

# Conscious Business: An Enlightened Business Model for the 21st Century

BY FRANK POLETTI

This past February the Center for Theory and Research (CTR) hosted a momentous conference titled, "Conscious Business." Initiated by Esalen Board Chairman Sam Yau, and co-designed with Jay Ogilvy and others, this event brought together progressive business leaders with systems thinkers and spiritual teachers so they could share personal values and discuss the emergence of new business models that honor employees and the environment. As the first gathering of its kind, it featured current or former CEOs and senior executives from seven of the companies picked by *Fortune* magazine as the best 100 to work for. Prominent names included John Mackey, CEO of Whole Foods, and Chade-Meng Tan, Head of Personal Growth at Google, Chip Conley, CEO of Joie de Vivre Hospitality, with Starbucks, Bright Horizons, Nordstroms, The Container Store, and Trader Joe's represented as well. For many years, Sam Yau has dreamed of a CTR conference that would enable the magic of Esalen to impact business leaders in a powerful way. As the week unfolded, it became clear that the heart-felt sharing and depth of intellectual exchange was making a unique contribution to the emergence of the conscious business movement.



John Mackey and Dulce Murphy



Fritjof Capra and Brother David Steindl-Rast

This group also addressed the troubled state of global banking. Eco-economist Hazel Henderson described how it has become legalized gambling for elites. Thus, we must force banks to realize that their rapacious gains rely upon a global commons shared by all. So-called "private" profits must be taxed on behalf of the common good. Some former investment bankers concurred, as one added that even tougher regulations are needed to force banks and investors to be accountable and transparent.

A number of participants spoke to a new paradigm that transcends the outworn dualism of charity vs. profit. It's time to grow beyond the divide between the "moral" non-profit sector and the "immoral" profit sector. Both can embody conscious values, provide a desired good or service, and raise financing toward those ends. Any business can be "good" and make a profit at the same time. The old archetypes of the saint and the businessman can be integrated in a fresh way. A conscious capitalist can be both a lover and a profit-maker.

**"Value your employees' desire for self-actualization, value the earth, value your customers, value quality, and value love, and then your business will succeed like no other."**

The conference began with a foundation in spirituality and systems thinking. The participants happily engaged in daily spiritual practice led by Brother David Steindl-Rast, including a unique group "humming" meditation. And the physicist Fritjof Capra described a systems view of our evolving and living universe, which is characterized at every level by networks of self-regulating networks. In effect, the executives responded to Capra by saying: We run our companies according to a systems model; we regard them as living, growing, and even loving beings.

Next, Chip Conley turned the group to the wisdom of Abraham Maslow, whose hierarchy of values (once so influential on the founding of Esalen) is now achieving tangible results in the workplace. Professor Raj Sisodia reported that conscious business companies that focus on employee self-actualization and personal meaning actually have much better performance results. Trader Joe's executive Doug Rauch agreed that when a company's employees feel a higher purpose, they barely need to be managed at all. If employees embody their company's values every day, then there is hardly any need for advertising either.

And a broad market for this new business paradigm is already emerging. As Spiral Dynamics founder, Don Beck, put it: a new value-meme is responding to conscious products and services. This value-meme looks beyond old divisions and embodies a more integrated and pragmatic approach in the global age.

As the conference closed, John Mackey of Whole Foods recognized an intuitive connection between conscious business and Esalen. He put it succinctly: "We are the children of Esalen." Indeed, Esalen-inspired values are now showing tangible success in business: Value your employees' desire for self-actualization, value the earth, value your customers, value quality, and value love, and then your business will succeed like no other. Abraham Maslow could not have imagined a more profound ripple effect for his seminal ideas than this.

For more information or to make a donation to support this work, please contact Jane Hartford: [jane.hartford@esalen.org](mailto:jane.hartford@esalen.org).

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