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Business Forum Report, May 2020 [*online meeting*]

## **Embracing ethics at a time of crisis**

### ***Online Business Forum***

## Embracing ethics at a time of crisis

### Values come to the fore during the pandemic

Many food and farming businesses have had to switch to survival mode during the crisis. Nonetheless, several intrinsic values have become more prominent. These include but are not limited to:

- Kindness, compassion and generosity
- Integrity, consistency and authenticity (with Patagonia being cited as a good non-food example)
- Leadership traits including showing vulnerability (as a positive trait) and bravery to pull back and not overstretch into areas beyond expertise
- Valuing the local – local community and local sourcing of food
- Positive collaboration, sharing, less concern about losing competitive advantage, working together to continue to keep stores stocked and people able to get food on the table
- Solidarity and togetherness
- Resilience, resourcefulness, commitment and adaptability of people to cope in challenging circumstances

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*“Everyone just pulls together and handles everything that's thrown at them with a smile on their face and just gets on with it.”*

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The response to the crisis from food and farming businesses has highlighted many things, not least how much can be achieved in a short space of time through collective action.

### Show kindness in the emergency response

Many people and organisations from across the sector – and beyond - have come together during the crisis to help ensure that shelves remain stocked and that people across the UK are fed. An example was shared of one catering company that could have sat idly during the pandemic with almost all staff furloughed. However, it instead chose to step up to the plate and to look after local communities nationwide, feeding thousands of vulnerable people. The organisation's core value of kindness has shone through in the way it has responded to the emergency.

### Ethics cannot be simply switched off and on

Some organisations have seemingly abandoned ethics during the pandemic. The example was cited of the branch of a hotel chain that fired its staff and with immediate effect kicked them out of their live-in accommodation due to fears over COVID-19. It was reported in the media that the hotel chain had been named the UK's worst for seven years in a row.

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*“It's a bit late if you didn't have your ethics going into this crisis, to start embracing them now...”*

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### Organisations with robust ethical character shine

The philosophy known as the virtue ethics tradition says that ultimately the most important thing about ethics, from an individual perspective, is character<sup>1</sup>. The corporate analogy is that organisations also have a character. People often talk about an organisation's *culture*, but it may be more helpful to just call it 'character', because it makes the moral analogy much clearer. When a company has a good moral character, doing the right thing is not just a checklist and is not something people will have to keep looking at to make sure they are not stepping over the line. It becomes embedded in the way things are done.

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*“What we've seen in the crisis is that those organisations that have a robust ethical character responded really well and really quickly. And a lot of those that didn't, stumbled and made mistakes. [They] worked out things they could do and tried to get a lot of credit for it. But the really good ones didn't have to. They did the right thing straight away.”*

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Having that deeply embedded ethical character is important, in part because it is not possible to anticipate every situation. Businesses have to be nimble.

### Be open about managing trade-offs

During a crisis, trade-offs may be judged differently. It was noted that tensions exist between hygiene in a COVID-19 world and the use of packaging for example. But is a company somehow failing if it lets go of environmental commitments during a crisis?

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<sup>1</sup> The word ethics itself comes from ethos, which means character.

For example, Boston Tea Party, the first national chain to ban single-use coffee cups. When the virus came in, companies had to go back to using single-use cups again. Such a move should not be thought of as a betrayal of ethical principles in these circumstances. It is having the flexibility and the wisdom to recognise that different situations require different responses.

Food and farming businesses should be authentic and strive to do good. Customers are more likely to be understanding and supportive if a business is transparent about compromises it has had to make in a short-term crisis situation.

### **Purpose-driven businesses in a good position**

Purpose-driven organisations, including social enterprises and benefit corporations, may fare better during a pandemic, not least because their ethical ‘character’ is likely to be more robust than organisations for whom profit is the priority. However, at a time of global crisis, it may not be the right time for purpose-led businesses to be shouting about the stark realities of the social and environmental issues they are trying to address in ‘normal times’ e.g. eliminating slave labour in supply chains.

Being part of the B Corps movement can be powerful, as it enables businesses to measure their impact on communities, people and the planet. Involving customers and making them into stakeholders, taking them on the sustainability journey with you, can be hugely important.

