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### ***published in***

Amsterdam in Science, Business and Society  
2014

### ***document version***

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### ***citation for published version (APA)***

Risi, D., Wickert, C. M. J., & Sayah, S. (2014). Corporate social responsibility managers as internal activists for ethics and sustainability. *Amsterdam in Science, Business and Society*, 2(1), 8-11.

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Corporate

Social

Responsibility

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## CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY MANAGERS AS INTERNAL ACTIVISTS FOR ETHICS AND SUSTAINABILITY

**C**orporate Social Responsibility (CSR), a management concept for the systematic integration of social, environmental and ethical aspects into core business operations in collaboration with stakeholders, has become central to the corporate world. Nowadays, few companies can afford not to position themselves with regard to CSR and communicate their activities to stakeholders. Whilst formal structures such as codes of conduct, policy documents and certification schemes are central for the successful implementation of CSR, their formal endorsement by company leaders alone often has little to no effect.

In the worst case scenario, public commitments to CSR without proper implementation easily lead to accusations of greenwashing or the symbolic construction of a CSR façade without any substance. CSR managers play a critical role in avoiding such problems, because they are responsible for implementing CSR practices internally and spreading a CSR mindset within companies. Our research shows that CSR managers have developed a set of creative and informal tactics that promise to facilitate a more effective implementation of CSR.

## COMPANY LEADERS KNOW WHAT THEY SHOULD DO TO MAKE CSR AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THEIR BUSINESS

Multinational corporations are confronted with steadily increasing societal demands to incorporate CSR into their strategy, core business operations and even their global supply chains. Many companies have recognized the complexity of this task and have hired a CSR manager, or have even created entire CSR departments of ten or more people. CSR managers are an emerging type of professional and usually have staff positions that are relatively close to the boardroom. Their job is to manage the strategic planning, coordination and evaluation of CSR; in other words, to integrate CSR into organizational structures and procedures. At the same time, they are often the most important carriers of CSR-related knowledge in an organization. CSR managers have thus become key professional agents that drive the thorough implementation of CSR.

Existing research provides many insights into the strategic importance of CSR, and there are a vast number of best practices available that illustrate the content of CSR strategies, policies and related management frameworks. Company leaders know what they should do to make CSR an essential part of their business. It is well known, however, that it takes a long time to integrate CSR

into a company's daily routines and processes successfully and, more importantly, with the necessary seriousness, and that it is not easy to make CSR part of a company's DNA. CSR managers are therefore indispensable, because they constantly push their colleagues to move from initial strategic commitments to concrete operational results.

Despite the apparent importance of CSR managers, they have received surprisingly little attention in empirical research. Understanding what they do is important, because it makes it possible to give strategic advice about how to implement CSR more effectively.

In this research project, a collaboration between VU University Amsterdam, the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland and the Heinrich-Heine University in Düsseldorf, Germany, we took a closer look at the work of CSR managers. We asked which strategies or tactics CSR managers use to navigate around tensions and constraints or even denial of the importance of CSR among other employees in the company. We focused in particular on the interplay between formal elements such as a CSR strategy and informal processes such as subtly encouraging others to cooperate. For our study, we interviewed 75 CSR managers in German and Swiss multinationals in the course of 2013.

Many of the CSR managers we spoke to reported that a major difficulty

in their work is to convince other employees and decision-makers in their companies about the importance of CSR. While many leaders and CEOs recognize that CSR is a 'must have', this recognition does not always extend to middle managers and white-collar employees. Often motivation or sheer interest in sustainability topics are lacking, or people feel overwhelmed by their daily schedules and thus refrain from launching new CSR projects (take, for instance, a procurement manager who needs to include different CSR standards in his decision-making that may not be in line with common financially-oriented objectives). As a whole, the evidence shows that while commitment from a CEO is essential, successful CSR implementation by no means automatically follows. Rather, it is the CSR manager's job to point people in the direction of CSR.

