

Corporate Foundations: Culture, Territory and Social Responsibility

by Tommaso Fanfani

On Friday November 6th 2009 in Pontedera, the Piaggio Foundation organized a seminar on the theme *Corporate Foundations: Culture, Territory and Social Responsibility*. The seminar, which took place at its headquarters, marked the 15th anniversary of the foundation's establishment. Representatives of many Italian corporate foundations were present and the discussion took up several of the topics introduced at the previous seminar, organized by the Aem Foundation on May 8th 2009.

Following the welcome by the local authorities as well as the representative of Museimpresa, I opened the workshop by listing the main issues that most frequently concern corporate foundations, companies and the managers of cultural projects initiated by the companies themselves. These include:

- Corporate foundations and territory: what is the relation between the two entities? How can the foundation's engagement be optimized in terms of society's expectations of the company. Should culture, training and the principle of subsidiarity be included among the foundation's activities that are available to the territory? Should (or could) the foundation's *governance* be affected by its involvement with the territory?

- In the experience of Piaggio (but also in other cultural projects initiated by businesses), the foundation organizes and manages the company museum and historical archives, thus valorizing the historical patrimony of a company as well as that of the surrounding territory and its community. The foundation acts to promote a sense of belonging on the part of workers, employees, managers and entrepreneurs. Does this constitute a "foundation model" to be pursued or is it an external "display" that may not always be in line with the strategies of the company itself?

- In the relations between corporate foundation and company, the foundation is the cultural "rib" of the company. Therefore, despite its belonging to the brand, it has a non-profit role of promoting the intangible values of the company. What are the operational restrictions between a foundation and its company? Can a foundation keep its independence in the face of the current financial crisis or during a change of ownership and/or of the company structure?

- Finally, the company's investments in cultural foundations are entitled to special tax privileges. Corporate foundations can coordinate and optimize the benefits provided by national legislation. Is it then possible to imagine a "corporate foundation association" where people can discuss organizational, cultural and strategic issues?

After the introduction, Stefano Baia Curioni and Giuseppe Paletta, in their remarkable presentations, specified first of all, the theme of “Business and Culture”, dealing clearly and constructively with how foundations can work effectively in the field of cultural and artistic events promotion. Curioni stressed the need to plan these activities in line with available resources and with a view to promoting artistic events or sponsorships adequate to the high standard of the foundation that bears the company name. To accomplish these goals, resources, clearly defined projects and far-reaching vision are necessary.

Giuseppe Paletta retraced the path of Italian corporate foundations, drawing attention to the numerous difficulties as well as the needs of planning and operational interaction between foundations and companies. He pointed out the contribution they can make to the growth of cultural sensitivity for companies and especially, for the territory. The cultural institutions of firms, regardless of sector, endeavour to perceive the expectations of employees, along with those of local institutions, local authorities and stakeholders in general. Corporate foundations should be fostered by the company but the sources that create this type of institution can be different, as in the case of foundations promoted by the employees themselves. The success or the failure of the foundation depends greatly on the initial impulse.

All participants contributed by sharing their own experiences, and examining and comparing their ideas. Several concrete proposals towards the creation of a “corporate foundation association” were put on the table.

Alberto Sciumè, in his closing remarks, underlined the need for coordinating efforts so that corporate foundations can exercise their cultural role on behalf of the companies they represent, towards the territory and towards the expectations of all stakeholders.

The day ended with the prospect of a further opportunity for debate in where, as in the previous seminars in Milan on May 8th 2009 and Pontedera on November 6th 2009, new ideas and proposals are gathered with the aim of creating a forum for all foundations to find common ground for comparison, knowledge and planning.