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Upfront

From the Bottom Line of Our Hearts: Why businesspeople don't mention values when they discuss social responsibility

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From the Bottom Line of Our Hearts

Why businesspeople don't mention values when they discuss social responsibility

In April 2006, Morgan Stanley began raising money for microfinance institutions. "Microfinance is reaching a point where private capital is entering, and Morgan Stanley wanted to use its capabilities to get into this industry," says Henry Gonzalez, an associate in private wealth management at Morgan Stanley's London office. "This was not philanthropy," he explains. "This was aligning a business unit with amazing social gains."

Although companies like Morgan Stanley may develop products and services, like microfinance, that could improve the lot of humanity, they don't generally encourage discussions of social issues at work, says Scott Sonenshein, a doctoral student at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business. And so when employees talk about social responsibility on the job, they tend to play up its economic implications and play down its moral dimensions, he reports in the December 2006 *Academy of Management Journal*. This is especially true when employees talk to people higher in status or less interested in corporate social responsibility (CSR). Sonenshein concludes that when people discuss social issues in terms of their audience's concerns, "they are able to bring about change, even in inhospitable contexts."

To demonstrate how employees tailor their talk to the priorities of business, Sonenshein conducted an experiment with MBA students. The students first chose a personally meaningful social issue and gave their private reasons for caring about it. Half of the students then read about a company that embraces CSR, and the other half read about a company that eschews CSR. Finally, students wrote a memo attempting to convince either a boss, a peer, or a subordinate at the company to care about the social issue.

Sonenshein found that students listed more economic reasons, such as "[this issue] is highly important to the financial success of our company," in their corporate memos than in their private testimonials. He also discovered that students listed fewer values-based reasons, such as "everyone should be treated fairly," in their memos. Moreover, when students wrote to a boss or to a CSR-eschewing company, they further amped up their talk of finance and dampened down their talk of values.

"Adjusting arguments to audiences is an important skill, given all the tensions between what organizations value and what employees value," says Sonenshein. He acknowledges that there are downsides to "issue crafting," as he calls this skill. Organizations may not recognize the true reasons behind their actions, and people may feel anxious about saying one thing in public and believing something else in private. But on the whole, he says: "I have so much admiration for people who are trying to sell social change inside businesses. It's one thing to work in a nonprofit where it's legitimate to talk about these issues. But to talk about them in businesses takes a lot of chutzpah."

—Alana Conner

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