The responses we gathered in the interviews can be aggregated to five tactics that CSR managers tend to employ. These are not necessarily present to an equal degree in each and every company. However, these five tactics represent reoccurring patterns that were highlighted by the majority of the CSR managers to whom we spoke. They emphasized that the systematic application of these tactics is an important component of successful CSR implementation, and allows them to circumvent internal barriers and tensions better.

### TACTIC 1

Building a network of internal allies. The creation of an internal network and the identification of likeminded others that act as allies in the quest for greater sustainability are key components of successful CSR implementation. Support from influential decision-makers that are embedded in the operational sphere (such as the Head of Procurement or Marketing) helps CSR managers to launch pilot projects. This helps to give CSR a strategic edge and shows that it 'works' and can be scaled up to other parts of the company.

### TACTIC 2

Creating emotional and functional proximity. CSR managers who are able to connect abstract ideas about ethics and sustainability to employees' daily business routines create an important lever to foster commitment and support. This means explaining what sustainability means not only for the company, but also for specific people doing specific jobs. This can happen at the emotional level, where employees develop a feeling of personal responsibility for different CSR aspects (such as helping to reduce accidents in their factory or considering their own footprint). Equally importantly, functional proximity means explaining the sustainability impact of specific jobs in the company. For instance, showing

how procurement or marketing roles can raise ethical problems and which steps are necessary to address these (such as measuring the carbon footprint of a company's car fleet and adjusting procurement decisions in favour of more efficient cars).

### TACTIC 3

Identifying adequate incentives. In order to 'catch people where they can be caught' (as one informant put it), CSR managers need to identify the different and often very heterogeneous incentives and motivations of employees within a company, and adjust their arguments in favour of particular CSR projects to these incentives. This is important when convincing employees with different educational backgrounds of the importance of CSR for the company. Moreover, employees in different divisions of a company, such as accounting, production, sales or PR, often differ considerably in their level of openness to various CSR incentives. For instance, employees with managerial functions, in particular with a strong finance background, are more likely to be convinced if CSR can be quantified and a strong business case can be presented. By contrast, arguments with regard to reputation and long-term effects on stakeholders such as future employees or governments have more impact when a CSR manager is dealing with public or investor relations and HR staff.

### TACTIC 4

External and internal benchmarking. Creating benchmarks against which to measure the progress of CSR projects is another important tool. CSR managers can use this tool in two ways. Internal benchmarking aims to compare different divisions within a company on related grounds, such as the carbon emissions or recycling quotas per unit for multiple production lines. It works well for creating internal competition for the best CSR performance. For instance, decision-makers may be more motivated to engage in CSR projects if there is an incentive to be the best, or not the worst, among all divisions or locations. External benchmarking is broader and aims to make the CSR performance of an entire company comparable to that of a competitor. For instance, this can be measured by looking at the placement in reputable CSR rankings, such as the Dow Jones Sustainability Index.

### TACTIC 5

Creating holistic awareness. Finally, the effectiveness of these tactics can be leveraged if CSR managers integrate CSR issues holistically into employee awareness. This is an important precondition for fostering proactiveness among employees to detect CSR-relevant issues without the constant presence of a CSR manager.

Creating holistic awareness starts by addressing ethics and sustainability in training and education programmes, as well as internal communications tools or corporate volunteering programmes.

Collectively, the results of this study suggest that having formal structures alone, such as a code of conduct, a CSR strategy, or policy documents for environmental or social aspects, has little impact, even if paired with CEO endorsement. Formal structures are important building blocks for starting the 'CSR journey', but they need to be accompanied by a range of informal tactics. Company employees and decision-makers need to be carefully and subtly encouraged to adopt CSR in their everyday roles, rather than allowing it to remain a lifeless concept. This is a difficult task, and one that confronts CSR managers with multiple challenges. Our study reveals several innovative tactics that promise to make the task of CSR implementation more effective.<sup>1</sup>

For further inquiries about the research project, please contact Dr. Christopher Wickert, christopher.wickert@vu.nl.

<sup>1</sup>This article is an abbreviated version of this research report has appeared in German in the CSR Magazin, March 2014.