

Serving THE Future

An overriding and greater purpose—which has nothing to do with monetary benefits—drives Present Group’s business operations.

Images by David Phillips

At Present Group, there is a common understanding that a short-term approach only serves the needs of a limited few, while looking long term has a multitude of benefits economically, socially, and ecologically.

Chairman Brian Grimmer believes that it is “much more satisfying and liberating” to look to the future, lose the need for competition, and embrace collaboration. “All of the concepts and ideas we have implemented are coming to fruition. Now, rather than me pushing people along this path, a lot of them are actually pulling me along in some ways—all of which assures me that it has been embraced.”

Cooperation and forming alliances are paramount for Present Group. “There’s no need to compete,” Brian says. “If your purpose is to make money, then you’ll always compete; but if your purpose is a true purpose that is meaningful, it will drive you to succeed through collaboration.

“Our purpose is shaped by the understanding that the economy sits within society and society sits within the ecology. Old enterprise thinking acts as if the economy is separate from society, but the economy isn’t actually us; we’re society, and the economy sits within us. So the economy should serve society and society should serve the ecology, or biosphere.

“As Jo Hunter shared at a recent Conscious Capitalism event: If someone’s inspired by that purpose or shares it, I will happily mentor them in my practices. And then if they actually do their job better so that my clients choose to see them rather than me and put me out of business, then I’m happy. That’s because they’re serving the purpose of the business better than I am. So there’s no room for competition in that model.

“However, if your sole purpose is to make more money, then there will always be someone you will have to compete with. I believe the greatest understanding of this century is that if we are to survive in the long run, then we have to

find a way for this new paradigm to emerge from the old economy—one of collaboration leading to unity of purpose, and not competition leading to separation.

“There’s no need to compete with people better than you; you should celebrate that. And if they’re doing worse than you, but it’s the same purpose, you should help them to do as well as you do.”

Present Group has a great relationship with Bill Withers, the brains behind ADAPT by Design. “He has also helped to introduce us to the concepts of the Conscious Capitalism movement, which is about a lot of these themes that serve a purpose for the greater good,” Brian says.

“We had already been working on our own notion of a social venture, which was to be intergenerational and serve our communities. We have several programs now: feeding malnourished kids in schools, building schools, and volunteering as mentors. We’re a private enterprise—and we don’t put our shareholders first; we put our purpose first. >

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“Unfortunately, it is often the shareholders who are decoupled from the passions and the tribulations of the business. It’s somewhat evil—and I’m not saying that the people who do it are evil; I’m saying it’s due to all sorts of things where dividends can become the primary reason for the business’s existence. A private enterprise can really understand its purpose and, in a sense, risk more and can do it over a longer term to serve more people. It can stay true to itself.”

“Our whole enterprise is about making a meaningful difference to the world’s biggest industry sectors—utilities, infrastructure, mining, oil, and gas—and ultimately keeping waste to a minimum while we work out how we’re going to make the planet sustainable. We believe that is our part to play even though we’re only at about 400 people right now.”

Present Group wants to be relevant to future generations with the intergenerational succession of people and structures. Over the next four years, Present Group will be working on what it calls ‘Project Custodian’. ‘Custodians’ are integral to the business, and they have the highest level of commitment; then there are ‘collaborators’ who are included, ‘contributors’ who are involved, and ‘citizens’ who are invited. Brian says everybody will know who their successor is.

Furthermore, Present Group is implementing eight ‘successions’ as outlined in ADAPT by Design,

combined with its own developmental holarchy called ‘Revolve by Nature’—a holarchy with eight levels of abstraction to describe the enterprise as a whole, which all sit within themselves rather than being separate. “It’s a very powerful model. It allows us to be entrepreneurial and renew ourselves like nothing else. And hopefully we’ve come up with an ecosystem that should stand the test of this century.”

Brian is known by his colleagues as somewhat of an entrepreneur for his innovative way of thinking. “I have a ‘no surrender’ gene in me,” he says. “You see something that is so compelling: an innovation, a culture, a new way of doing something which serves a need people don’t even know exists yet; you’re an entrepreneur when that one compelling reason will defy all the other usually prosaic reasons not to do it.”

“So to be an entrepreneur you have to rally the doubters, cynics,



and sceptics and keep them on side. You have to be diplomatic and inspire on a daily basis without losing sight of that one compelling reason why you just have to bring this idea into existence.”

He explains that the intuitive leaders introduce the business to sustainable orthodoxy when they’re ready to embrace it. “I think that’s a major key to our success. The thing with visionaries and entrepreneurs is that they can see just that little bit further—the thing that doesn’t exist for anybody else yet. But once it does exist, they should get out of the way if it serves the greater good.”

