has also won an Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year award. The company website offers this advice to entrepreneurs: "You can't focus on the monetary or material result. Be a conduit and allow your vision, your dream to come through – and fortify it every day."

### Tomorrow's Regenerative Economy Today

In *The Necessary Revolution*, Peter Senge and his co-authors describe two-day "dreaming sessions"; corporations invite employees and customers to assess the directions of their industries and articulate their future wants. The authors note that business innovators creating what they call "tomorrow's regenerative economy" have learned how to see the larger systems in which they work and live.

Education, both as a formal process or via reframing thought at a personal and company-wide level, is a key component of this innovation. Not surprisingly, colleges and universities across British Columbia are reflecting this shift in "eco-imagination," offering courses, programs, degrees and research that did not even exist less than a decade ago. Their diverse study topics now range from sustainable energy, climate solutions and green jobs strategies to sustainability management and ecological restoration.

Jennie Moore, director of sustainable development and environmental stewardship for the B.C. Institute of Technology's School of Construction and the Environment, remembers when few people even knew what a sustainability planner was. "It was a lot harder to get [green initiatives] going in the institutional world 10 years ago," she says. "Today, it's a no-brainer. It's the way we need to be doing business."

Last year, the international publication *Achieving Business Excellence* named BCIT's five campuses the greenest in Canada. It called them "living laboratories" that address sustainability through a team approach between operations and academics. A Natural Resources Canada survey has revealed that BCIT operates at the lowest energy intensity per square foot of constructed space of any campus in the country.

### Sustainability and ROI

Moore says there has always been a high level of engagement around sustainability at

BCIT with buy-in from top leaders, program heads and staff. The Institute's Pacific Spirit Project enables faculty to learn about sustainability and how to incorporate it into their curriculum. Leaders across campus are identified to guide sustainable activities at each of BCIT's six schools. Aligned with its goal of becoming greenhouse gas neutral by 2012, the Institute strives to become paperless, have zero waste and keep lights off.

**"Sustainability is also investing in what you've got: retaining people and the right people for what you're doing."**

Since 2001, BCIT's energy management program has saved \$1.3 million in utility costs, says Moore. (The Institute received BC Hydro's Power Smart Excellence Award in 2004.) Over the last three years, its School of Construction and the Environment has generated almost \$2 million worth of industry support from groups such as BC Housing and the Real Estate Foundation of BC. This includes funding for sustainability research and the advancement of green values strategies in trades curriculum.

In Moore's words: "Our commitment to sustainability is really paying off in terms of staff morale and generating our own capacity for leadership and engagement, and attracting funding." Each year, the institute offers the Earth Apple Award to an individual who has carried out excellent green initiatives. A human resources employee won this year for a composting program. "It [the recognition] strengthens a sense of community," says Colleen Fostvelt, BCIT's manager of total compensation in HR.


In her view, sustainability is part of best practices, giving back to the province, the community, and to employees. "Sustainability is also investing in what you've got: retaining people and the right people for what you're doing." For Fostvelt, the term incorporates health and well-being, a safe workplace and professional development that supports employees' career aspirations.

The Institute makes communication around environmental sustainability a high priority, starting with employee orientation, says Fostvelt. Employees are invited to take time off work to attend open forum sessions on sustainability initiatives. Stewardship and resource development are identified as major strategic initiatives in BCIT's new five-year strategic plan. The plan evolved after 15 information sessions with the president, a blog that invited postings, 10 focus groups, and seven roll-out information sessions. "We try to be as transparent as possible," she says.

In northeastern British Columbia, the city of Dawson Creek revised its vision, mission and guiding principles in 2007 to include quality and sustainability; it now posts its vision and mission at each work site. The city won the B.C. government's Green Cities Award in 2007 for its population size (10,000 to 25,000). At a national level, Canadian Green City Awards recognized the city for its sustainability achievements in both 2007 and 2008 in the areas of city planning, energy planning, and social planning through youth engagement.

Dawson Creek has set a goal to be carbon neutral by 2012. Related initiatives range from anti-idling and recycling gravel and sand to installing solar bus stops. The city maintains an Eco Information office and a how-to website for sustainability planning ([www.planningforpeople.ca/index.asp](http://www.planningforpeople.ca/index.asp)). At the same time, it has completed level three based on National Quality Institute criteria.

"The whole key to our success and moving forward is that clearly, there's leadership buy-in," says Sharon Peterson, Dawson Creek's director of excellence and personnel development. "We have support at the political level."

She says that discussions are held with all employees, asking them: What areas do you think are important to focus on? How can we do better? "This has opened the door to having conversations that never happened before." 

For a how-to checklist on initiating corporate social opportunities, visit [www.bchrma.org/pdf/csr-hr-checklist.pdf](http://www.bchrma.org/pdf/csr-hr-checklist.pdf)

Heather Conn ([www.heatherconn.com](http://www.heatherconn.com)) is a Vancouver area writer and consultant.