

# Beyond PR: Embedding Social Responsibility in Organizations through People

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to provide a guide for embedding CSR in the people of an organization through effective Talent Management practices. We see multiple applications for this article: as a roadmap for those embarking on a new mission to truly embed CSR in their companies; as a diagnostic framework for fixing problematic CSR programs or transforming a peripheral program into an embedded one; and as a means for HR practitioners to justify a seat at the senior leadership table for the planning and execution of robust CSR initiatives.

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## **Introduction**

Aguinis and Glavas (2013) present a helpful, research-based framework for classifying the range of corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts in which organizations engage. As career-long practitioners, we seek to extend their work by describing the key activities needed to truly embed CSR within an organization. Our central position is that this can only be done through people, and to do so through people requires engaging in a robust, comprehensive program of Talent Management. CSR efforts that are executed without engaging in the full spectrum of Talent Management activities illustrated in Figure 1 run the risk of ending up as notable but still peripheral initiatives at best or transparently inauthentic public relations ploys at worst. Organizations will actively seek to avoid the latter. The former, however, can arise out of otherwise good intentions and are worth exploring further.

In the second author's experience, many organizations engage in some of the Talent Management activities at the periphery of this framework. They may gather key leaders to craft stirring, action-oriented vision statements and articulate their CSR objectives (*Envision and Strategize*). They may commission entirely new workgroups and positions to drive those CSR objectives (*Design Work and Workplaces*). They may send out engagingly written memos and present compellingly on the company's important new CSR stance (*Engage and Motivate*). These all look like important activities, and they are, but they aren't enough if the goal is to truly embed CSR. Without including staffing, assessment, training, and performance evaluation types of activities, such window dressing stands little chance of enduringly shaping the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the people who make daily choices about social responsibility for the organization. Without extending CSR into the mainstream, routine activities of the organization, its relevance and impact potential is condemned to a functional silo handled by 'someone else.' Unless CSR is thoroughly instilled in the hearts and minds of the

population that makes up an organization, it is in danger of being a casualty of the inevitable, unyielding pressure that comes from the regime changes, budget cuts, and downsizing demands most companies will face.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to provide a guide for embedding CSR in the people of an organization through effective Talent Management practices. We see multiple applications for this article: as a roadmap for those embarking on a new mission to truly embed CSR in their companies; as a diagnostic framework for fixing problematic CSR programs or transforming a peripheral program into an embedded one; and as a means for HR practitioners to justify a seat at the senior leadership table for the planning and execution of robust CSR initiatives. Figure 1 provides a framework of Talent Management areas to target when seeking to embed CSR in an organization.



*Figure 1 – Talent Management Framework for Embedding Social Responsibility in Organizations*

In the sections that follow, we will describe key activities to engage in for each Talent Management area.

### **Envision & Strategize**

For CSR to truly take hold, it is vital that top management champion such programs (Daily & Huang, 2001). Organizations enter into CSR initiatives for a variety of reasons (Bansal & Roth, 2000). Whatever their original motivations, it is important to start by assembling a representative, cross-functional team to shape and drive such efforts. Doing so enables the sometimes competing functional interests of an organization to be voiced

and creatively worked through to each stakeholder's satisfaction (see Deller, Schieders, & Titzrath (2012) for an example of how Daimler AG enabled such a cross-functional partnership). From there, the senior team should articulate its CSR-specific vision, mission, and strategic objectives. It may help to conduct or review benchmarking studies that provide insight into the comparative CSR efforts that the organization's competitors and industry have undertaken. It may also be worthwhile to evaluate the organization's culture and climate (Levinson, 2002) for its receptivity to CSR values and practices. The resulting strategic objectives must then be translated into actionable tactics and behaviors that enable employees to execute with clarity of purpose. Key to the ongoing success of any CSR effort is an effective measurement and reporting framework, such as The G4 Guidelines (2013). Care should be taken to ensure the metrics used to monitor and report on these initiatives are soundly measured, appropriately collected, and clearly interpreted. For some organizations, this may include sharing reporting frameworks with partners and suppliers to ensure alignment with the company's own CSR stances and objectives. Walmart's sustainability supplier assessment, for example, provides tools and a structure to support internal reporting for its suppliers, and it also encourages them to share their results with their own supply chains (Sustainability Index, 2013). For further examples and guidance around CSR-relevant visioning and strategy, see DuBois (2012) and Muros, Impelman, and Hollweg (2012).

