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FIVE STRATEGIES TO DRIVE ENGAGEMENT ENGAGING YOUR WORKFORCE IN CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY PROGRAMS:

FIVE STRATEGIES TO DRIVE ENGAGEMENT

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A Satell Institute CSR Research Report for Business Leaders

ABSTRACT

Around the world, organizations are increasingly striving to increase employee engagement in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In this article, we explore five potential barriers that could impede voluntary participation in CSR: program-participant misalignment, lack of subjective norms, negative attitudes, lack of past experience/habits, and (social) anxiety. We then present five interventions for addressing these barriers and increasing participation. The interventions center on organizational culture, leadership, internal communication, group and peer influence, and the design of CSR programs. We suggest that variety in opportunities for employee participation and a supportive internal context are likely to have the greatest potential to increase employee participation in CSR. NOTE: This article is based on a conceptual study published in Roza, L. (2016). Employee engagement in Corporate Social Responsibility: A collection of essays. Doctoral dissertation. Erasmus Research Institute in Management, Erasmus University. Please see this publication for additional theoretical details and relevant references.

Keywords: CSR, corporate volunteering, payroll giving, employee participation, barriers, organizational interventions

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INTRODUCTION

As a result of increasing awareness, stakeholder expectations, and a desire to create a positive impact, more and more companies are allocating resources to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities. Their efforts focus on contributing money, time, products, services, and other resources to support the community. Studies have shown that many companies increased their total community contributions in recent years (CECP 2014), while other research has identified a variety of benefits associated with CSR programs, with employee engagement surfacing as a key driver of success in these initiatives. It is thus understandable that many organizations are currently striving to increase employee participation in such activities.

Despite organizational efforts to design effective programs, employee participation in CSR tends to be limited, and many companies struggle to increase the number of participants in their programs. One important reason why building these programs is challenging is that employee participation in CSR activities is always voluntary. This means that leaders need to be strategic in the design and implementation of these programs if they are to attract workers to engage deeply in this work.

It is particularly important to understand mechanisms that affect decisions to participate in CSR, as they reflect the needs of employees with regard to CSR and other socially responsible initiatives. We consider here individual and contextual factors that can impede employees from participating in the voluntary aspects of CSR and then outline what CSR leaders can do to maximize employee participation and, in turn, community impact. Here we focus on two CSR activities that rely heavily on employee participation: corporate volunteering and payroll giving. Given the discretionary character of employee participation in these two CSR activities, companies can neither require such participation nor include it as part of the formal job descriptions. For many companies, it is still a desired behavior and getting better at driving this behavior is a priority.

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CSR ACTIVITIES: CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING AND PAYROLL GIVING

Within the context of CSR, employees and companies are mutually dependent. Companies need employees in the development and implementation of their CSR efforts, and employees need corporate support to engage in corporate volunteering or other CSR activities. Outside the corporate context and without corporate support, the donations or volunteering of employees would simply belong to the realm of private citizenship. Within the corporate context, employees are encouraged to become involved in at least two major forms of CSR: donations of time (e.g., corporate volunteering) and donations of money (e.g., payroll giving).

Corporate volunteering, also known as employee volunteering, employer-supported volunteering, and workplace volunteering, refers to volunteer activities that are performed by employees and encouraged or even facilitated by their employing organizations. The voluntary and discretionary nature of corporate volunteering for both companies and employees, combined with an inward focus on corporate benefits and an outward focus on community benefits, makes corporate volunteering the clearest form of employee participation in CSR.

Corporate volunteering can be performed either in the employee's own time (e.g., with unpaid leave or other support from employer) or during official working hours. For this reason, companies are likely to adopt formal and informal policies that involve volunteering. Corporate volunteering practices vary widely, ranging from turnkey one-off group outings such as volunteering to paint classrooms and plant flowers at a local elementary school, to customized long term programs such as individual overseas sabbaticals in which an employee uses her business skills to advance technological capacity in another country.

A second form of CSR involves donations of money through payroll giving. By definition, this form requires some level of involvement on the part of the company, as the donations are processed through the organization's payroll system. In addition, many employers match the donations of their employees. In most cases, payroll donations offer direct tax breaks, as they are deducted directly from the giver's pay.

