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John Elkington: seeing opportunity in discontinuity

February 2, 2009

To an extent, John Elkington welcomes the current period which he describes as one of "discontinuity". He sees an opportunity to for "a true paradigm shift", with the potential for a phoenix-like rising. Indeed, the phoenix is the symbol of his latest business undertaking, Volans Ventures, a for-profit business dedicated to social and environmental innovation.

When Mr. Elkington, who has also founded other businesses and serves on a number of boards, spoke at the Responsible Leadership Summit at IMD, he talked about pressure waves that can push forward change.

"I do not believe the current economy will serve 9-10 billion people in a sustainable way," he said, emphasizing that this is not a gloomy prediction. "In the midst of everything going on, we saw natural resources and the climate moving into the number five position on the list of global risks at the Davos World Economic Forum this year."

He went on to say that the triple bottom line - balancing people, planet and profits - is an ineffective mindset. The alternative, he suggested, was to weave these things together as a DNA-like "triple helix".

Tomorrow's values can grow from this kind of perspective. While pessimists of the past decade talked of bear markets and optimists of bull markets, the optimists of the decade to come may focus on the phoenix rising.

The drivers of "the phoenix decade", as he envisions it, could be "unreasonable people"; those who persist in trying to improve the world. Not every idea will work, but some will. Sometimes the impact will not be the expected one, but ultimately, there will be momentum from those who come forward with new visions to drive innovation, as well as having the courage to present them even when they don't lead directly to profits.

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"Real responsibility is doing things even when they cut across the business model," he said.