

Why getting staff to believe in firms' commitment to CSR is a process of negotiation

Many organisations are using corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to establish their reputations as responsible employers

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Many organisations are using corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to establish their reputations as responsible employers and so differentiate their brand. Surveys support their approach: in 2004, Stanford Graduate School of Business found that 97 per cent of European MBAs would forego financial benefits to work for a socially responsible firm, while the High Fliers Survey 2006 found the most desirable employer characteristic to be social responsibility.

We set out to discover whether such development schemes actually yield the desired outcomes. We surveyed 30 European high-flyers from a professional services firm who'd attended in-depth leadership development programmes (ranging from seven days to a year) involving CSR. We supplemented this with data on 170 partners from the same firm attending one-day programmes.

Although half of the participants felt more connected with their organisation after these initiatives, almost 60 per cent said they were no more committed to what their organisation stood for.

Half felt no better able to express their feelings and values at work as a result of attending the programmes. This was reinforced by the organisation's apparent failure to meet its end of the CSR bargain. One respondent said that he was "dealing with the reality that what the firm preaches is not what the firm practices".

Similarly, only 30 per cent reported a significant improvement in their sense of social responsibility, while 62 per cent reported little or no improvement in their awareness of the social responsibilities of the organisation.

But these schemes successfully allowed staff to develop a more robust leadership identity. Seventy per cent reported a greater awareness of what kind of leader they wanted to be, while 68 per cent felt more able to express their own "leadership brand". The programmes helped to clarify the obligations of being a leader, with one participant commenting that it gave her "a clear understanding that leading myself is a precondition for leading others".

But the courses did not imbue leaders with a particular cultural or leadership ideology, with almost 60 per cent reporting that they were no clearer about the importance of the leadership approach for the organisation.

The findings suggest that, although using CSR can be a powerful way of creating purpose in people's working lives, there are some specific challenges:

- Organisations must be authentically committed to the sense of meaning they are trying to create. Employees will evaluate this based on the behaviour of their local leadership. So senior managers must demonstrate their concern for the environmental and social impact of the business's activities.
- This also applies to senior managers walking the talk regarding the culture or leadership identity they're trying to imbue.
- Employees will emotionally commit to organisations only to the extent that they feel able to be themselves and express what's important to them at work.
- Identity and meaning cannot be downloaded into employee's heads like software. It requires a process of negotiation in which staff will internalise the organisation's story about how they should be, to the extent that they embrace the values and enact them.

Tim Casserley is director of talent and leadership consultancy Edge Equilibrium
www.edgeequilibrium.com

Key points

- Organisations must be authentically committed to the sense of meaning they are trying to create.
- Senior managers must be active programme sponsors.
- Employees will emotionally commit only to the extent they feel able to be and express themselves.
- Identity and meaning can be internalised, but only through negotiation.