

The haves should share with the have-nots



Miroslav Trnka

CEO, co-founder and co-owner of ESET, s.r.o.

AWARDS

- 2006 EY Entrepreneur of the Year
- 2007 Crystal Wing Award (economy)
- 2008 IT Personality of the Year

EDUCATION

- Slovak Technical University, Faculty of Material Sciences and Technology in Trnava

Do you see yourself more as a philanthropist or benefactor? Do you think that donating money and donating one's own time and/or skills has an equal value?

I don't think these two ways of helping can be compared like that. If somebody is very ill and therefore doesn't have the means to sustain himself or get the necessary medical treatment, giving him money may save his life. On the other hand, someone may not need a one-off financial donation as much as advice or guidance that will encourage him and direct him on the right path. It all depends on the situation. Thus, if circumstances allow it,

After 18 years, Miroslav Trnka withdrew from the management of ESET, a successful company well known for its anti-virus system NOD. He then refocused more on not-for-profit activities. He explains his stance on philanthropy, charity and CSR.

one should be ready to be either a philanthropist or a benefactor. I think that one way for successful entrepreneurs to help non-profit organizations is to share their knowledge and experience in management in order to streamline their operations.

Every person has different idea of how much they need to sustain themselves and how much they can spare and give away. What is your advice on this dilemma?

There is also no general answer for this dilemma. The key question is how to manage the things that we possess. There are various old rules, for example in Judaism, how to divide one's wealth, or how much to give to charitable causes. Everyone should sense when they have enough to share and how much it should be. Generally, hoarding money and not sharing does not make people happy. Some feel burdened by possessions and feel free when they don't own much. Those are usually happy to share even the little they have. Then, there are people that feel the need to achieve a certain standard of living before they can engage in charitable activities. And there are those who don't feel the need to share at all. So it's hard for me to judge people based on how much they give. In my opinion, your heart tells you what to do.

An American Indian proverb says: Never criticize a man until you've walked a mile in his moccasins. Nevertheless, one can often hear the opinion that disadvantaged people are to be blamed for their situation because they are lazy or lack initiative. Where should the help come from for the drunken homeless man or the prostitute on the side of the road?

The answer to this question is probably influenced by people's political orientation, whether they are leaning more to the right or the left and expect either the government or rather non-governmental institutions to care for the disadvantaged ones. I personally don't want anyone to die of hunger or experience harsh suffering. But, at the same time, unconditional state welfare support can have very negative effects on society and people's behavior. I think it's necessary to find a balance: nobody should be allowed to perish but generous support should be available only to those who have worked enough to deserve it.

The commonly cited difference between philanthropy and charity is that charity relieves the pains of social problems, whereas philanthropy attempts to solve those problems at their root. Thus a benefactor will give a hungry man a fish, but a philanthropist will teach him how to fish for himself.

I also agree with the Dalai Lama who once said that, before offering a helping hand to others, we have to ensure that we are firmly standing on our feet. That means that one should make sure that he doesn't make himself dependent on help as a result of giving away too much. So, when I'm doing fine then I'm obliged to share my spare resources with those in need. The question is when can we say that we are "fine". And at this point, the American Indian proverb reminds us that we shouldn't judge others because everyone deals with different circumstances.

Earlier this year – together with Michal Blaha of BBDO – you have established a foundation "Zastavme korupciu" (Let's stop corruption). What motivated two very successful businessmen to do so?

Due to the economic crisis, standards of living and the amount of investment into business are decreasing. Both of these phenomena are a serious problem for the society because they often result in an increase of corruption. Whether people get involved in bribery or not depends mainly on their moral values and their environment. Therefore, the foundation "Zastavme korupciu" has two main goals: The first is to raise awareness about the negative consequences of bribery and corruption for Slovakia's business environment as well as society. The second is to protect and help (financial, legal, and moral support) those who dare report corrupt behavior and act as whistleblowers. Without these brave people the vicious circle of giving and taking bribes will never be broken.