

Into new dimensions: CSR

It is generally agreed that a reinterpretation of the basic concepts of productivity beyond the economic dimensions is required. An APO study meeting on the Social Dimensions of Productivity held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 28–31 May, considered five such dimensions: impact of globalization on national productivity and strategies for its improvement; socially sensitive enterprises and their actions during corporate restructuring; social enterprises and their role in the nonprofit sector; social capital and productivity; and corporate social responsibility (CSR) and achieving it through organizational development. A seminar was organized in Tokyo to focus specifically on one of them: CSR. The following article was contributed by one of the seminar resource persons, Singapore Compact for CSR Executive Director Thomas Thomas.

Five days of learning occurred when 19 participants from 12 APO member countries converged on Tokyo to share experiences in and investigate Japanese examples of CSR, 11–16 June. The seminar participants included government officials, business leaders, academics, and CSR practitioners. The seminar kicked off after the opening formalities with a lecture by Professor Scott T. Davis of Rikkyo University. He explained the beginnings and development of CSR, what it means, and put it into the global and Japanese contexts. Professor Davis showed that profits, people (the social dimension), and the planet (the environmental dimension) form an inclusive continuum. His diagrams and descriptions illustrated that CSR is the only way to tackle effectively the many challenges now facing society.

I was the other resource person, and my presentation on issues in CSR practices in the Asia-Pacific region acknowledged the different levels of CSR achieved and challenges faced. The definition of CSR is being developed, although the main criteria are accepted. Many CSR issues are still evolving, while the roles of business and government in ensuring that CSR is a priority are also unclear. It is only in tackling the needs of society that these issues can be resolved.

Company visits and presentations by business representatives showed that although all had different perspectives on CSR, they were able to make a difference in society. For example, the independent research company and CSR specialist IntegreX showed how CSR can be measured to help companies improve their performance and attract informed investors. It was pointed out that companies with better CSR performance also yield better returns to investors. Seven and i Holdings explained how good CSR practices equal better business. Its business grew as it tried to meet the needs of customers and employees. However, the representative cautioned that needs and wants change with time, CSR is a journey,



Thomas lecturing on CSR practices

and processes and systems must be in place to ensure effectiveness.

JAL had problems with its safety record, affecting its reputation and bottom line. CSR for the airline meant ensuring flight safety by operating in an open, transparent manner. Along with safety, stakeholder engagement and environmental activities formed part of JAL's CSR agenda. Soy sauce manufacturer Kikkoman is located in a residential area of Chiba. Relations with the community have sustained the company over many decades and helped it to grow. Kikkoman is justifiably proud of its environmental record and stressed that sustainable development was achieved by the twin wheels of safety and stability.

During the visit to Amor Towa Corporation, President Takeo Tanaka explained how the corporation grew by simply addressing the needs of shopkeepers and the community. Amor Towa makes a big difference in the lives of many in the community by delivering hot meals to the elderly, looking after children, or providing cleaning services. Panasonic showed that it remains true to the vision of founder Konosuke Matsushita with its goal of being a "super honest" company and a technological leader generating good returns for shareholders.

From exchanges among participants, we learned that CSR champions in many countries are doing a lot in small ways with limited resources and publicity. Just as there is no standard definition of CSR, there is also no standard CSR practice or result. However, everyone agreed that we can all make a difference for the better by understanding the CSR message and practicing it in the workplace, marketplace, community, and environment. 🌀