

MONSANTO, MMR OR TIGER WOODS? THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CLIMATEGATE

How can we make sense of Climategate? For the past few years there was a growing consensus in business and government that climate change was a tough problem, but was real and needed tackling. Companies from BP to Wal-Mart to Tata had it high on their list of priority issues.

Then Climategate broke in late November 2009. Emails hacked from the University of East Anglia's Climatic Research Unit, and revelations about lost and undisclosed climate data became the crucible for a resurgence of doubt about the science of climate change. A week later, the Copenhagen Climate Conference began and disappointment with its outcomes fanned the flames of climate change denial. The consensus that climate change is pulling us all into what Al Gore called the Age of Consequences suddenly seems at risk as the blogosphere and parts of the mainstream media echo with shouts of fraud, scam and hoax. What are the different voices saying and whose should we believe?

Science, non-science or nonsense?

The first thing to note is that this is not really a disagreement over the science. If the science is fundamentally flawed, that is bad news for science as a whole for reasons I'll come to shortly. But it is very good news for everyone else because all the predictions of ecological collapse and the need to fundamentally overhaul the global economy will have been proved wrong. However, to get to that point, we will need evidence that a) greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide do not trap infrared radiation, thereby risking raising the earth's temperature; b) these gases are not and will not be increasing in the atmosphere; c) when atmospheric carbon dioxide and oceanic acidity increase, this is of no plausible concern to humanity; and d) these increases do not cause rising temperatures.

Current climate change science provides overwhelming evidence that all of the above are untrue. A convincing rebuttal of climate change science would need to prove that evidence wrong, and there is no sign of this happening.

However, if Climategate is not really about the veracity of the science, what is it about? A lot of scientists and what Climategate bloggers would call their groupies in the media say this is essentially an argument between science and nonsense. However, I think it is best understood as a non-science argument about science in society. And it is exactly for this reason that Climategate matters for business managers: because they need to make sense of the squabbles over climate change, but also because in a world where the licence to operate is crucial to business, Climategate has many lessons to tell. Managers need to understand what Climategate represents. Let us examine four possibilities.

Interpretation 1: a Shoeless Joe Moment

In early twentieth century USA, baseball symbolized all that was great about the American Dream. So when one of its heroes, Shoeless Joe Jackson, took a bribe to throw the 1919 World Series baseball championship, not only did his reputation die, that dream itself was irrevocably tarnished.

There are many in the blogosphere who believe Climategate is a Shoeless Joe moment; when a widely held scientific belief is discredited, and trust in science evaporates. As noted earlier, refuted data about a Himalayan glacier and disputes about the significance of the Medieval Warm Period are not a body blow to the scientific consensus on climate change. However, if the consensus were shattered, a Shoeless Joe moment would have profound consequences for the credibility of normative science as a whole, making recent battles over stem-cell research and vaccines seem like playground scuffles. Any firm whose credibility hinged on normative science (from healthcare to foods to insurance) would feel the repercussions.

Interpretation 2: a MMR Moment

The Spectator's Matt Ridley portrays Climategate as a Shoeless Joe moment when science itself is in turmoil. Perhaps, but there are other interpretations. The MMR vaccine scandal is still fresh in our minds, and demonstrates how a small group of scientists can use bad research on an emotive topic to cripple the scientific status quo and significantly influence public opinion over a long period of time. The rebel scientists are portrayed as heroes, and their struggle plays on laypeople's concerns that there is a conniving scientific elite willing to hide the truth from the public to serve its own interests.

Climategate feels a lot like a MMR moment: a struggle between a complacent scientific establishment and heroic outsiders battling to expose the fallacy of global warming. One difference is that many in that 'establishment' were until fairly recently outsiders, struggling for years to build what eventually became the International Panel on Climate Change's scientific consensus on global warming. Like a political party that spends so long in opposition that it is confused about what to do when it gets into power, these scientists are bemused to find themselves portrayed as insiders and elitist. The fact that the scientific consensus ultimately may be proved correct is little comfort if a decade or more of opportunity to tackle climate change is lost. It would be a period when investment in the innovation and financial mechanisms of a Green New Deal would stutter, the intellectual capital required to take on climate change's challenges would be diverted elsewhere, and perhaps most damagingly the incentivizing of high carbon economies would continue with industries from cement, to oil, to airlines paying none of their environmental costs.