### **Design Work & Workplaces**

Once senior leadership has identified how best to achieve its CSR goals, it is important to align the organization's culture, teams, and jobs with an approach to work that balances the company's pursuit of profits with the interests of people and the planet. At this point, the foundational practices of analyzing jobs and developing competency models should be undertaken to better articulate the KSAOs that will drive CSR-relevant behaviors. Groups and teams should be designed to foster positive attitudes and motivations toward engaging in CSR-friendly behaviors. This may include a range of initiatives, from designing altogether new work and workplaces to simply revising existing workflow processes toward greater social responsibility. At this stage, it is critical to consider how best to cascade CSR through multiple levels of the organization from the individual job, to the team's function, and further into the climate and culture to optimally shape the values, attitudes, and morale permeating employees' work and workplaces. Key to this is providing structure and support for CSR, while still enabling employees to innovate and act in socially responsible ways that are unique and authentic to them. Put differently, companies interested in weaving social responsibility into the fabric of their culture should ensure that employees are afforded sufficient space and freedom for informal expressions of sustainability. Several large public companies demonstrate a move toward blending formal and informal CSR-related strategies by including green teams among their supported employee groups. Advanced Micro Devices, Inc., for example, now has twelve green teams in offices from their Austin headquarters to Malaysia and India. In providing these teams with grants and other benefits, AMD provides its employees a chance to express themselves at work while making an investment in its human resources (Mohin, 2013). In another example, Dell responded to a wave of informal green teams springing up around the world by launching a formal "Planet" employee resource group (ERG) on Earth Day 2012 (Robinson, 2013). In becoming an ERG, the Planet team was granted a budget to fund the group's mission and activities, access to a larger network of other ERGs, leadership opportunities, training, executive support, and visibility. Dell's Planet ERG now includes 800 members across eight chapters in locales including Texas, Oklahoma, India, Malaysia, Panama, Casa Blanca, Amsterdam, and Ireland. Dell also capitalized on its people's innovation and creativity by initiating a contest inviting employees to submit ideas around the broad theme of people

“powering the possible” through technology. Prizes included employee recognition and funding to bring the winning idea to fruition. This contest resulted in a new eco-learning and sustainable garden on Dell’s Roundrock, Texas campus, which will include a pavilion to showcase the health benefits of sustainable gardens and organic eating. Similar to GE’s ‘eco-magination’ program (Aguinis and Glavas, 2013), these programs demonstrate ways for companies to establish looser, employee-driven, open-ended workplace structures that support and facilitate socially responsible values, attitudes, and behaviors.

### **Attract & Recruit**

To better staff an organization with CSR-friendly people, attracting and recruiting processes should be revised to communicate the organization’s CSR programs and cultural values. This should include updating recruiting materials to share more information about the company’s CSR- relevant values and attitudes. The organization’s recruiting team should be trained in the new social responsibility characteristics they need to look for in candidates. They should also be provided with CSR-friendly talking points about the company to share with applicants. Further, candidates should be surveyed periodically for their reactions to ensure such messages are coming across clearly and authentically. A growing body of research offers that infusing recruiting processes with CSR- relevant content can positively influence candidate perceptions and decisions in the organization’s favor (Ones & Dilchert, 2012a; Willness & Jones, 2013).

### **Test & Select**

Testing and selection practices offer multiple opportunities to embed CSR in the organization. For one, a growing number of jobs have arisen from social responsibility concerns (Dierdorff, Norton, Gregory, Rivkin, and Lewis, 2013). To the degree such jobs are present in the organization, they offer opportunities to assess candidates for specific, CSR-relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities. If those who perform well on valid, reliable measures of such KSAs are selected, the organization is likely to see stronger CSR-relevant task performance over time. Additionally, job candidates can be evaluated on ‘Other’ characteristics beyond KSAs, even if their jobs do not directly include CSR-specific tasks. That is, they can be assessed and selected based on their context-free, CSR-oriented personality traits, values, and attitudes. Recent research suggests individual differences such as *locus of control*, *future time perspective*, *extraversion*, *conscientiousness*, *agreeableness*, and *openness* are linked with environmental sustainability criteria of interest (Ones & Dilchert, 2013). These may be a useful starting point for evaluating a job candidate’s receptivity to an organization’s CSR-related values, attitudes, and initiatives. More broadly, a candidate’s trait-based *engageability* (Muros et al., 2012) shows potential for identifying those who will be more inspired and motivated to act in alignment with the organization’s social responsibility values and objectives. Preliminary evidence suggests that including CSR-relevant predictors will not detract from other performance-related constructs we may also need to predict in selection testing (Dilchert & Ones, 2012a). A recent case study of Aveda Corporation provides an informative example of validation research used to develop an assessment aimed at predicting employee sustainability behaviors (Dilchert & Ones, 2012a).

