

Adonis Hoffman

Global Transformation through Corporate Citizenship

His mother was a seamstress and his father was a construction worker, neither of whom made it past high school. Still, education was of paramount importance in the Hoffman family, and Adonis always knew he would go to college. From his father he drew a strong sense of grounding, and from his mother he drew the power of dreaming. And later, after seeing the world and the mechanics of its functioning, he would cement a sense of responsibility that extends far beyond the individual, and farther still beyond the impact of government. Now the Managing Director of Leadership Counsel, a unique and innovative firm poised at the cutting edge of corporate responsibility and reputation consultancy, Adonis Hoffman uses each and every experience in his vast arsenal of memory to address the escalating importance of corporations to act as positive and accountable entities in the today's global landscape.

As Adonis describes, an astounding 35 of the world's top economies are corporations, ranking higher than many countries and governments and thus suggesting that business now wields a certain power in society that was once reserved for governments and nation-states. With this tremendous power, however, comes tremendous responsibility. To date, Adonis's work has been a nuanced and comprehensive approach to guiding this reality in a positive, compelling, and unprecedented direction, with Leadership Counsel aiding clients in defining comprehensive corporate responsibility solutions.

At its essence, corporate responsibility is the way companies adhere to certain principles, policies, and practices that affect the way they do business. With an implicit link to local or even global communities, it pertains to the manner in which a company contributes time, resources, and talent—in short, how a company conducts itself as

a citizen within society. Encapsulating areas such as philanthropy, accountability, citizenship, diversity, and ethics, it is ultimately the act of doing business with a respect and appreciation for the industry and community in which it thrives, acting in the best interest of “the whole” even if such integrity warrants a larger price tag for the company itself.

And yet, while the immediate cost of being a responsible corporate citizen may appear larger at face value, current research indicates that the choice to commit to such ethical standards is a marketing tool that has gained momentum as consumers adopt a larger sense of responsibility of their own. Studies indicate that more consumers are looking for corporations to be responsible citizens in our society, actively giving back to both the local and global community. “All things being equal,” Adonis explains, “companies are often distinguished from competition based on the nature of their commitment to corporate responsibility.” Research even indicates that some consumers are willing to pay more for a product that guarantees such values.

The other primary crux of Leadership Counsel's service model is its focus on corporate reputation. Of course, it seems only logical that every company should be concerned about the image it portrays to the outside world in terms of the quality and value it boasts, the way it treats employees, and the ways in which it gives back to the community. However, actually advocating these principles is easier said than done. In this sense, corporate reputation is inextricably linked with corporate responsibility. Leadership Counsel, then, aims to assist organizations of all sizes to understand, implement, and then market these issues in a more efficient and effective way.

“For companies that are on a sound trajectory and even those that are not, we believe we can bring some leadership and counsel to their



management team, executives, and boards,” Adonis explains. “I truly believe that businesses in American society are fundamentally a good thing, creating opportunity, wealth, and prosperity. However, businesses also get a bad reputation when they neglect to do the right thing. The goal of Leadership Counsel, then, is to bring a multifaceted frame of reference to the issues at hand that will help a company do its work better through accomplishing its objective of being a better corporate entity and of getting proper credit from appropriate third parties.” In essence, the consultancy serves to help leaders chart the course from their current latitude and longitude to where they hope to be, lending value to society and benefitting communities along the way.

Adonis first launched Leadership Counsel as a two-person consulting firm in 1997, collaborating with his partner, Victor Frazer, a long-standing friend, lawyer, and former member of the U.S. Congress with extensive experience in interior corporate dynamics. “Because we’re so small, it’s very important to us that the service we provide is strategy and not implementation,” Adonis stresses. “Unlike a PR firm, we don’t write press releases, develop media, or address campaigning. Rather, our unique selling proposition is our commitment to providing the overall strategy.” This is done through meetings with a company’s C-level executives to present key decision makers with strategic outlines and observations—sometimes highly-sensitive—about their business and market.

A typical strategy might set out guidelines and advice for developing important relationships with environmental groups, activists, academics, think tanks, civil rights organizations, community leaders, and policymakers, for example. It might then be followed with instructions and suggestions for communicating messages to important influentials in government, media and industry. Adonis could not hope to provide the lenses necessary to accomplish such a sweeping task, however, without an extraordinary background and wealth of industry experience to inform his perspective—a journey that began in childhood but was continued after his graduation from Princeton University.

