

# undercurrents

challenging the mainstream | imagining what is possible

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downey youell associates

## IMI CONFERENCE: AVOIDING THE AGENDA?

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For an illuminating clue to the inner world of a person, an organisation or a profession, take a good look at the language they're using.

Each one of us carries about a set of words we use to justify our beliefs and behaviours, a vocabulary that shapes our ideas and our actions. And what we think and talk about amounts to putting in the order for the world we get, moment by moment, day by day. So, words are never 'mere', as Shakespeare suggested. Language matters.

Because of the dominant shaping influence of business on our culture and our ecology, the language business people use to frame their ideas and actions is an indicator well worth keeping tabs on, and the Irish Management Institute's (IMI) annual conference in Killarney is a window on the evolving vocabulary of business.

The conference is aimed at leaders - chief executives, directors and managers with a strategic remit - who are interested in 'the next big thing' and like to be able to talk the latest talk. After all, it's hard to justify a pay cheque that's a significant multiple of those shovelling coal in the engine room if you're on the bridge and can't read the currents.

Under the multiple banner '*Getting ready to Win: Enterprise and Innovation - Meeting the Challenge*' the conference agenda includes some of the new words on the periphery of the business vocabulary: Renewal. Ambiguity. Uncertainty. Responsibility. Sustainability. Corporate conscience. Leadership. Learning. All important concepts within which to

frame solid beliefs and actions.

What's striking, however, is what's *not* on the agenda, and that's the shifting social and ecological context within which business and all these concepts exist. From a 'business-as-usual' mindset, these words and ideas might appear to be optional extras, but from an informed perspective of what's coming down the line, they are far from optional, they're *vital* in the dictionary definition of that word: that is, they are indispensable for the continuance of life and, indeed, for the continuance of business itself.

In the business-as-usual corporate boardroom, the storm clouds gathering on the horizon might be brushed away as social or political issues, unconnected with business, but those smart enough to take a systems perspective, to look across traditional boundaries and join the dots, will know these signals hold the potential to play havoc with 'business-as-usual' and the financial bottom line.

Just two months ago, a suppressed Pentagon report leaked to the press, took the issue of climate change from the eco-warrior fringe and planted it firmly in pinstriped laps. It warned that over the next twenty years (well within the professional life of the current generation of managers and leaders) climate change could result in a global catastrophe. In the scenario envisaged, major European cities will become submerged beneath rising seas, Ireland faces a Siberian climate and a combination of dwindling food, water and energy supplies is likely to lead to a global pandemic of social instability and conflict, and cost millions of lives in wars and natural disasters.

The authors of the Pentagon report are former head of planning at Royal Dutch/Shell Group, Peter Schwartz and Doug Randall of the California based Global Business Network. They merely confirm the bleak warning just three years ago of Andrew Dlugolecki, then director of one of the world's largest insurance groups CGNU, who forecast that the bill for property damage caused by the rising tide of natural disasters as result of climate change "will exceed the world's GDP by 2065." Others have predicted this might happen even earlier.

Put simply, the world - and business - will be bankrupt.

These issues, flagged for decades by scientists and environmental agencies, are just beginning to seep into the common consciousness. Last January, Fortune magazine (hardly a hotbed of environmental concern) ran an item on the catastrophic consequences of the shutdown of critical ocean currents in an article entitled 'Climate collapse: Growing evidence of Scary Change'.

In the same month, the UK's Guardian and Independent reported on a four-year research project published in the prestigious journal Nature, that global warming will drive a quarter of land animals and plants into extinction by 2050. The findings were described as "terrifying" by the authors who said: "... what we found we wish we had not. It was far, far worse than we thought, and what we have discovered may even be an underestimate."

Why is this context missing from the IMI's agenda, and indeed from most business agendas? Why aren't business leaders daily confronting the truth of this enormous onslaught on the fabric of life? And why aren't they using their annual think-in in Killarney to consider the concepts of uncertainty, ambiguity, responsibility, conscience and above all, leadership, *in the context of this stark reality?*

Climate change, species and habitat decimation, an insecure water supply, persistent chemical pollution, food safety issues, a disturbing litany of human rights violations, a dangerously widening rich-poor gap, and a plethora of ethical failures are just some of the

direct consequences of a business model which has externalised the social and ecological costs of doing business, institutionalised shorttermism and has no way of responding to the notion of 'limits'.

