



BSR Conference 2009

Reset Economy. Reset World.

Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities

Breakout Session Summary

Thursday, October 22, 2009 | 9:45-10:45 a.m.

Speakers

- » **Adam Kahane**, Partner, Reos Partners
- » **Diane Osgood**, Vice President, CSR Strategy, BSR (moderator)

Highlights

- » Bringing people together to solve tough problems takes time. Unfortunately we don't have a lot of time to deal with today's biggest issues.
- » Solving tough problems is more than just talking and listening; it's about working together to arrive at a common understanding of the current situation and truly believing in the potential for relationships to create solutions.

Memorable Quotes

"The real problem is not that we don't know what to do; it's that we don't want to work together to do it."—Adam Kahane, Reos Partners

"We're too busy solving the problems created by not having worked together to find the time to work together now."—Adam Kahane, Reos Partners

"In 80 percent of my experiences in solving tough problems, the connection and the shifting occur when people speak personally...the most personal is the most universal."—Adam Kahane, Reos Partners

"For me the question is not 'What is the use of talking?' but 'What do we do when not working together gets us stuck?'"—Adam Kahane, Reos Partners

Overview

Kahane opened the session by emphasizing the need for a significant shift in the way the private sector perceives its relationship with society. For the past 20 years, he explained, the dominant ideology for companies has been that someone else sets the rules, and business fights to win within those rules. However, the extreme market fundamentalism that marked the late 1980's and early 1990's is no longer relevant.

Kahane described how his work in post-Apartheid South Africa in the early 1990's sparked the revelation on which he based his book *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities*. At that time, he worked in scenario planning for Royal Dutch Shell, that for many years had been subject to boycotts because of its refusal to divest in South Africa. Given the complexities of that country after the release of Nelson Mandela and the move towards a democratic state, Kahane realized a seemingly simple fact: that talking and listening become essential when different entities cannot find a solution by working individually.



However, the challenge is how to bring differing parties together to work in coordination to “create a new reality.”

Kahane noted that “if you’re not part of the problem, you can’t be part of the solution.” In other words, a key first step is for each societal actor to understand its role in the problem in order to be able to help find the solution. The implication for the business community is that the private sector can no longer continue with business as usual and leave government and civil society to work through societal problems.

Kahane went on to explain that there are various levels of talking and listening, ranging from downloading of ideas to building relationships of trust. To solve tough problems, different societal actors must come together in order to achieve the seemingly simple task of creating a shared understanding of the situation. However, several factors can contribute to one person’s understanding of reality—and it can differ greatly from another’s—so building personal relationships through talking and listening is key to success.

Brad Henderson from Plan International highlighted the discrepancy between measurable aspects, such as metrics and indicators, and the very complex and often mysterious nature of relationships. He asked Kahane, “How do you embrace complexity?” After describing three types of complexity—dynamic, social, and generative—Kahane responded that you have to carefully design the interactions but that you can’t control them. “You can design it; you have to design it...But that doesn’t mean we can control it. Literally all we can do is take the next step, see what happens, and then take the next step.” He noted that, in the design process, a critical element is incorporating non-work spaces where individuals can connect on a personal level, as true relationships and trust building happens when you tell personal stories.

Referencing his new book, *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change*, Kahane discussed the relationship between power and love and the need to unite the two for positive social change. “In order to deal with the challenges we face, we need to learn not to choose between [power and love] but how to use both.” He went on to say that power is an incredible force for change, but power without love—doing what you want without regard to others—is reckless and there is no limit on the potential for damage. Therefore, business can be a key driver for positive social change.

Kahane emphasized that solving tough problems takes time. Unfortunately, the biggest issues we are facing today have a deadline. He noted that we are facing mammoth issues that require unprecedented collaboration. While unsure of the final outcome, he’s impressed with the truly global and multi-sector conversations happening now to find a solution.

Notes Sponsor