### **On-Board & Train**

Once employees have been selected to better align with the organization’s CSR mission, they should be on-boarded and trained in ways that reinforce and cultivate the company’s CSR values and practices. A recent \$82M ruling against Walmart makes clear that not having widespread, targeted training and job-aids in place

can be damaging to a company's finances and the communities it serves (Kurtz, 2013). For on-boarding purposes, new hires should be made aware of the organization's social responsibility initiatives. New employees should also be socialized to the CSR values that drive the company. For training efforts, the focus should be impacting trainees' declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, or motivation to think, feel, and/or act more socially responsible on the job. Designing effective training should start with a needs assessment that draws on a variety of inputs (e.g., objective metrics, subjective evaluations) to articulate what the CSR-specific training objectives should be. With that in place, a range of research-supported tactics (e.g., social modeling, cognitive dissonance, public commitments; Dilchert & Ones, 2012b) can be employed to impact socially responsible organizational behaviors. Companies can seek out pre-designed options like AMD's use of discussion-based courses from Northwest Earth Institute (Mohin, 2013), or they may choose to develop more customized, company-specific training like Caribou Coffee's sustainability training (Muros et al., 2012). Dell devotes a portion of its employee training programs to sustainability to reinforce this core value (Robertson, 2013). The company has been sharing information about its commitment to sustainability during the on-boarding process for the past several years. In addition, every employee completes sustainability training annually as part of their company-required training.

### **Appraise & Evaluate**

As the adage goes, "What gets measured gets done." CSR behaviors must be incorporated into performance evaluations to better embed them within the organization. Doing so fosters employee motivation to take the social responsibility concerns of the organization seriously (or at the very least act in a manner sufficiently aligned with those concerns while on the job). Performance evaluation tools and discussions should be customized to include CSR-focused performance dimensions. These can be employed during cyclical performance management processes (e.g., one's annual review), as well as developmentally-oriented feedback programs (e.g. 360s for leadership development). It is important that supervisors are adequately trained to evaluate employee social responsibility behaviors effectively. To this end, clear definitions of CSR-specific performance dimensions and behavioral anchors should be developed. To ensure their relevance to the company's broader social responsibility mission, these should be linked clearly to the organization's strategic CSR objectives. With those articulated, supervisors should then be trained to evaluate employees along the CSR-relevant dimensions using evidence-based approaches such as frame-of-reference training (Woehr & Huffcutt, 1994). Supervisors should also be equipped with tools and skills training in how best to provide constructive developmental feedback (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) to employees who need to improve their CSR-relevant performance.

### **Develop & Promote**

With CSR included in people's performance objectives, organizations should have in place a range of solutions to support the promotion of high performers and the development of low and average performers. This includes developing KSAO-based profiles and descriptive behavioral anchors of low and high performance relevant to the organization's unique CSR context. Care should be taken to articulate CSR performance targets across different organizational levels (e.g., entry, experienced, supervision, leadership). Where such progressions make sense, designing career paths that include CSR jobs or responsibilities should be undertaken. CSR-focused 360s, developmental assessments, coaching, job rotations, task force projects, and

stretch assignments may also be helpful approaches for enabling the organization to develop stronger CSR capabilities in its contributors, supervisors, and leaders.

### **Engage & Motivate**

Organizations have increasingly started to include CSR-relevant questions in their employee surveys (see Biga and colleagues (2012) and Muros and colleagues (2012) for examples). This is a critical practice for ensuring that perceptions of the organization's CSR efforts mirror leadership's intentions. With the appropriate kinds of questions, surveys can support empirical links between CSR initiatives and employee engagement (Muros et al., 2012; Mohin, 2013). Well-designed and executed surveys and focus groups enable organizations to fine-tune their CSR programs through confidential 'reality checks' and constructive, qualitative feedback on what to stop, start, or continue doing around social responsibility concerns. Beyond providing helpful insights, a well-managed survey program can yield actionable improvement ideas, as well as reinforce senior leadership's dedication and focus to embedding CSR in the organization. That reinforcement may be engaging to employees in itself, though such data can also be used to facilitate the design of motivational incentive programs that encourage socially responsible behavior and discourage socially irresponsible behaviors (Ones & Dilchert, 2012b). It may help to tie elements of employee compensation packages to CSR-relevant behaviors and objectives (e.g., a percentage of one's bonus or commission), as well as to provide company benefits that facilitate CSR engagement (e.g., flexible, paid time off to engage in social responsibility concerns; 'micro-volunteering', through which employees are able to volunteer to support causes of interest in small increments of time from their desks (Mohin, 2013)). In doing so, care should be taken to ensure the right mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators is put in place, since some research shows that extrinsic motivational programs can have deleterious effects on CSR-relevant behaviors (Werner, 2013). Whatever blend of incentives ultimately makes sense for the company, additional motivation to work more sustainably may come from sound goal-setting and team-building interventions that foster employee commitment to difficult, specific CSR objectives.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Simply stated, we believe that influencing people's values, attitudes, and behaviors is the only way to truly embed social responsibility in an organization. We have attempted to outline a clear path for doing so through the use of a comprehensive Talent Management approach. Using this framework as a guide, organizations are better positioned to create fertile soil in which to sow seeds of social responsibility that will flourish for the benefit of their profits, their people, and our planet.

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