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Despite the wide range of opportunities for employee participation in CSR, research evidence suggests that participation in corporate volunteering and payroll giving is relatively low (Haski-Leventhal, 2013; Roza, 2016). This reflects the inherent challenges of involving employees in CSR programs. The discretionary and individual character of such participation means that employees are free to choose whether they will participate. The decision will be shaped by the time commitment needed, the nature of the social impact to be achieved, and the resources of employees. Although many employees are involved in the creation, implementation, and maintenance of policies and actions relating to CSR, many others tend to avoid them. For example, a recent study shows that employees in households without children tend to engage in CSR activities more often (Roza, 2016).

Corporate volunteering can be particularly attractive to employees if it can be done during work hours, as it is less likely to conflict with other obligations, duties, or activities outside the workplace such as family time or leisure. It can also enhance the meaning of work experiences, particularly for employees who do not perceive their jobs as meaningful.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Employee decisions regarding CSR programs are based on a combination of several elements, based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991): 1) perceived ability to perform the behavior; 2) attitude toward the behavior such as approval or disapproval; 3) perceived expectations of others regarding the behavior (subjective norms); 4) anxiety or concerns regarding the behavior; and 5) past experiences with the behavior. In addition to predicting the intention to engage in a particular behavior such as volunteering or giving in CSR programs, these factors can have a direct effect on the likely level of acceptance of CSR programs by the workforce. Employee participation in CSR could be impeded by deficiencies in any of the five areas presented above. These factors therefore suggest interventions for overcoming such obstacles to participation. In the sections below, we discuss each of these factors separately.

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Program-Participant Misalignment

Individuals who perceive that they lack the time, skills, money, or other resources to donate time or money are less likely to have the intention to engage in such behavior. Even if these resources are available, employees may regard them as unsuited to the particular CSR programs of their companies. For example, a company's program might focus on soliciting financial donations, while the employee perceives having behavioral control only with regard to volunteering. There can be a mismatch between the CSR opportunities offered by the company and the initiatives to which potential participants feel that they are able to contribute. Lack of information on CSR opportunities (or about the specific social issues or charities that they address) can also impede employee participation. The issue of mismatch arises when there is a desire by the employee to do something, but the options presented by the company are simply unappealing. The CSR may reflect company policy and priorities, but it may not connect to employee interests or availability.

Lack of Subjective Norms

Norms, understood as perceived social support and pressure to conform, can affect employees' intentions to engage in CSR activities and the likelihood of actual participation in them. Higher levels of perceived organizational support have been shown to increase the likelihood of participation in CSR activities and other discretionary behavior.

Companies can apply five levels of pressure in their corporate volunteering activities: 1) low pressure through completely voluntary participation; 2) limited pressure by emphasizing the rewards of volunteering; 3) moderate social pressure by creating clear expectations and providing information about the type of volunteering desired; 4) high pressure through hierarchical expectancy, with volunteering as an important element in the functional evaluation of employees; and 5) maximum pressure through obligation. Lower levels of social pressure could be expected to make employees less likely to perceive the subjective norms that would lead them to participate. In the same vein, greater social pressure could increase the likelihood of employee participation. Maximum pressure through obligation is obviously not an option, given that CSR is by definition voluntary and discretionary.

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Negative Attitudes toward CSR

Positive attitudes toward a particular behavior are likely to increase the intention to engage in that behavior. Research evidence indicates that attitudes are strong predictors of intentions to donate money and to volunteer. Conversely, we can assume that employees who perceive CSR in negative or undesirable ways are less likely to become involved.

Negative perceptions of CSR tend to take one of three forms. First, employees might consider CSR undesirable if they perceive it as inconsistent with the primary mission and objectives of the company, thus diverting attention and energy away from the intended corporate goal of maximizing profit. A second negative attitude toward CSR could stem from a perceived lack of authenticity. Stressing the instrumental benefits of CSR for the company and its employees can generate skepticism and cynicism regarding the authenticity of the company's intentions. Employees who doubt the authenticity and intentions of the company should thus logically be less likely to participate (Van der Voort et al., 2009). A third negative attitude toward CSR emerges from the perception that such efforts constitute unacceptable organizational behavior. When companies become involved in their own charitable behavior, employees are likely to perceive this as an intrusion into their private lives (Van der Voort et al., 2009). Employees who are very active in volunteering and donating money in their private lives might be less willing to engage in such activities on behalf of their employers.