Interpretation 3: a Monsanto moment

When you Google your company's name and the first images that come up are skulls and gas masks you know you have a problem. This is the world of agrochemical company Monsanto: rich and innovative, yet in the eyes of many despised and distrusted. Monsanto has been at the

The Climategate Moment – Mick Blowfield

forefront of important scientific innovation, housed a Nobel prize-winning chemist, and is a leader in genetically modified seeds. Its involvement and behaviour in the latter is what has made it the whipping boy of a very effective, prolonged campaign that has generated doubt about the efficacy of genetically modified organisms, and significantly influenced government policy and consumer behaviour.

Unlike a Shoeless Joe moment when a whole body of science is proved wrong, or a MMR moment when an alternative (if ultimately bogus) theory gains acceptance, a Monsanto moment is only partly about scientific truth. In fact, scientific research may only seem a sub-plot in a much grander story about the influence of corporations, the relationship between business and government, the purpose of scientific discovery, the ownership of ideas, the public's right to reject innovation, and Man's relationship to the environment.

These are all themes in the Climategate story, and there are other similarities that lend weight to the idea we are in a Monsanto moment. First, in both the GM and climate change cases there is sufficient confusing or conflicting information to sustain a concerted assault by campaigners. Second, in both cases scientists are perceived as hubristic and arrogant in their treatment of public concerns (and have limited success in communicating effectively, often blaming the press and public for their ignorance). Third, the protesters capture and hold the moral high ground (not least through good communications). Fourth, those protesters experience no direct benefit or pain from their actions, i.e. they are not the people most at threat from, for instance, food poverty or the impact of rising temperatures.

There are clearly many parallels between GM protests and Climategate, and looking at how the two movements have developed reveals the importance of confusion and dissent. Planting small seeds of doubt into debates about complex issues is an established political strategy, and is something well-organized campaigners are trained to do. Monsanto, despite its wealth of PR experience, struggled to deal with these guerilla tactics, so it is not surprising that career scientists

(many of whom may be asking what PR stands for) can appear goonish in dealing with the well-rehearsed media strategies evident in Climategate. Perhaps more unexpected is that environmental groups, versed in web-based campaigns, have also been caught out by their opponents.

Interpretation 4: a Tiger Woods moment

Shoeless Joe, MMR and Monsanto all offer important insights about what is happening with Climategate. However, there is a fourth interpretation. Tiger Woods is a great golfer: the best of his generation. But Tiger Woods became much more than a golfer: he became a brand, one of the biggest brands in world sport. Woods came to define the intrepid quest of the senior manager (Accenture), character (TAGHeuer), performance (Gatorade), and victory (Nike). I doubt if Woods had much involvement in building that brand other than cashing the cheques; but when his personal life hit the headlines in 2009, he was judged by the values in the brand that had been constructed around him – a brand that came crashing down, taking him with it.

Climate change also became a brand, one that was built around a strong scientific consensus. Emboldened (as only outsiders can be) by their new found status as visionaries, climate change scientists plunged into public policy, ethics, culture, and economics. Many politicians, journalists, civil society groups, and business leaders listened, and in their own ways created the brand. Brand Climate Change grew, and became as values-driven as it was evidence-based.

Scientists did not build this brand, although some were happy to contribute, often by talking on issues about which they were as naïve as they were assertive. But the brand was irrevocably connected to the science just as Brand Tiger was welded to golf. In a Tiger moment, it is not Climategate's assault on the science that matters as much as the accompanying serious blows delivered to policy, public opinion, private sector attitude, and all of the other elements of 'non-science' that ultimately combine to legitimize any scientific belief, and without which scientific beliefs cannot be harnessed to influence human behaviour.

Where do we stand?

I leave it open to the reader to consider which of these moments we are living through. Like any analogy, they are a caricature not a photographic representation of what is happening. But they show the dangers of misinterpreting Climategate. There is danger for science, for politicians, and for society in reaching the wrong conclusions about Climategate. But the danger for managers should not be underestimated. There may be many in the business community breathing a sigh of relief that Climategate offers an excuse to wait. After all, if the scientists aren't certain and governments cannot agree, why should the private sector stick its neck out? I would agree that the uncertainty Climategate was fuelled makes it harder for business to know what to do, but in each of the four moments set out above, inaction is as damaging as wrong action. Business might regret the new levels of uncertainty, but it cannot look to others to find the way out.

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