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Philanthropy and CSR: a matter of lifestyle

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Next year will mark a quarter century since Slovakia opened up to inward and outward exploration to new people, ideas, and practices. The degree to which we are open varies as openness largely depends on human nature and tradition. Undoubtedly, our windows of opportunity are wide open. We should only doubt our open mind as a matter of growing in our human endeavor.

Philanthropy and CSR are the very areas that give us an opportunity to constantly test our openness. We have achieved a major shift in paradigm in how businesses, non-profit organizations, individual donors, governments, and the media operate. Those who have embarked on the journey of philanthropy and CSR have already grasped the essential tricks of the trade.

Nevertheless, something crucial is missing: we have yet to identify with the social context of this 'trade'. We tend to be lone boats sailing through the ocean of philanthropy and CSR. This has been exacerbated over the past few years when we have been navigating through the Gulf of Crisis. These dire straits have brought some of us together while drawing others further apart. Whether in business, non-profit, government or the media, some of us have become sharks and others cannibals. Most are like jellyfish floating without a conscious effort to guide their direction. But the Gulf is not a dead end and we are not shipwrecked. The dire straits are an opportunity to join forces with others more effectively and creatively. We need to grasp the oars and row the boat together.

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Philanthropy and CSR are not yet a matter of our lifestyle. At best, they tend to be a matter of pragmatism. It looks good for a business to be philanthropic, particularly if one supports a PR-friendly cause. A non-profit organization has to endure the pains of fundraising. For governments, it would be electoral suicide not to give grants. As for the media, writing about CSR and philanthropy is more a source of income than a story to explore. At worst, CSR and philanthropy are the feed to our inflated ego "Hey, look what I can afford!" Making a donation is all too often marked by a distasteful bacchanalia which significantly increases the cost of the philanthropic gift. Is this nouveau rich opulence to become our philanthropic and CSR lifestyle? We have so much more to lean on!

Slovakia has a long tradition of giving, CSR, and philanthropy, even though it was not quite called that in the times of Juraj Fándly or Tomáš Baťa. The forty years of state-run nonsense nicknamed "national enterprise" might have put the tradition into an abyss of forgetting. Then, shortly after 1989, thousands of expats and international investors – particularly from the US – came. They reminded us as to what CSR and philanthropy is about. Instead of taking their profits home, they shared abundantly with us. So did the major non-profit international donors. Thousands of us have awakened since.

What we need to do now is to start working together more effectively and confidently, and at the same time stay humble and open. We should hold on to our oars and row in rhythm with the others. The voyage will become smoother and much more fun. No matter the waters, it can and should become our lifestyle.

Happy New Year!