Lack of past experience and habits in CSR

Past experiences and habits have important effects on current intentions and behavior. Research has (Knowles et al., 2012) demonstrated that current volunteers and donors are likely to have volunteered or donated in the past, and they are likely to have significant others who do the same. As such, employees with no past experience in either volunteering or donating are likely to be less inclined to participate. This could pose an additional challenge for organizations that are only starting their CSR programs and struggling to involve more people, as they do not yet have previous experiences on which to build the program. In this way, current CSR programs are tethered to the past of workers who may or may not have a reservoir of positive experiences related to volunteering or giving on which to draw.

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Anxiety

People might encounter psychological barriers in the process of becoming involved in CSR. For example, social anxiety can cause individuals to feel uncomfortable entering unfamiliar situations or situations in which other people already appear to be well connected. In the context of corporate volunteering, this could be reflected in the reluctance of individuals to talk to strangers or engage in new social situations, possibly preventing them from volunteering in unfamiliar organizations. In the case of monetary donations, social anxiety with regard to the act of giving might impede employees from becoming involved as donors, as such involvement would expose them to situations that they might perceive as new, uncomfortable, or socially threatening.

ORGANIZATIONAL INTERVENTIONS SUPPORTING PARTICIPATION IN CSR

In order to enhance employee participation in CSR programs, companies must either overcome the five barriers described above or transform the mechanisms that create the barriers into catalysts for involvement. To this end, based on literature from the field of organizational behavior, we present five potential organizational interventions for increasing employee participation in corporate volunteering and donating. The interventions involve 1) internal communication, 2) culture, 3) leadership, 3) group and peer influence, and 4) program design. Each of these interventions focuses on a supportive mechanism at the organizational level. The effects of the interventions on the various barriers are discussed below.

1. Develop an internal communication plan to promote CSR Internal communication has been identified as an under-utilized and potentially powerful channel through which organizations can influence stakeholders (Dawkins, 2005). Intensive communication is of crucial importance in any process of change including behavioral change, and it is a powerful mechanism for influencing employee CSR behavior. By providing more and better information about CSR opportunities, companies could address any lack of awareness among their employees while having a positive influence on their attitudes. Storytelling, informal communication, coaching, and other communication strategies have proven important and effective. Employees tend to be receptive to information about the CSR activities of their organizations.

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Communication about the possibilities for CSR is likely to reduce program-employee mismatch by integrating worker perspectives into the program design. Communication about CSR in general, as well as on the specific programs of the company, is thus likely to improve the attitudes of employees, enhance their attachment to CSR programs, and drive greater participation.

2. Create a favorable culture of CSR

Organizational culture has been defined as a set of shared mental assumptions that guide interpretation and action in organizations. Although it is quite difficult to change , organizational culture plays a significant role in shaping employee behavior. Specific organizational cultures and subcultures could drive specific attitudes toward CSR. If CSR is an explicit part of the organization's culture and norms, it could therefore be expected to trigger employees to participate in CSR. The creation of an organizational culture that promotes CSR is likely to enhance the attitudes and subjective norms of employees in this regard. CSR initiatives that are grounded in the basic values of the organization are more likely to increase employee participation.

As learned behaviors, volunteering and donating require socialization. The process of socialization to CSR should therefore become part of the organization's culture, in order to achieve value congruence between the organization and its employees. Shared norms and value identities within an organizational culture that is supportive of CSR could therefore alter past experiences and habits.

