

The Evolution of a Corporate Idealist: When Girl Meets Oil

REVIEW BY GLENN RIFKIN

CHRISTINE BADER is one of those increasingly rare business types: a social activist who loves working inside big companies. Within this seemingly incongruous subculture, the challenge is to find ways to do good while providing value for the organization. This challenge is a central theme of Bader's new book: *The Evolution of a Corporate Idealist: When Girl Meets Oil* — a must-read for M.B.A. students with a twinge of desire to save the world. Executives who want to support corporate social responsibility ought to read it as well. It's an insider's view, without a public relations spin, on what it means to tread this narrow path.

Bader's description of "corporate idealists" is instructive. "We're in Asia's factory zones, working with local managers to make sure employees are paid and treated properly. We're in Africa, sitting on dirt floors with village elders to protect indigenous traditions amidst an influx of foreign oil workers. We're in Silicon Valley, collaborating with product developers to better protect user privacy. We're in London and New York, convincing our directors that protecting people and the planet is good for business. We believe that business can be a force for good, even as we struggle with our own contradictions."

Given the global perception of big business these days, especially in the aftermath of the economic meltdown of 2008, Bader sometimes sounds like a lonely voice in the wilderness. But, in fact, she is one among legions of idealists who believe they can abide in the corporate world, make a decent living and do good

works. She gathers their voices, their triumphs and their frustrations in this small but insightful volume.

For Bader, now a lecturer and visiting scholar at Columbia University, the journey to corporate idealism began in 1999 when she attended a lecture by John Browne, the chief executive of British Petroleum (rebranded BP). The urbane and charismatic Browne, knighted by the Queen and the first head of a major oil company to acknowledge the reality of climate change and urge action, gave a talk that lit a fire inside Bader.

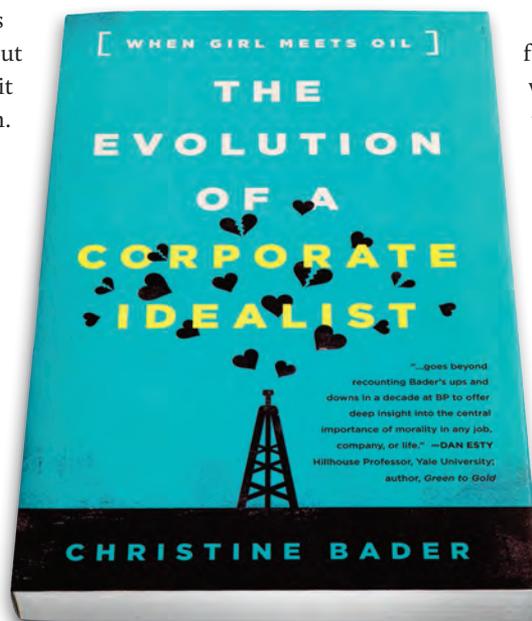
"Companies are not separate from the societies in which they work," Browne told his audience that day. "We don't make our profits and then go live somewhere else. This is our society, too.... Companies which want to keep operating successfully on a long-term basis can't isolate themselves from society."

Hmmm, that sure doesn't sound like the BP we came to know and fear in the aftermath of the Deep Horizon explosion and oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010.

But for Bader, then just a first-year M.B.A. student at Yale, those words more than struck a chord; they changed

her life. Already a social activist who'd done a stint with City Year after graduating from college, Bader suddenly saw a new career path. BP was a company that cared about the world in which it operated, and that was a company for which she wanted to work.

After Yale, Bader landed an internship with BP's London office, where the environment, inhabited by clean-cut, well-dressed and well-intentioned budding professionals, was "catnip" for her. They talked incessantly about the company's role in society and



behaved in accordance with Browne's outspoken philosophy. "I fell in love with that BP," Bader writes. "And BP loved me back."

Her internship led to a corporate position, and she was immediately assigned to an ambitious project in Indonesia, followed several years later by a similar endeavor in China. Bader's first frontline experience was in Papua, Indonesia's easternmost province, in a region rich with natural resources and rife in political turmoil. In 2001, BP was initiating a plan to build a liquefied natural gas plant in a tiny village called Tanah Merah. The project, which would displace 127 households, was named Tangguh, and Bader's assignment was to address the human rights aspects of the development.

Given the complexity of the political and tribal issues in this part of the world, Bader immediately worried about the company's commitment to aligning its own interests with those of the community. But in her time in Papua, Bader came to admire that commitment and concern from Browne and BP. Even though 127 families is a relatively small number to resettle, Browne directed the team to find an alternative to forcing anyone to move. When no other method seemed feasible, he reluctantly agreed but instructed the team to use the highest international standards during the resettlement.

The Tangguh project was completed successfully, without incident and with great care for the local community, according to Bader. During her two years in Papua, Bader came to understand the realities and subtleties of corporate idealism. Unlike activists working for Greenpeace or Amnesty International, she had to find a way to push her agenda while accepting the inevitable compromises. BP is in the business of making money, first and foremost, and there are countless sensitivities in that endeavor that require a deft touch and a resilient but open mind. For example, two independent consultants wrote a 60-page report on the human rights implications of the project. Bader believed the entire study should have been made public. Instead, the company released a two-page summary. She had to live with it.

In the end, an independent advisory panel, chaired by former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell, concluded that: "Support for the project is strong among both Papuans and local leaders. Although some complaints exist, there is unanimous appreciation

for the consultations among Papuans in which BP has engaged and for the specific tangible benefits that Tangguh has already brought to the area."

On the heels of that accomplishment, Bader moved quickly to another challenging project in China, which achieved similar results. After a short return to the London office, she embarked on an extended tenure working with John Ruggie, the United Nations secretary-general's special representative on business and human rights. This seemed like another dream job for a corporate idealist, and Bader jumped with her usual zeal.

Then, as she writes, "Big oil broke my heart." The Deepwater Horizon blowout was the perfect storm of a corporate disaster for BP. The explosion on the oil rig killed 11 workers, and the resulting spill flooded

the waters of the Gulf with nonstop gushers of oil. Browne had long since left the company. Tony Hayward, his successor, managed to turn the PR nightmare that was the oil spill into an even worse scandal. BP was excoriated in the media. And even though Bader no longer worked for the company, she was devastated by its response to the crisis.

"My former employer was portrayed not as kind and caring but manipulative and murderous, more Macbeth than Romeo,"

Bader writes. Bader had to rethink her values and motivation. Was she naïve? Was she delusional or unrealistic? "Is our love of big business justified or misguided?" she asked herself.

To answer those questions, Bader reached out to kindred spirits at a wide variety of multinational companies to gain their insights and troll for understanding. The upside of Bader's book is that she pursues an honest and open dialogue about the mixed experiences of the would-be reformers and quiet revolutionaries who share their stories. Most remain steadfast while professing frustration with the incremental nature of their efforts. Big companies should do good because it is the right thing, not because it is good for business. But only the naïve have such expectations of the global business world. For Bader, the honeymoon is over in her love affair with the private sector. But "despite the failings of big business," she writes, "I find myself still optimistic about its ability to make a positive difference in the world." /

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