

Patrick Struebi writes about how we are becoming more socially responsible.

- 1 There has never been so much potential in so many hands. There has never been a time where we have so many people wanting to turn that potential into positive impact for the sake of our world. That is how one would describe our historical moment, and it is truer by the day.
- 2 It is not just a question of the technology at our fingertips, though that of course is fundamental to our new reality. It is a question of something deeper: a new value system that has inspired a new zeitgeist¹. Some of the main values of the new zeitgeist are a desire for purpose and mission, an emphasis on positive impact over material gain, a preference for sharing and giving over owning and taking, a willingness to break down silos and connecting the dots in new ways and an urgent, enthusiastic desire to find new solutions to the world's most pressing problems. As a society, we are indeed becoming more socially responsible. 5 10
- 3 The proof is everywhere. And no longer are they the values of young idealists only. They are the values held by growing legions of people in all generations in all parts of the world. They are the dominant values of the generation that is coming of age right now. And the people who hold these values dear have the means to effect real change on a massive scale. This has never been the case before. 15
- 4 At the recent World Economic Forum Annual Meeting of the New Champions held in China, the diversity, range, and ingenuity of technologies and models on display were indeed astounding. There was a virtual reality project that puts us in the shoes of a young girl in Syria, opening up new means of empathising with each other. There were discussions of the digital revolution in healthcare that will bring more customised, affordable, and effective healthcare to millions around the world. There were advances in medicine that are increasing lifespans and hope. On display were also signs and implications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. All of these were mind-boggling. But what was most inspiring was the social consciousness – the desire to improve lives – that animated it all. It is logical that this spirit would be in full force at a World Economic Forum, of course. But what is important to realise is that the same spirit is growing everywhere. Just look at the news or go about your daily life, and you see proliferating examples of the sharing economy, the circular economy and other astounding examples of the new zeitgeist. 20 25 30
- 5 This change is clearly related to the maturation of the millennial generation, who for years have been showing a distinct predilection for purpose in their lives and impact in the world. The older generations are continually amazed and inspired by their new awareness and mentality. It is fascinating that, as a generation, their values and attitude have broken with the prevailing trends of their predecessors. They have taken a leap, and soon they will take the lead. 35
- 6 Clearly the new zeitgeist is a response to a deepening awareness of what is at stake. As a species, we know more and more about what we are up against: mass immigration, climate change, poverty, soaring inequalities... More people than ever before understand that we absolutely need to find new and innovative solutions to our most pressing problems – and increasingly, people are willing to devote their careers and lives to finding them. The stark contrast – between a highly optimistic, positive and widespread movement on the one hand, and so many serious challenges on the other – points to the 40

¹ *zeitgeist*: the defining spirit or mood of a particular period of history as shown by the ideas and beliefs of the time.

decision facing each of us every moment. Each of us, because we are a part of this world, is faced with unprecedented challenges. And each of us has also unprecedented opportunities at our fingertips. We can participate in an amazing and massive movement to improve our world and the lives of future generations. We can no longer pretend that change is not possible. Change has never been so possible – and there are millions of people proving it every day.

- 7 Moreover, institutions today realise that being socially responsible is arguably the only way to go in their operations. For leaders in businesses, governments, universities – it is no longer a question of whether or not one should strengthen the social or environmental impact of one's mission; if they do not adapt to the new zeitgeist, they would face a tremendous backlash from society. But it is not only societal pressure that also brought institutions into the fold of this societal shift. Businesses too begin to see the financial benefit it brings when they adopt environmentally friendly practices be it in their procurement of materials or the use of labour. This often brings about a more sustainable business model and enhances their public image, which creates a virtuous cycle because it creates brand loyalty especially from those who embrace and identify with the business practices of corporations. For other institutions such as government bodies, schools or universities, it also seems like they too have no choice but to embrace this new philosophy and walk the talk. For all the values of integrity, humanity and honesty that leaders outwardly preach and try to cultivate in the young, it would seem manifestly hypocritical, ironical and nonsensical of them if they do not too lead by example in the way they do things, be it in their policy decisions, the way they resolve conflicts or the way their programmes are run.
- 8 Today, we ponder how capitalism would be if values such as environmentalism were tradable on a market. We also ponder how companies would contribute to society if we could price not only goods and services, but also principles such as justice. Economic transactions involving the choice and practical implementation of socially relevant values is becoming an option to reconcile sustainability and profit, and, more in general, economics and ethics.
- 9 Issues like climate change, poverty and gender inequality require urgent attention, and those companies that focus on their values and not the bottom line gain a competitive advantage. There are a number of big brands that are leading the way in this regard. Outdoor clothing and gear company Patagonia was one of the first to carve out a niche sustainability message with its commitment to responsible consumption, which it has pushed in various campaigns over the past decade. In 2011, the company released a full-page print advertisement detailing the environmental costs of its bestselling sweater, asking customers to think twice before buying it. Patagonia has seen double digit growth annually over the past five years. It is the marriage of storytelling and integrity of what they are doing that gives them credibility in the marketplace, and it lives on in the minds of the consumers.
- 10 But ultimately, a better future will be determined by the everyday choices we make as individuals. This is as true for the leader of a business as it is for an aspiring artist, a medical school student, or a small-scale farmer living in poverty and struggling for a better future. Each of us creates the future; together, we co-create the future. We are co-creating the future right now. And there has never been a moment in history when the possibilities were so great, and the stakes so high.