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Earlier this year, I watched an independent film entitled The Corporation. Half documentary, half polemic, the film poses a question: if the modern corporation were viewed as a human being, what would that person be like? The film then cites numerous examples of fraud, environmental damage, social injustice, and disregard for employee quality of life on the part of economically successful corporations. As these accusations mount, the film builds an argument that The Corporation, viewed as a person, fulfills the DSM IV diagnosis as a psychopath – exhibiting callous unconcern for the feelings of others, incapacity to maintain enduring relationships, deceitfulness, reckless disregard for safety, and failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors.

Although provocative and engaging, I believe the film overlooked an alternative diagnosis of "the corporation" based on the same data. My year as a kindergarten teacher in 2001-02 immersed me in a population whose behavior I could at times describe as callous, fickle, deceitful, reckless, and defiant; yet it is unlikely that any of the children I taught will turn out to be psychopaths. Rather, they were at a stage of development that did not afford them the level of awareness and responsibility we expect from a mature adult. It is through this same lens that I view modern corporations – not as flawed or pathological adults, but as relatively young citizens in human society who hold the potential for high levels of function and social responsibility.

My core research questions emerge from this frame. Through what processes and structures do "mature," socially responsible companies balance the evolving needs of diverse stakeholders in society? Is there a consistent developmental process that takes an organization focused on short-term financial gain towards that more balanced citizenship? What types of contexts and guidance (policy environments, organizational consulting, leadership education, NGO relationships, etc.) prove most effective in promoting that development?

Although these questions may seem to fall at the macro-level of management science, with primarily economic and sociological implications, I am particularly interested in how they play out at the micro level of organizational behavior. How can front-line operational teams deliver a triple bottom line most effectively? What factors of individual and group psychology enable teams to balance among the needs of multiple stakeholders? How can organization-wide structures and processes promote these team capacities?

My own background – as an educator, entrepreneur, consultant, and scholar – provides me with a unique perspective and ability to approach these questions. In particular, I would identify three key threads of inquiry that lead me directly into this work.

The first thread relates to the practice of business management. As the son of successful entrepreneurs, I worked in my parents' companies during grade school and high school summers, and engaged in factory assembly, IT support, and web development. I grew up speaking the languages of finance, operations, sales, marketing, and customer service at the dinner table. Upon graduation from college I set out on my own, securing a job at a Knowledge Universe company that managed private preschools around the United States.

There I participated in a process re-engineering effort that mapped critical flows of money and information – a task that provided insight into the "physiology" of the business and methods of organizational analysis. The other component of my job was to explore the role of information technology in supporting our educational offerings. In doing so I developed a concept for a web-based curriculum and assessment system that would support parent-teacher collaboration in preschools. I secured funding from Knowledge Universe to spin off "Little Engine" as a startup company, and built a team of eight people to develop a prototype of the tool. At age 22, I soon found myself in over my head as the company president, and we were not able to weather the capital markets crash of winter, 2000-01. Still, the experience exposed me to the challenges of managing a socially-minded organization and incited further inquiry.

The second thread, which I began in college, is the study of cognitive psychology in social context. As an undergraduate at Harvard I majored in psychology and treaded the line between cognitive neuroscience and social psychology, studying the biological systems through which human beings make meaning in the world. When I returned to Harvard three years later, I had the opportunity to study constructive developmental theory with Robert Kegan at HGSE. His work helped me understand the way that meaning-making, particularly about social reality, increases in complexity over the human lifespan, and shed particular light on the challenges I had faced as a young entrepreneur. More generally, I believe this family of theories highlights the constraints that individuals face when attempting to integrate diverse or conflicting stakeholder needs; my intention at Harvard Business School would be to continue studying with Professor Kegan as an outside faculty advisor.

My third thread of inquiry has been to examine another layer of social organization – group process and technologies for collaborative learning. This work began with an undergraduate internship at Synectics, a consulting firm that combines live facilitation with groupware technology to support creative problem solving in teams. It came to full fruition four years later through my M.Ed. degree in Technology in Education at HGSE. With Chris Dede, Catalina Laserna, and others in TiE, I focused my studies on technology in social context, steeping myself in theories of situated learning, collaborative knowledge building, and social structuration. I also engaged in an experiential course on leadership and group dynamics at the Kennedy School, which gave me both powerful theoretical tools and an opportunity for direct practice in leading collective inquiry. The richness of these experiences, combined with my fascination with adult development, led me to my current job at Dialogos International, a consulting firm focused on leadership education and organizational change. Bringing me inside global organizations such as BP and the World Bank as an assistant facilitator, my time at Dialogos has been a watershed in my understanding of group process and dialogue, systems dynamics, and organizational leadership and change. Most critically, the firm's emphasis on dialogue in organizations has helped me discern the critical link between corporate social responsibility and groups' capacity for integrative conversation. My pursuit of a Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior emerges directly from questions born during my practice at Dialogos.

It is clear to me that Harvard's Organizational Behavior program provides the best possible environment for me to weave together these threads of inquiry and make a distinctive contribution to the field of socially responsible organizational behavior and development. Joshua Margolis sits at the precise intersection of corporate social responsibility and organizational behavior that I have described. Amy Edmondson and Richard Hackman's work on productive teams and open communication provide an exquisite foundation for the study of team function within a context of social and environmental impact. And the wider Harvard ecology, including the Center for Public Leadership at the Kennedy School and Robert Kegan's work on adult development, provide superb additional resources for my work.

Securing a Ph.D. is the next critical step in what I understand to be a lifetime career of research, writing, and bringing my capacities as an educator to future business leaders. Through this work, I hope to learn how businesses can grow from being characterized as "psychopaths" to achieving their full potential as citizens of the global ecology.