Brian believes the biggest challenge businesses can face often lies within the inner work of the leader. “By the time you’re a leader, you know your strengths, and everybody else knows your strengths. The biggest threat to a business is if the leadership team isn’t prepared to address their egos. If they’re willing to go on that journey, then their true selves and purpose will be revealed.”

“Sometimes you get to the point where all you’ve got is a hammer

and everything resembles a nail. So your one key strength is your hammer and you use it for everything. If your strength is sales, you try to sell your way out of trouble; if you’re a great administrator, you might cost-cut your way out; if you’re a visionary, you might come up with a new innovation.

“You have to realise the diminishing returns which come with using this strength, or hammer over and over. It can cast a shadow over others. So you have to find the courage to find those blind spots lurking in the dark and bring them to light.”

“Sometimes there is this one thing you do with your strong game, but it is disruptive, and yet nobody has brought it to your attention because you’re the leader. If you address that one area, then you will gain huge returns.”

“The reason that businesses fail, more often than not, is because leaders get to the point where they’re not willing to look at themselves. They’ve built something with substance or success, and rather than hand it over, they’ll sell it, they’ll flip it, they’ll cash out or compromise

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in some way. They’re not prepared to change in order to free up the next generation.”

The thing that the Present Group team brought to Brian’s attention was that his long-term vision, although a strength, was his ‘hammer’. “Every time we’d have an operational meeting, I’d talk about decades into the future and things that didn’t exist yet. That was where I was getting in the way of our enterprise, and I should have known better.”

“So what we’ve been through is a process which the other executive leaders call ‘SLOT’. I was ‘Speaking Lots, Off Topic’, which was an indulgence. It’s just because I’m impassioned, curious, and an entrepreneur. What I’m now practising—and it’s a daily battle, I will admit it—is still ‘SLOT’, but it’s ‘Speak Last, On Topic’.”

“I don’t have to have all the answers, and I can give guidance and suggestions at the end which are far more likely to be adopted by my leadership team, rather than me starting and acting as if I have all the answers. So that’s my particular inner work, and all the people in my business are also embracing and finding out ways to unlock their own blind spots.”

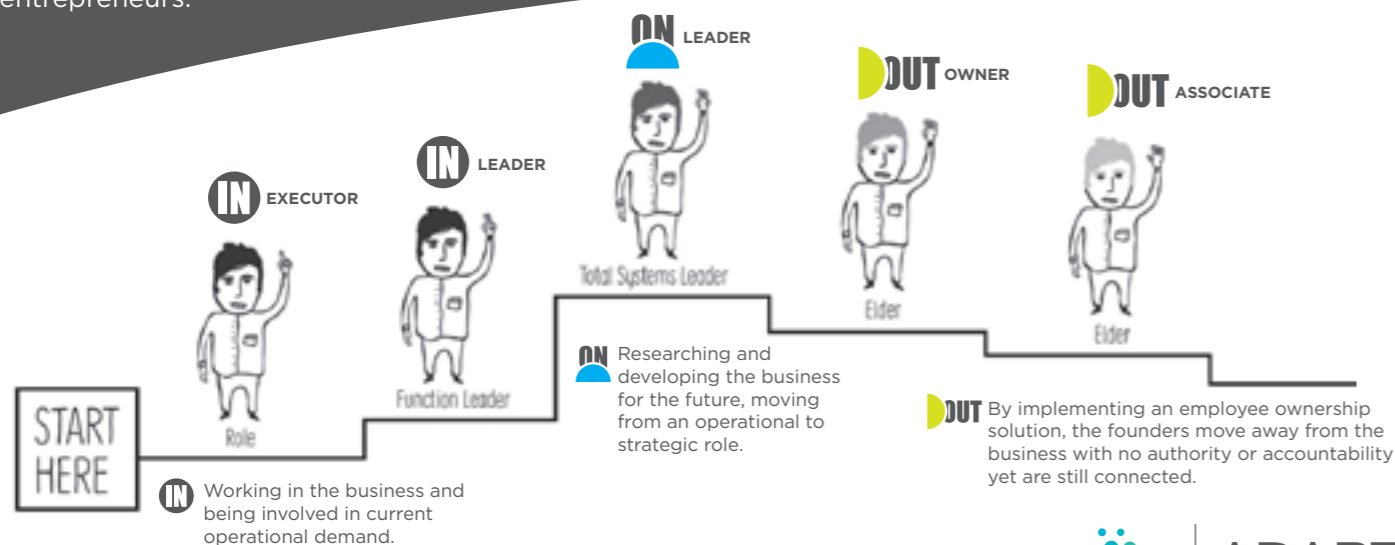
With Present Group’s clear purpose and belief that it plays an important role in enhancing the economic, social, and ecological aspects of the world, the future looks bright. •

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