

A disconnect between business and purpose

By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Trevyn McGowan, co-founder of Business of Design and the Guild Group, opened day one of Business of Design in Johannesburg this morning, 18 October, reflecting on the past year, which has been an extraordinary year for them with new ventures and a massive amount of hiring in a short space of time.



Trevyn McGowan, co-founder of Business of Design and the Guild Group.

The Guild Group has grown from a team of six to 36, so they've had to implement corporate structures, but not just to follow standard practice, but do things differently, remaining true to vision and offering value. McGowan said we have to keep in mind who we are and what we're trying to do in this world or articulate to our audience. The gist of her message is that we should be trying to find our own space and nuances, so we don't clutter the world with the same old things.

Next up was Gordon Cook, founder of Stir4Change and co-founder of Vega School of Brand Leadership, who spoke about rethinking almost everything about how business should operate, specifically with regard to brand activism.

Cook believes the reasons we aren't content with the way things are on a micro and macro level have to do with patriarchy and power hierarchy, too narrow a focus or blinkered thinking, self-centredness, denialism and disconnectedness. There's a disconnect between purpose and metrics (that relate to share value and a dashboard to attract and retain investors). "How we measure the purpose begins a huge disconnect," he said. "Purpose is put aside and its return to shareholder becomes the real metric, and other dashboard metrics that are all about finance."

There's also a disconnect between people as assets, and who gets paid the most and receives the mega bonuses. A disconnect between products/services adding meaningful value, and smoke and mirror over-promised value claiming (such as the latest Dove ad). A disconnect between state expenditure and the state of society, and between state services and businesses.



Gordon Cook, founder of Stir4Change; co-founder: Vega School of Brand Leadership.



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Creating private healthcare and education, security services and gated communities is not a solution, he said. This is disconnection, self-centredness and denialism or a refusal to be activists. And corruption abounds in both the private and public sector. SOEs are bankrupt, South Africa is growing at less than 1% per annum, unemployment is near 30%, and 94% of public high schools offer no creative subject. Art has become an extra subject for the elite. With that said, JSE-listed companies are hitting week-on-week record training levels, and corporate CEO bonuses are regularly reported at over R20m, meanwhile the constitution, the courts and civil organisations work hard to ensure glimpses of equality.

The reality is that society is a complex system of interlinked cogs: public, private and not-for-profit organisations; so businesses need to rejig their metrics, revisit power structures, become learning organisations, create a new dashboard of metrics more aligned to purpose than profit, and CEOs and boards need more conscience-based decision making. Ask yourself, "What are we trying to do, what is our ethical standpoint and then how are we going to make money?"

Businesses must become part of a broader and common vision of an alternative, human-centric society, and in order to do this they have to collaborate much more to have a meaningful impact on the broader society.

Some of the questions Cook posed are: “Can we make social justice the lodestar that will help revive our humanity? What should the public/private sector partnership look like? How do we generate more mutual respect? What should be the public sectors dashboard of metrics and how do these align with the private sector?”

He believes the answers to these lie in brands engaging with relevant broader social/economic issues beyond CSI Band-Aid, government making the private sector environment far more enabling, and a responsible alignment towards sustainable human-centric change. "This is our priority before and beyond politics. Collaboration and activism is the road out. Disconnection and self-interest will take us over the cliff. And business, plus brands, plus civil organisations, plus public services equals vehicles working in tandem to achieve social justice. So the question is really, can we and do we want to work together for the greater good of society?

That's just a taste of the current flavour of design-thinking. [Click here](#) for our Business of Design coverage, and be sure to follow [@busofdesign](#) for the latest updates.

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