**What is Essential?**

Guest Blogger

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What is Essential?

This is a question my family and I have asked many times in recent weeks, as Covid-19 forces us to reconsider both the meaning of that word, and the values that drive different people’s answers.

Collectively, as a society, asking this question has led to us facing some fairly uncomfortable truths about human nature.

Starting with the most serious-level, many of us would list ‘the protection of human life’ as essential, made more apparent by the cruelty of this virus targeting the most vulnerable who lack defences to fight it. And so it is left to those of us with health, strength, agency, and influence to use this to protect others. Sometimes just by staying at home and changing our behaviour, other times changing our business purpose, and other times by demonstrating these values as leaders of our communities and nations.

But while the protection of human life may appear of the essential list for many, it has become apparent that this is not necessarily for all. We have seen an emerging narrative in some places which does not subscribe to this as an essential. Human life is not deemed essential when saving it will require behaviour change, will cost too many jobs, or will impact the economy. In this narrative, the (economic) protection of the many is more essential than the lives of the few.

Of course, as a sustainability and climate change scholar, I can’t help but draw a parallel here. We are told that the (economic) protection of the many – or at least, of the most wealthy in society – is more essential than the lives of the ‘few’… except that those vulnerable to this other crisis are not ‘few’. There are millions at risk of sea level rises either directly or indirectly through inundation of arable land, there are low lying islands literally planning their escape routes to dry land as they lose their nations, and there are already water-stressed continents who see no light – or rain – at the end of the tunnel.

But this question of ‘essential’ has another less dramatic interest to me. What businesses are ‘essential’? And are there different levels of ‘essential-ness’? So while existing ventilator, sanitiser, and PPE manufacturers are essential, so are those with the ability to pivot into these areas. In a ‘war effort’ type mentality, we see essential businesses now include car and vacuum manufacturers making ventilators, high end fashion brands sewing PPE, and distilleries and breweries sourcing ingredients for hospital-grade hand sanitiser.

This draws on the business strategy theory of strategic agility which I have written on in relation to sustainability in the past ([Ivory and Brooks, 2018](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-017-3583-6)). Strategic agility requires

* strategic sensitivity: understanding the context in which we operate our business and the changes on the horizon which may impact us,
* collective commitment: having the support of our employees, supply chain, customers, clients and other stakeholder so that when we need to make fast strategic decision they come along with us, because we have built a ‘reservoir of trust’ that we are acting in the interest of all and not just privileging the few (eg the current shareholders), and
* resource fluidity: being ready (and able) to redeploy resources to be used for a different purpose, in a different way, or in a different location. Using a gin still to make hand sanitiser, or enabling employees to work from home with the kit and broadband they need, are obvious current examples.

Businesses who have been strategically agile have become key providers of our greatest defence against this crisis – either directly with ventilators, PPE, and sanitisers; or indirectly – by mandating or enabling social distancing with ‘work from home’ decrees, or providing essentials to our doors so we don’t need to leave home.

Which leads us back to our question of levels of essential-ness. Because we can class food as essential for survival, but what type of food is more essential? Whereas convenience and freshness drove shopping habits before this crisis, now many find habits driven by availability, shelf life, and contributions to health. Moreover, how we get food has contributed to our examination of essential businesses. Who would have listed food delivery drivers or even deliveroo-riders as essential a few months ago? But if they are keeping us fed whilst also not tempting us out of our houses, they are performing a service in our fight against the virus. To that end, other delivery drivers and even tablet computers can be added to the essentials. The former are delivering the pencils and colouring books and the latter the school lessons and learning which are keeping children both connected and entertained. Perhaps not as essential as a ventilator, but in these uncertain days which are very likely to be impacting our children is ways we aren’t even quite sure of yet, they are performing a service too.

I hope that when the recovery comes following this difficult time, businesses (and shareholders) don’t try simply to regain the value they have lost in profits and share price, but to build on the values we have gained in our sense of humanity, community, and resilience. I hope they look to be embedded in and responsive to what society *needs* and not just what those who can afford to pay *want*. I hope also that businesses embrace approaches like strategic agility and do not see themselves as paragons of cost effectiveness with no slack (which curtails resource fluidity), or as separated from the people and communities who provide their licences to operate (which inhibits collective commitment), or blind to the future business environment (by ignoring strategic sensitivity). Because we are facing a potentially more deadly and life-changing crisis in the climate crisis, and if we have learnt anything from the current Covid crisis it is that we need businesses who serve society’s ‘essentials’ to lead, grow, and support us.

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Ivory, S.B., Brooks, S.B. Managing Corporate Sustainability with a Paradoxical Lens: Lessons from Strategic Agility. *J Bus Ethics* **148,**347–361 (2018). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-017-3583-6