

People don't get it - but business can help

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15 Core Dinner Debates have been planned around the world so far

Here's a problem: People don't get sustainable development. Thankfully there's a solution.

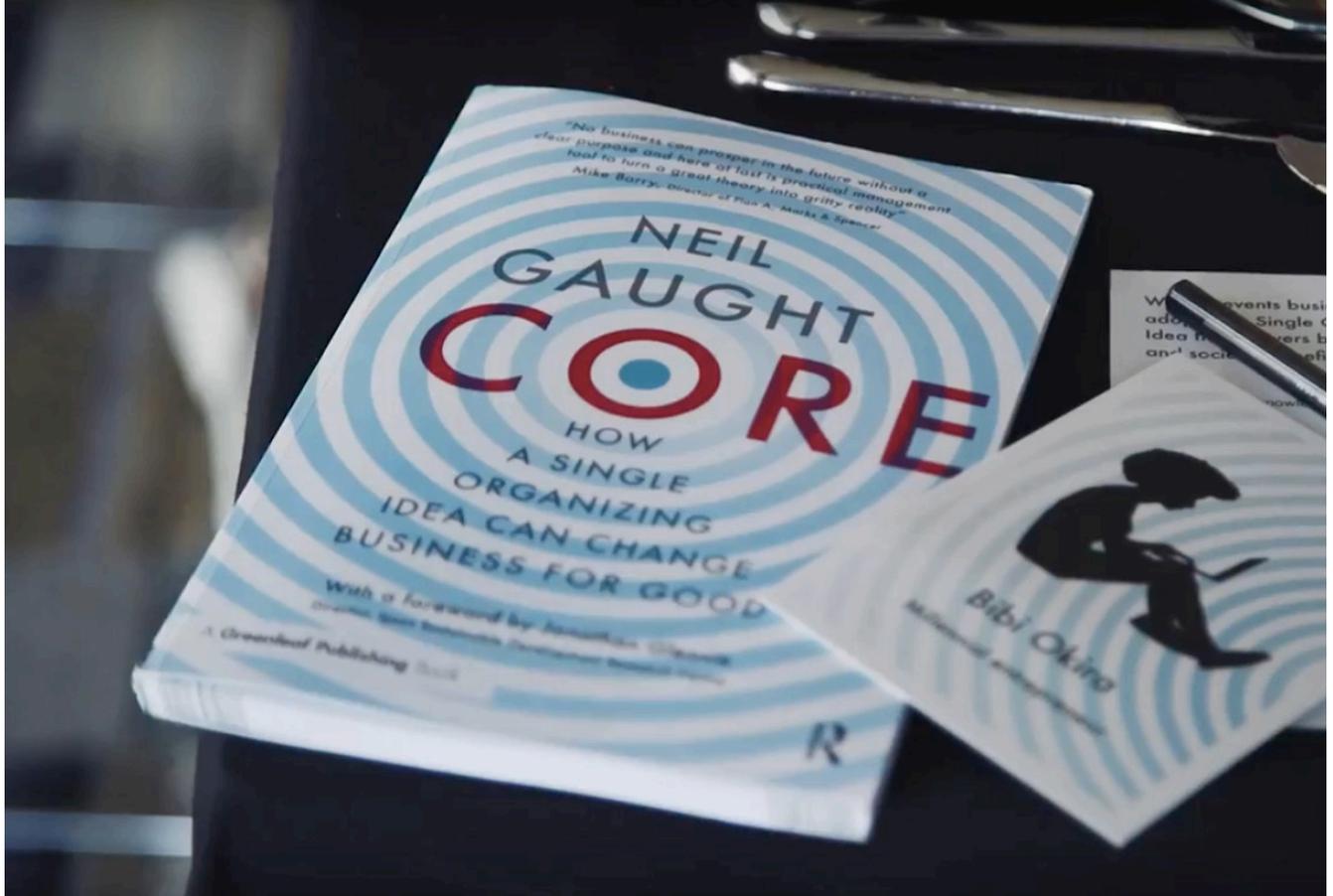
Last week it was my great pleasure to be in Oslo to host the second CORE Dinner Debate with my friends and colleagues from [Pure Consulting](#), Norway's leading sustainability consultancy, and [Ipsos' Sustainable Development Research Centre](#).

