

Blessed is this peacemaker

Case professor: CEOs could unite to reconcile, heal the world

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David Cooperrider believes a new world could be right around the corner. "We are saturated in God's love, and saturated in strength and capabilities from the most local to the universal," says Cooperrider, who chairs the Case Western Reserve University Department of Organizational Behavior. "If we can just create the right connections between people and cultures, it's all here for us to create a better world." Cooperrider, also faculty director for CWRU's Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit, knows this can happen. The South Russell resident is rubbing shoulders with the likes of United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the Dalai Lama to spur revolutionary changes in global business. "We have so much capacity as a human family," says Cooperrider, 50. "We could solve every global issue in a year. We could wipe out hunger in the world. We have the capacity to feed every human being at twice what their nutritional needs are. In five years, we could create a hydrogen economy that lets us let go of our dependence on oil, and that is totally non-polluting, and we could do it for less than what we just spent on the war in Iraq. Every global issue of today is a business opportunity."

Inspired by 9/11

It was the destruction of the Twin Towers on Sept. 11, 2001, that helped generate the idea for such a center. Cooperrider took note of the words written on those towers - "World" and "Trade." He remembered an earlier conversation he'd had with the dean of CWRU's Weatherhead School of Management. The two had spoken about high tensions in the world and the need to discuss the role of business in the 21st century. Cooperrider thought about the extremes of wealthy and poor in the world. He pondered the exciting new technologies enabling global communication among people on all sides of the planet. At that moment, he chose to create a force for change - one to transform the

world and bring unlikely partners together.

Building peace

Last June 24, CWRU formally launched Business as An Agent of World Benefit. Cooperrider is aware that the center's title may be viewed as an oxymoron. "The headlines are dominated by negative stories of our corporate conduct," he acknowledges. But in contrast to the reports of ruthlessness and greed in the business world, Cooperrider puts forth the example of Boston businessman Bobby Sager. Sager built a bank in Rwanda to give loans to the poorest of the poor and jump start new businesses. With so many men killed in an ethnic war in the African country, Sager earmarked the loans for women - but to qualify, they must partner together in business across the conflict divide. In building a stronger economy, Sager was also striving to build peace. "You can no longer demonize a person you meet with every day," Cooperrider says. Sager's is just one of the stories the center has collected in a worldwide search for extraordinary examples of the best in business - and nobody's talking about stock performance or profit margins. "It's business as a force of peace and reconciliation," he says. Included are companies such as Green Mountain Coffee Roasters - which obtains its coffee from poor regions and prices it so suppliers can make a fair profit - who have committed to using business to strengthen communities. But can Big Business solve the world's problems?

A global compact

Cooperrider's facilitation of the U.N.'s first global summit, on the day of the center's official opening, brought 500 business leaders together. Its aim: to create a worldwide movement in global corporate citizenship. For the first time, CEOs from across the world sat together to direct their brainpower toward the principles of universal ideals in a "global compact." The focus includes human rights - with an emphasis on child labor - and environmental restoration. They did this in a dining hall because in all of the other rooms in the U.N., the seats were bolted down. "We've designed our buildings with a set of assumptions that only small groups are effective, and that's not true," Cooperrider says. He has conducted similar gatherings for businesses, using the method of "appreciative inquiry," or AI, that encourages open discussion. Some have gathered a thousand people communicating through big screen projection and computers as if they were participating in a 21st century electronic town hall meeting.

Breaking barriers

In Cooperrider's new world of business, the old model of CEOs who "command and control" is dead. "When you break down all the barriers, the best in human beings comes out," he says. "The worst comes out when we try to do things bureaucratically in separate departments and cubby holes." At Roadway Express in Akron, everyone from corporate executives to truck drivers and dock workers - up to 500 people at a time - has

participated in discussions that imagine the company's future. The U.S. Navy used his method. Cooperrider has also designed a series of dialogues for 25 of the world's top religious leaders and authored books and articles on AI. His mission has taken him across the globe – to Uganda to work with companies to stop the spread of AIDS, and, last spring, to India, where he met with the Dalai Lama. When Cooperrider asked his thoughts on what American management schools should be teaching, the Dalai Lama began laughing. "Well, first of all I can't manage a thing. I have to be honest," Cooperrider recalls him saying. "If I were running a business, I'd probably be losing money every day." Then, the Dalai Lama grew serious and spoke of the need for a radical reorientation from preoccupation with the self to concern for others.

It begins at home

Growing up in Chicago, the oldest of four children, Cooperrider learned from his parents to cross racial boundaries. "My parents were very active in building a better world, especially around race relations," he says. His father, Loy, created a Human Relations Commission in Oak Park that became the model for the country and was studied by Shaker Heights. Cooperrider still remembers being an eighth-grader and accompanying his mother, Fran, to downtown Chicago to hear Jesse Jackson speak. "We'd be the only white people in the crowd," he says. A few years later, while standing where 130,000 people died on Aug. 6, 1945, when a U.S. atomic bomb fell, the young Cooperrider had an unforgettable realization. "I remember the feeling that day," he recalls of visiting Hiroshima during his junior year of college. "It was like an atomic bomb of awareness went off inside of me. I started to feel the sense of responsibility - the miracle of life on this planet is placed right into our hands." Today, the father of three - he and wife, Nancy, are the parents of Daniel, 19, Matthew, 17, and Hannah, 16 - believes the globe is poised on the brink of a new Renaissance. "It may not look like it right now, but we're on the edge of a major positive leap in human history," he says.

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