The year was 1976, and he had completed a management training program at Bank of America in California and accepted a full-time position there. He worked at the bank for a year

before seizing an opportunity to explore his interest in local and state politics that had originally been ignited by a high school internship with Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley. With that, he joined the staff of the Lieutenant Governor of California, Mervyn Dymally, the state's first African American to hold that office. This experience exposed Adonis to people whose involvement in community issues and interests lent a lasting sense of public service to his repertoire of interests, explaining much of his commitment today. He then remained in state government for four years until Governor Dymally ran successfully for Congress in 1980.

With this victory, Adonis accepted the invitation to move to Washington and work for the new Congressman on Capitol Hill as his Legislative Director, attending night classes at Georgetown University Law Center at the same time. Coming to the nation's capital opened the young man's eyes to both national and international issues, and in 1984, he left the Hill to work for Gray and Company, a predominantly Republican lobbying and public communications firm representing foreign governments and large companies. As one of the firm's few Democrats, he recalls that much of his work was involved in helping these clients present a better public image and improve their reputations on Capitol Hill. “I sometimes felt as though we glossed over things, and I wanted to provide something deeper, more tangible, more solid,” Adonis explains.

After finishing law school in 1986, he practiced law at a national law firm as a legislative, regulatory and corporate lawyer, until he again answered the call of government service in 1990. The Congressman he originally worked for had become Chairman of a key subcommittee on the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and wanted Adonis to serve as the staff director, which he eagerly accepted. In this capacity, he had the extraordinary opportunity to travel extensively throughout Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Though his journeys were fraught with wonder, he also found the repeated exposure to abject poverty to be life-changing. “You can’t see something like that and walk away unaffected,” he explains. “I wanted to make a change through my career somehow, but I didn’t know exactly what to do yet.”

When the Congressman retired in 1993, Adonis returned to law practice but couldn’t shake

the urge to do policy work, so he found his way into the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a leading foreign policy think tank in Washington, where he focused on democracy, governance and international law, especially in Africa and developing countries. It was only after leaving Carnegie that he felt he had acquired the plethora of experience necessary to launch a successful firm, and with that, Leadership Counsel was born.

It is interesting to note that, in its fledgling stages, Leadership Counsel also focused on foreign government development, assisting countries as they attempted to develop effective communications with Washington and as they worked through massive societal shifts. In several instances, for example, Adonis assembled teams to go to newly-democratic countries to observe their elections, providing guidance and reports for how to improve their constitutions and commercial code.

In 1997, as a result of his international work, Adonis received an invitation from the Chairman of the FCC, Bill Kennard, to work on the chairman's new international initiative to bring transparency and accountability to developing countries in the areas of communications.. "I really appreciated this opportunity because it launched me into international communications work, and from there I was able to move into communications policy and merger work involving cable and internet companies regulated through the FCC," he recalls. He left the FCC in 2000 to serve as Senior Vice President and legal counsel for the American Association of Advertising Agencies for eleven years, whence he returned to Leadership Counsel with—quite literally—a world's worth of new knowledge and skill. He then began marketing the company as a strategic management consultancy with its current niche focus, shifting away from the broader interests it had pursued previously.

Despite all his travel and experience, however, Adonis insists that the attitude of altruism and stewardship so prevalent in his mission was instilled long ago by the institutions and experiences most familiar to America's youth: his high school, his church, and a sweeping generational mentality. "I came of age in the 1970s during a time fertile with debate about the role of government and business in society," he recalls. "You can't divorce the spirit of the times from your

own experience, and I always felt that I had to do something with some redeeming social value with my life. It wasn't until I got older that I figured out how to combine my need to contribute to society with my need for a sustaining profession that would provide both the social impact and financial independence I hoped for."

In advising young entrepreneurs entering the workforce today, then, Adonis recommends a considerable devotion of time to analyzing one's personal values and their roots. A reflective exercise of this nature will assist in solidifying one's character and will thus be instrumental in the subsequent use of these values to identify a career that will allow them to be expressed professionally. "After all, beauty is only skin deep, but character goes all the way to the bone," Adonis quotes.

And isn't that what it's all about, after all? Not a sense of detached responsibility, not a mere façade kept in the interest of attracting the growing socially-minded consumer population for personal gain, but an ideology sunk into the very framework of a corporate entity? Adonis's latest book, entitled *Doing Good: The New Rules of Corporate Responsibility, Conscience, and Character*, was published in the fall of 2010, but his vision of making this ideal a mainstream mainstay doesn't stop there. Indeed, the publication is only the most recent installment as the impact of a legacy begins to flesh out: one in which the commercial players shaping our societies today are challenged to move beyond basic corporate responsibility and toward an evolution of true conscience and character.

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to

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