



Deep reflection, broad collaboration — the route to transformative CSR

Judith Tavanyar looks at the reasons why organisations embark upon CSR programmes and at how they can make them meaningful.

Leading an in-house management training programme recently, I overheard a brief conversation between two participants about the state of their organisation's corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme. "They've given it such high profile, but no one except the Board really knows why they're doing it," said one. "Yes — and talk about a token gesture," said the other. "If only they practised those values in the actual organisation, we'd all be benefitting." Dry laughter followed.

Comments like these, although dispiriting, may not be uncommon — even at a time of global economic upheaval, when more and more organisations feel the need, often for highly laudable reasons, to think about corporate responsibility objectives.

CSR initiatives can not only show an organisation's understanding and commitment to the important role it can play as a "corporate benefactor" and resource within the wider community; they can also demonstrate the values that "make it tick", that energise and motivate employees to give their best. CSR is, in essence, about organisations "giving back" in meaningful ways to the social and environmental systems in which they exist and, most importantly, upon which they themselves depend for support and resources of all kinds.

Yet, if the reasons for embracing CSR in corporate life are diverse, there are also important indicators that many initiatives fall short of the mark. A recent report highlights that focus on adopting CSR initiatives is rising, and that there is a "clear opportunity" for HR practitioners to embrace the challenge and the considerable corporate and community benefits that CSR can offer. The report also sounds a note of caution: that CSR initiatives "need to be owned by all functions" so that they can be embedded meaningfully throughout an organisation and within its "wider value chain" — not simply left at the door of HR personnel as their domain of expertise, and therefore, ultimately, their unique responsibility.

Jeroen van Lawick is Managing Director of *Zijn Werkt!* — a Netherlands-based training and consulting company with a strong vision and track record in supporting organisations in setting up and delivering corporate responsibility programmes. He considers that there are many reasons why organisations sometimes get CSR wrong; by failing to engage understanding and commitment throughout the organisation, or by spending too little time considering what they seek to achieve, and most importantly, why.

"Meaningful CSR programmes need to involve a shared sense of purpose and heartfelt engagement from individuals and teams at all levels," he says. "Without that, they risk becoming initiatives driven by the Board of Directors or HR departments, in isolation from the rest of the organisation."

Van Lawick underlines how, in some organisations, the idea of CSR has too often been viewed as a specialist function within corporate life. "It may seem an obvious point, but what truly adds meaning to CSR is not just about, say, creating technological or environmental advancements within the community, but something more essential —

finding ways to build positive, supportive long-term relationships with other people, some of whom may be quite different from ourselves. In other words, it is about collaboration and understanding — the human factor.”

Van Lawick believes that, in their urgent wish to drive ahead change, some organisations spend too little time reflecting in depth upon what they wish to achieve, and move far too rapidly to what seems like a useful solution. He speaks about the corporate tendency to seek to create an impact swiftly and powerfully, to take action, to “do” things far too early. “The corollary to that tendency is that if you are not always ‘doing’ something within an organisation, then you’re ‘just being lazy’,” he says.

But what, in these times of severely pressurised deadlines and time-starved executives, does just “being” amount to as a significant phase of any CSR programme, and what can it achieve? Talking to Van Lawick, it becomes clear that his ideas on the role of “being”, or standing back from rapid action in corporate life, are far from equivalent to simple laziness or a “go slow” mentality. They describe a purposeful stance of intense reflection among individuals and teams that can serve to highlight key values and human needs, the motivational drives and sense of purpose that sustain people in their work and help them perform at their best.

He tells a story about running a CSR workshop previously with a consultant firm that had already produced its own report on corporate responsibility, but which experienced stagnation in advancing the CSR programme with customers.

“Without engaging with the values and deep sense of purpose of individuals throughout the organisation, the initiative could never really gain energy but was experienced as something ‘passed on’ from the Board of Directors,” says Van Lawick. “As a result, the ‘doing’ part, or implementation, seemed to have limited relevance for many, as the proposed actions were based on values and ideals that did not ‘speak to’ people on a personal level.”

In this instance, Van Lawick invited individuals to summarise and note down all the values that the company envisioned, and then to take time to reflect on and highlight those corporate values that touched each participant personally. This was followed by some intense dialogue in pairs, where each person took it in turns to listen deeply to the other regarding how he or she would bring those specific chosen values to life in their own professional role.

According to Van Lawick, this stage of reflection, bringing values to life, is essential and precedes a phase of developing concrete, practical actions by each participant.

This way of working presents many possibilities for HR professionals tasked with the role of introducing and sustaining the development of corporate responsibility programmes in their organisations. Furthermore, as Van Lawick sees it, the skills required to do so are highly practical ones.

“Developing a truly transformative CSR programme is, to a great extent, about learning to listen deeply,” he says. “It is also about bringing people together through a variety of processes and getting them to describe and discuss their ideals; what matters to them. It is about enabling a process of reflection, dialogue and collaboration that slows down the rush to ‘just get on with it’, that corporate drive which so often results in misplaced objectives, or ‘stuck-on’ initiatives which do not genuinely relate to company values. Above all, it is to invite people to temporarily suspend their judgments about what the company ‘should’ be doing in the wider community, and to look again with fresh eyes as individuals and teams at their values, and how they might bring these powerfully and practically to life.”

Van Lawick refers to “transformative” corporate responsibility, whereby HR personnel can be supportive in becoming strong process leaders for truly meaningful CSR initiatives, enabling them to build effective networks across organisations for reflection and dialogue — through consultation groups, training activities, “open space” discussion forums, and so on. This is evidently a far cry from the specialist “design and implement” perspective, where CSR stays neatly but often meaninglessly packaged within the expert remit of one department or function.

“Shared purpose, heartfelt engagement, transformative action in CSR follows from supporting individuals to surface

and align their own and collective corporate values, and to focus on appropriate processes for bringing their ideas into being,” says Van Lawick. “Without that, corporate responsibility is reduced to a number of nice documents gathering dust in a filing cabinet; not a practical, collaborative and passionately-espoused strategy for translating shared ideals into community action.”

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