As with the [London debate](#) a month earlier the specially selected group of public and private sector leaders, investors, media and academics gathered round the table were quick to engage and share their opinions, expertise

and experiences. Chaired by Pure's Founder Stine L Hattestad Bratsberg, the debate focused on the key question 'What stands in the way of businesses pursuing a core strategy (Single Organizing Idea) that is good for people, planet and profit?' At the end of the article you can see a list of the main remarks and conclusions the group reached but it's the lack of knowledge that stood out most for me.

Prior to the debate Stine and her team had conducted a set of interviews with 13 board members representing 160 Norwegian companies to gauge their understanding of sustainability. As in many other countries a small group of people appear on a lot of boards! The main findings were:

- Large variation in knowledge about sustainable development at board level - and little systematic approach to gaining or growing this knowledge
- Large variation on understanding of the terminology of sustainability
- Few see having a sustainable strategy at the core as a competitive advantage, even though most state sustainability is a part of their business strategy
- Sustainability is rarely on the agenda at board meetings, but they state they have a proactive attitude towards sustainability
- Little knowledge of the Sustainable Development Goals



Back across the North Sea, the London debate was aided by the results of a specially commissioned survey undertaken by Ipsos into the attitudes of UK consumers to sustainability related questions. Key findings included:

- 49% of people in the UK would not take a job with a business they believe to behave unethically
- 37% of consumers believe businesses should put social purpose ahead of making profits
- 47% of consumers believe that ethically run businesses are better for the economy
- 48% of consumers prefer to use or purchase from businesses that act ethically
- 70% of consumers are more likely to purchase products or services from businesses paying employees a fair wage
- 18% of consumers agree the current economic

system is working well for them and less than a third believe it is working well for business.

What was interesting was [Jonathan Glennie's](#) reaction to the results; the Director of the firm's Sustainable Development Centre asked "Why is it that only 37% of consumers think businesses should put the needs of society ahead of making profits?" It's the kind of comment that makes you stop and think. It's the kind of comment that makes you want to join dots.

Taken together, the ignorance of Boards and consumers is alarming. Especially if you consider the combined effect these two groups have on executive decision making that always finds it easier to think about the short rather than long-term. In the face of such challenges, declarations of social purpose based on the ideals of an informed few stand little chance of changing anything. What is required is the defining and rigorous implementation of a practical strategy that informs and influences decision making; one that consistently and constantly asks questions of decision makers whoever and whatever their role be. Set at the core of a business a Single Organising Idea (SOI®) provides the opportunity to realise that ideal.

Neil Gaught is a strategic advisor and author of [CORE: How a Single Organizing Idea can Change Business for Good](#) published by Routledge.

Oslo remarks and conclusions

- The pursuit of a sustainability agenda cannot compromise businesses' ability to make profit
- Companies will only ever focus on what they can measure.
- Intangible value is hard to measure; like brand value the value of sustainability is not completely clear
- Price is the main driver of consumer behavior - this is the number one challenge
- People are the key. More change makers are needed in key positions in companies and Boards need to be rejuvenated with younger people
- Complexity stands in the way - multiple drivers of change need to be addressed
- Investors have an enormous role to play and with one eye on the future they are beginning to exert their influence. In general investors want long-term stability
- Companies need to speak up about the good they are doing but not in a promotional, self-serving manner; it's not about selling more stuff - it's about leading change for good.
- Companies need time and space to change and evolve
- CSR is low hanging fruit; changing the core purpose of a business is tough, but entirely possible
- Courageous politicians are required to change policy and systems.