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Using Communications to Engage Stakeholders in CSR

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Communication transforms intent into action, and decisions into results. Managers who are willing to challenge the view that corporate communication is merely reporting news and events after the fact face a substantial opportunity to use communication as a defining force for their organizations.

Judging by the thousands of corporations who now publish sustainability reports as their standard approach to communicating CSR, many companies still consider communications as simply a means of reporting on plans already laid and incidents that have already happened—taking credit for them in some cases, and offsetting criticism in others.

Even within some areas of corporations themselves, communication is regarded as a kind of hyperbolic satellite function—a necessary evil to keep the shareholders informed and happy, but somewhat beside the point of real professional activity. This may be a common point of view for some members of the corporate community, but used thoughtfully, communication can be an instigator, a motivator, and an agent of real change.

Specifically, communication is the most important tool that can be used to embed CSR into a corporate culture. Communication is critical to the process of engaging and uniting people inside the company to make CSR a reality, and encouraging those outside the company to reward and support its CSR efforts.

Three roles that communication plays

To make the most of communication's potential, it's important to understand the ways in which it is developed and how it works.

1. Definition Whatever “it” is—an idea, a brand, a plan—“it” needs to be clear and compelling. In other words, it needs to be defined in a way that people understand, and recognize how it's different from other ideas, brands, or plans. This is usually the work of one person or a small team, and it's a step that is often skipped or truncated because it's usually the most difficult. It's far easier to be vague than to be original, but avoiding creative discomfort at this stage can mean vague ideas becoming even more vague as they are disseminated. An idea has to have all its required DNA from inception in order to grow strong. The better the definition, the better the execution, without exception.

Definitions can take the form of names, brand promises, and other types of initiative. “Seventh Generation” is a wonderful example of a name that defines a unique concept for a manufacturer of household products. The name refers to the Native American belief that “in our every deliberation we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.” In this case, two words hold the entire unique premise—and promise—of the company, however big and broad it gets.

2. Understanding The next step, and the next role communication plays, is to engender understanding among the relatively small group of stakeholders (usually the management team) that need to make it work. This phase interprets the concept: How does it work? What impact will it have? How long will it take? What will the obstacles be?, and so on. This is the phase where all the issues are discussed, sorted out, and made understandable to everyone who will be involved in the creation of it. In this phase, communication within a small team is used to design a prototype, plan, investigate and vet. We're all familiar with this stage of development.

These are the concept notes, briefs, and strategy documents we look at every day.

3. Engagement This is where communication gets personal. The focus must now be shifted from what the idea is and how it works, to what it means to the people it affects—and most importantly, to the people who need to make it a reality and enrich it with their participation. For any company, a CSR program cannot exist without the commitment of everyone in the organization. Effective communication answers questions about why they should care, how they can be a part of the new initiative, what benefit they will derive from it, and what success will look like.

This phase takes the form of communication programs, either for the company's internal audience (who should always be first), or for customers, potential customers, the public and press. This is also the point at which it is important to identify the emotional core of the idea and use that to create and leverage engaging communications.

One of the biggest challenges for any initiative is the transition that must take place from words on paper—however motivating—to visible, measurable action. This is where the invitation is made, the bridge is built, and the initiative is brought to life by employees and other stakeholders. Effective communication can make it happen.

So don't wait until after your plans are operationalized to communicate them. You'll be ignoring the most effective tool for creating sustainable change.

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