3. Cultivate supportive leadership styles

At the organizational level, leadership can have a major influence on a company's commitment to CSR. It can also affect the engagement of employees in the company, including their attitudes toward CSR participation. The cognitive, conative, and linguistic processes of managers have been identified as important determinants of perceptions about, development of, and participation in CSR within companies. For example, organizational leaders with less desirable traits (e.g., narcissism, hubris, dominance) are unlikely to inspire followers to engage in citizenship behavior, while leaders with more supportive styles create positive attitudes toward CSR and encourage more likely to encourage managers to allocate time and resources that enable employees to engage in CSR programs (e.g., by allowing corporate volunteers to have flexible working hours or to volunteer within official working hours).

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4. Stimulate group and peer influence

Employee behavior is strongly influenced by peer interactions and the notion of team membership. Strong teams are characterized by high levels of cohesiveness and strong team norms. Research indicates that individuals are more likely to engage in behaviors that are consistent with the norms of the groups to which they belong. In addition, fellow employees can be powerful advocates for a company's CSR efforts, and pre-existing groups and groups that are formed for the purpose of volunteering can help people to start and continue to volunteer.

A bottom-up rather than top-down approach to generating interest in CSR activities will prove more effective. Individuals prefer to learn about volunteering from those who are close to them (e.g., friends, family or colleagues; Handy and Cnaan, 2007), and they prefer to visit volunteering sites when accompanied by these people. Employees are more likely to participate in CSR initiatives 1) if they belong to groups who embrace supportive norms, 2) if they are able to engage in CSR activities with people who are familiar to them, and 3) if they are solicited by colleagues. Group and peer influence can also reduce anxiety related to corporate volunteering participation by providing a familiar environment within which to engage in such activities. A familiar environment where volunteering takes place among colleagues makes CSR activities appear less alien and daunting. Opportunities to volunteer as teams or departmental units can reduce anxiety for some employees, and thereby increase success in engaging new participants in CSR programs. In the case of monetary donations, the inherent social distance between the giver and the beneficiary could make this form of involvement more attractive to employees who experience high levels of social anxiety.

5. Develop a broad CSR program to increase variety in engagement options

Maximizing employee participation in CSR requires moving away from one-size-fits-all programs. Given that most barriers to participation are specific to individual employees, companies should strive to accommodate the abilities, needs, and barriers of individual employees by offering a variety of opportunities for participation within an organizational context that is supportive of CSR. By offering or facilitating a wide variety of CSR opportunities (e.g., flexible multi-organization payroll giving and various forms of corporate volunteering), companies can allow their employees to choose between donating their time/skills and donating their money, as well as the type of activity they prefer and the cause or mission they find most compelling.

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The availability of this level of choice is likely to address any mismatch that might arise from narrower programs. It is important to note, however, that some employees may prefer higher levels of variety and choice regarding who they give their money and time to, while others may prefer less autonomy and would be more likely to participate in activities that have been organized for them. Having not just a variety of CSR opportunities but a range of structured and less structured opportunities is thus best.

Offering multiple types of opportunities can also address anxiety issues. Apprehension can be reduced by organizing multiple volunteer opportunities to fit the preferences of employees (e.g., during/outside working hours; volunteering based on either skills or social preference), and by offering volunteering opportunities that put employees in familiar groups (e.g., family volunteering and work team projects).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The challenges that companies encounter with regard to low and/or stagnating levels of employee participation in their CSR programs create opportunities for innovation and change. Insight into barriers at the individual level suggests organizational interventions can be used to increase employee participation in CSR. Figure 1 shows the model of employee participation, which includes both the mechanisms that explain (non-) participation and the organizational interventions needed to positively influence those mechanisms.