### **We should learn from past crises and responses**

During the foot-and-mouth crisis of the early 2000s, the countryside was effectively ‘closed’ and farming had to drastically change. For a period of time, money was provided by government to support regional activity and lots of good learning and sharing happened.

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*“[the foot-and-mouth crisis] ... forced people to collaborate. It forced out some brilliant new ideas. We had very strong leadership from governments.”*

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In the current crisis, there is the added complexity of Brexit and trade negotiations, the results of which are likely to have a huge impact on the future of food and farming in the UK. While food systems are facing some really stark challenges in the current crisis, the response to date has arguably not been urgent enough. Foot-and-mouth had huge impacts, but was a softer blow by comparison, relative to the huge disruption affecting the food system at the moment.

There is a lesson to be learned from the way the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA – formerly GLA) evolved its approach. When the then GLA was established, the initial focus was on ensuring there were no illegal workers and was very much about compliance and control. Over time, it shifted to working much more collaboratively to share information, allowing organisations to instead act pro-emptively and work together to prevent modern slavery. So, there is a lesson for the current crisis response about the connection and sharing of information to achieve shared goals.

### **There is a time and a place for marketing**

No company should be seen to be profiteering from the pandemic or trying to artificially create ‘hero’ status. If they are found out, that profit maximising is likely to be short-lived.

Communications remain vitally important at this time. For some, that has meant dialling down, or even switching off, external communications and marketing during the crisis.

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*“We’ve dialled back our communication through our social channels... [as] we don’t want to be seen to be commercialising or monetising the situation [the pandemic] in any way”*

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Openness and honesty in communications – both internal and external – are critical. Intrinsic core values should already be embedded. People will increasingly see through greenwashing and wild claims that cannot be substantiated. There must be better regulation and open critique of greenwash and ‘healthwash’.

There is concern that, during the pandemic, there could be a rise in potentially distracting and misleading claims of certain food or drink brands boost people’s immune systems. There is a need for stronger regulation on health and environmental claims, which would benefit those food companies that are striving for honesty, integrity and openness.

### **Being global and local is possible**

Food businesses should not just be concerned with doing ‘good’ within this country, but doing good regarding our relationship with the rest of the world. So, if a business is concerned with, for example, farmers’ rights, it should be concerned not just for farmers’ rights in this country, but their rights and fair trade in other countries too. Similarly, if it is concerned about animal welfare, it should be concerned with

making sure that imported animal-derived products come from animals who have been well treated.

In many parts of the UK, there has been an increase in local sourcing of food during the pandemic. A shift to more localised food systems is not the antithesis of a global ethics approach; rather it is precisely an expression of it. This is because, from a global point of view, it is better that more food is produced locally.

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*“Let’s have a big round of applause ready for the companies that demonstrated in this crisis that they’ve done the right thing, because doing the right thing is so embedded with them. I hope they get more recognition.”*

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There is a call for exposing people and organisations doing ‘dodgy practices’, and for rewarding, and sticking with, companies who have shown strong ethical character through the crisis.

### **Protect employees and supply partners**

Protecting and caring for your own staff should be paramount for any organisation, particularly at a time of crisis. Many of those working in the food sector are designated as key workers and potentially putting themselves at greater risk.

Responsible companies should do everything they can, not just to ensure employees can work safely, but also to ensure they feel supported and connected. Where possible, employees should be allowed greater flexibility, particularly as they may be directly affected by COVID-19, including having additional caring and/or home-schooling responsibilities. Small acts of kindness and support can make a big difference.

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*“Our team also surprise and delight us across the globe. So, we get a surprise turn up on our doorstep once a week, which is really nice. Could be... a little box with some chocolate and some toilet roll and a few bottles of beer. But it just keeps people talking and keeps people engaged. It’s a nice little surprise.”*

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That care and support should extend beyond the office, store or factory door. Supporting supplier and farmer partners at difficult times is vital, including in parts of the Global South, where public health messages *may* be less widely promoted. For example, a food brand that has in its supplier communities has been putting up posters with information on precautions that

people should take, handing out leaflets and locally made soaps, to help stop the spread of the virus and to protect its suppliers and their families.

