

# Rhetoric versus reality – managing the Olympic ideal

All the talk surrounding the ethical and sustainability credentials of the London Olympics must now become action according to Leo Martin of GoodCorporation.

**There is no bigger brand than the Olympic Games – the five interlocking rings form one of the world's most well-known logos, recognised by around 90 per cent of the global population. They symbolise the high ideals of the Olympic movement: sportsmanship, equality, peaceful international relations and fair competition.**

However, Olympics Games of the last few years seem to have lost sight of these high ideals. The cost explosion of staging an Olympics has taken the event a long way from the original idea of building international relationships through the celebration of amateur sport. A recent *Panorama* programme revealed an International Olympic Committee member telling the BBC that member votes could be secured in exchange for financial favours.

But potential corruption is not the only thing that is damaging the Olympic ideal – the price of winning is driving athletes to enhance their performance through drugs and the actual cost of staging an Olympics appears to be out of control. The original budget of £2.4bn for the 2012 Olympics is already at £9bn. The resulting pressures on time and finances can lead to contractors paying scant attention to sound business practice. The FIFA World Cup was marred by the revelation that exploited children in Pakistan had stitched the footballs.

The London Olympics must take real steps to ensure that the rhetoric matches the reality and that the staging of the event matches the ideals of the movement.


Are there really robust systems in place to check how the money is being spent? Not just who is being paid for what, but how do the companies that supply the Olympic Games really behave? Are contractors and subcontractors treating their employees fairly? Do workers have the appropriate training? Are they paying the right amount of tax?

After all, it is taxpayers that are footing the bill. Do working and living conditions for contractors comply with health and safety requirements? In Greece the official death toll of construction workers employed to build the site was 14, however, the general secretary of the Greek Construction Workers Union, George Theodorou, told the BBC that he believed the real figure to be much higher.

Are the right steps being taken to protect the environment? David Higgins, chairman of the Olympic Delivery Authority, has said that he wants the 2012 Olympics to be the “greenest games”. What real steps are being

put in place to ensure that this is so? GoodCorporation reviewed the tendering process for the London 2012 Olympics and found that there are gaps in many of these areas. Host nations for the Olympics have a responsibility to ensure that all aspects of Olympic preparation meet the high standards of the Olympic ideal.

Britain should be setting the benchmark with the 2012 Olympic Games by driving standards higher and ensuring that auditing systems are properly established. Not just for contractors but for the suppliers of merchandise, sponsorship and all services to the Olympic Village.

At GoodCorporation, we work with businesses around the world to assess their business practices against the GoodCorporation Standard developed in conjunction with the Institute of Business Ethics. We would like to see those standards applied to the London Olympics. 

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Leo is a founder and director of GoodCorporation. He is the principal character in the BBC series *Good Company, Bad Company* about corporate responsibility and he is also author of *From Principles to Profits* the BBC Learning book about putting corporate responsibility into practice. He graduated in economics and an MPhil from Cambridge University in development economics. He started his

career as a Fellow of the Overseas Development Institute and then went to KPMG where he worked for eight years on economics and strategy for governments and companies worldwide. His clients included AstraZeneca, Rolls-Royce, and EDS as well as a number of departments of government in the UK and Hong Kong. Leo then went on to work for Lord Sharmar, then global chairman of KPMG, where he helped to



establish Britain in Europe, the pro-single currency campaign. Leo is on the Council of London in Europe and the former chair of London First Corporate Citizenship working group.