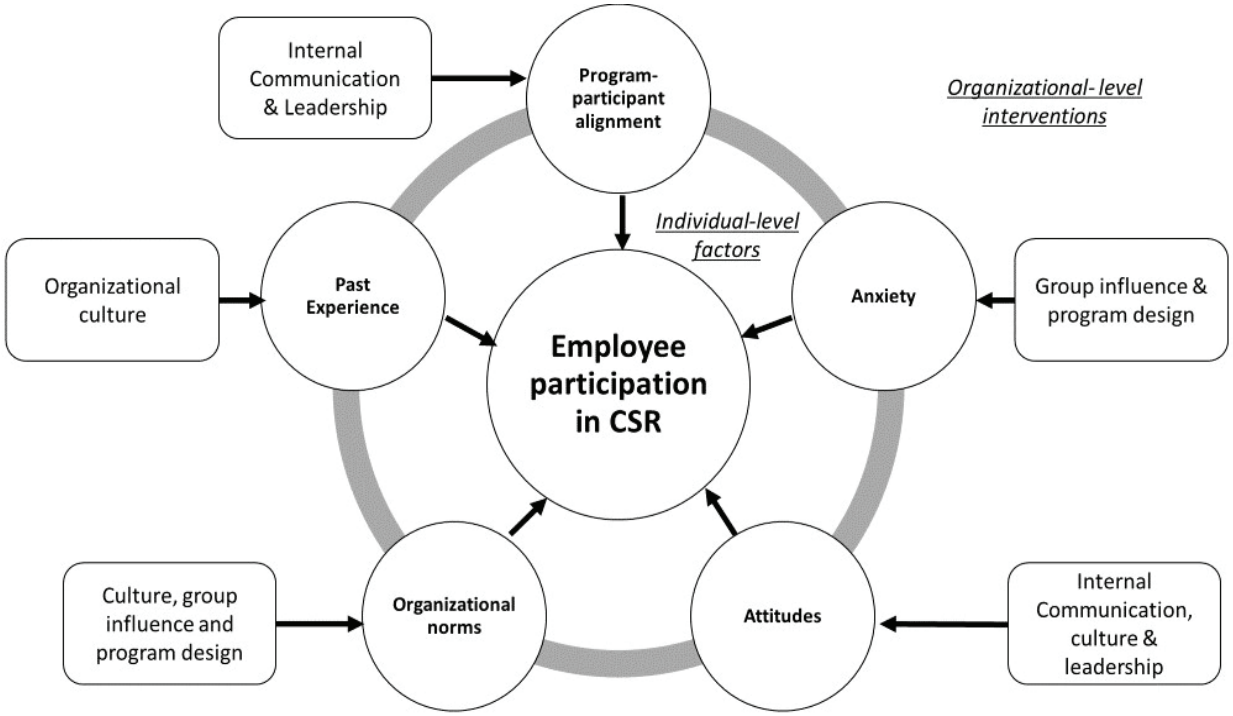

Figure 1: An employee participation model of Corporate Social Responsibility

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Although the interventions presented in this article are aimed at increasing particpation in CSR activities, it would be unrealistic to expect all companies to succeed in involving all their employees in their CSR efforts. We therefore do not propose that changes in the organizational context will always overcome all barriers for all employees. Nevertheless, understanding these potential barriers and how to address them strategically can contribute to the ongoing development of CSR programs, with the goal of maximizing the attractiveness of these programs to ever more employees.

External factors can certainly affect the ability of organizations to address barriers to participation, as well as the effectiveness of the interventions proposed in this article. For example, variation in national and cultural traditions of charitable giving behavior do play a role, particularly in multinational companies. Institutional-level socialization to charitable giving is crucial in this regard. Furthermore, the likelihood of engaging in CSR behavior can vary by industry (e.g., retail, finance, manufacturing). Moreover, high levels of participation are less likely in countries with relatively weak traditions of giving and in industries in which it is less common to engage in CSR. Similar to institutional-level influences (e.g., culture and traditions of giving), barriers to participation might also be affected by the level of diversity in a company's workforce. If the employees of a company are from highly diverse ethnic backgrounds, with some potentially having little tradition in giving, these employees are likely to experience higher individual barriers to participation, making it more difficult to alter their intentions and behavior. *Perhaps aligning more with their giving traditions might help them to get engaged and ultimately this might also have spill-over effects to other types of giving by these employees.*

The steps outlined here could be useful to CSR managers within companies trying to stimulate employee participation, especially in cases where CSR is a relatively new initiative. Leaders can set context and culture while managers will need to do the challenging work of developing a menu of CSR options tailored to employee interests, values and commitments. When both leadership and management work together to address the key barriers to CSR participation, these initiatives are likely not just to gain support but thrive.

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