### **Accept we cannot always get everything right**

Accepting that food and farming businesses cannot always get everything right should not stop them from making positive steps forward and being proud of those achievements. Ambition is welcome, but the pursuit of the ‘perfect’ can be paralysing or disempowering, particularly in a crisis situation.

The jury is still out there on the extent to which ‘being ethical’ costs businesses money. ‘Walking the talk’ on issues like workers’ rights, high animal welfare and environmental protection costs can be a significant investment in money and time. However, in the long-run, including during a crisis, such investments pay off.

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*“The crisis has been really good at exposing the gap between what businesses do and what needs society really needs them to meet.”*

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It is important to acknowledge though that there is a huge amount of work that goes into making sure food is safe to eat and contains what it says on the label. What is often regarded as ‘the minimum’ requires a huge amount of effort. In a country like the UK, most of us take access to safe, nutritious, wholesome food for granted. The pandemic has exposed (or re-exposed) stark inequalities in society. There are too many people vulnerable and struggling to be able to access sufficient, nutritious, culturally-appropriate food.

### **Legacy – making it stick**

Past experience suggests that business as usual typically reasserts itself alarmingly quickly after a crisis. Hence people and organisations have to come together doing what we believe in to ensure the best responses ‘stick’.

Being ethical should not be thought of as ‘getting a badge’ for being organic or fair trade. There is a risk that businesses do not get a red mark for not embracing ethics, unless they do something outrageous or dangerous (e.g. deliberately mislabelling food products).

We should all strive for the legacy of a fairer, kinder society and a resilient workforce that is inspired by its leaders.

*“what [employees are] all asking for is that there’s a legacy at the end of this crisis and that the kindness that we’re seeing which is amplified during this lockdown period [is helped to continue]”*

### Concluding comments

We should acknowledge and applaud the huge amount of effort and hard work that people in food and farming sectors have already put in during the pandemic. However, let us not stop at applause – we should value and reward those workers properly.

Anyone who claims to be the perfect ethical company, doing nothing wrong at a time of crisis, is likely to be deluded or lying. A level of scepticism and questioning is helpful if we are all to do the right thing. Complacency can do a lot of harm, as can ‘freeriding’ and only doing the bare minimum.

Embracing ethics should not be an idealistic crusade. Food and farming companies should show ambition and be honest about their failures. Only by working together more openly, honestly and transparently will we get through this crisis and ‘build back better’. Hanging onto ethics in some cases will be all companies can do. *Embracing* ethics means building and showing true ethical character – with integrity, purpose and realism. There is an opportunity to be ambitious, positively embrace and build off the best of humanity that is emerging during the pandemic.

### What next?

#### Key questions to ask:

- How can we keep safe the key workers that are producing and distributing food in difficult times?
- How should we value and reward food and farming workers that have too often been taken for granted?
- How can businesses show their true ethical character?
- How can food brands strike the right balance on communications during the pandemic?
- How can we continue to help those who need support in the future, in a way that is sustainable?
- How can we ensure that, in our response to the pandemic, we are not delaying much-needed action on other critical issues such as obesity, biodiversity and the climate crisis?

### Further resources

1. Food citizenship communications toolkit – link [here](#)
2. Food Ethics Council inspiration page – COVID-19 and food systems link [here](#)
3. Coronavirus, food and ethics blog by Dr Nigel Dower on Food Ethics Council website [here](#)
4. Ethics in our food response to COVID-19 blog by Dan Crossley on Food Ethics Council website [here](#)

#### Other relevant Business Forum reports:

- Purpose-driven business – link [here](#)
- The food system we made – link [here](#)

This is a report of the Business Forum meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2020 – held online during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are grateful to our speaker contributors – **Frank Bothwell**, founder of Thomas Franks Ltd (contract caterer), **Ben Greensmith** (UK Country Manager for Tony’s Chocolonely) and **Julian Baggini** (author, philosopher and member of the Food Ethics Council). **Dan Crossley**, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council, chaired the meeting. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Food Ethics Council, nor its members. For more information on the Business Forum, contact Dan Crossley [dan@foodethicscouncil.org](mailto:dan@foodethicscouncil.org) +44 (0) 333 012 4147.