The unfolding reality changes the game for everyone. It is an unambiguous call for a reframing of the relationship between business and the wider human and natural ecologies it depends on, and a total transformation of the economic model that is systematically tearing down our life support systems.

With better feedback from those systems, more accurate information about its systemic impact, and a deeper understanding of where its own self-interest really lies, business could use its enormous lobbying power to encourage legislators to speed up corporate adaptation and transformation by levelling the playing field upwards with tougher regulations that reward genuine and responsible innovators and penalise corporate vandalism.

Instead of this, business and its representative bodies like IBEC and the Chamber of Commerce opt for levelling the playing field downwards, effectively subordinating the flesh-and-blood needs of the real world to the abstract needs of the balance sheet. Policy makers are routinely warned not to mess with "competitiveness" by introducing measures that could deal with issues like climate change or human rights in a meaningful way. Meanwhile, the issue of what 'competitiveness' might mean in a world that's an environmental and social basket case, is never debated.

And as for the business media? Well... apart from this one, when did you last see an article on the ecological and social fallout of the current economic model parked alongside financial indices or articles on economic growth and financial yield? These issues are intimately linked, but the dots are never joined by the business media or by mainstream business organisations. To do so would call into question the 'common sense' upon which 'business-as-usual' is based, of course. Scary stuff indeed.

What's most disturbing about the IMI's agenda is that it never challenges the common sense of the current

business model or attempt to liberate leaders from a narrow perception of their role and responsibility. Unsurprisingly, instead of addressing these pressing issues and changing the reality, they typically annex the new language but use it as a cover for business-as-usual. Why bother changing the reality when you can settle for changing the perception?

To have a substantial effect on an organisation's strategic direction, new words and concepts must be understood from an informed view of our shared future. Even commonplace language like challenge, innovation and enterprise take on radically different meanings in the context of disturbing truths.

Ironically, no institution is better equipped than business to deal with these pressing issues. It has a global network, the best brains, the best systems and the best resources at its fingertips, and once it puts its mind to something, business has a track record of winning.

The real innovation the world urgently requires of business right now is an innovation of culture and values. A deep change in the way it perceives its relationship with the wider system, and understands its role and its responsibility. This can only happen if its leaders unflinchingly face up to the unfolding reality and help people to reimagine their work and workplaces, their industries and professions, their institutions and organisations in the context of a very different world.

The challenge of our generation is the challenge of transformation, and that begins with personal transformation. But that will never happen if our leaders just take the new language and apply it to business-as-usual. A whole new story is required.

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## REFLECTION

UnderCurrents is intended to respectfully provoke new conversations and challenge individuals and organisations to become conscious of the web of relationship in which everything exists, and the profound responsibility that lies with each one of us for the world that unfolds on our watch.

We encourage you to reflect on these ideas privately, or together with colleagues.

### Questions you might explore:

- Where am I in all of this?
- Where is my organisation in all of this?
- What are we contributing to the way things are?
- And how might I / we experiment with our life and work practices to foster healthier patterns of relationship?

### about the authors

*Paula Downey and David Youell* are partners at downey youell associates, working with issues of organisation, culture and change through the lens of living systems.

Paula has a Distinction in Communication Studies and a Masters with Distinction in Responsibility and Business Practice from the University of Bath and has studied Systems Thinking at the Open University. David is a qualified Cultural Assessment Practitioner. Both speak and write on organisational culture. issues.

### about 'UnderCurrents'

*UnderCurrents* is an occasional thought-paper, presenting a challenging voice that encourages people and organisations to learn, evolve and transform beyond their current worldview.

### Share 'UnderCurrents' with others

UnderCurrents was created in response to a mainstream business press which is unwilling or unable to give space to an alternative voice that challenges organisations to evolve beyond their limited worldview.

If you know others with whom these ideas will resonate, please forward this paper to them.

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