Storytelling helps employees connect with their companies’ CSR initiatives

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Humans are natural storytellers. Whether we’re conscious of it or not, we constantly create and share stories about what happened and why, as well as scenarios for what might happen next. Stories powerfully convey values, place them in context for the future and allow us to identify future opportunities. Within organizations, stories can be helpful in dealing with critical issues—such as those targeted by the company’s corporate social responsibility initiatives—by highlighting the positive and
negative outcomes of individual and collective behaviors. Internal stories are important to motivate people and create messages that are memorable enough for people to take action.

The IABC Research Foundation is conducting a study involving 98 European and American companies that seeks to determine how organizations communicate CSR initiatives and practices to their internal stakeholders, from rank-and-file employees to top management. Storytelling is emerging as a key tactic. With its universal appeal to culturally diverse audiences with different interests and learning styles, storytelling can transcend gender, age groups and subcultures.

For example, one of the interviewees for the study discussed the relevance of his organization’s founder’s story to convey organizational values and principles. The founder’s story has proved especially useful in aligning new and young employees with the core values of the firm. The CSR manager, in cooperation with the HR manager, describes the founder’s life and some specific episodes that are illustrative of specific ethical behaviors. As a result, employees are motivated to behave in accordance with these principles and to translate them into action.

6 storytelling tips for engaging employees in CSR

Stories that foster employee engagement should:

- **Keep language about the future vague**, so that employees are encouraged to be part of shaping the direction of CSR programs. This way, employees feel like contributors to the organization’s future, becoming more loyal and trusting. Intel, for instance, developed an online employee magazine, iQ, to share stories dealing with social, ethical and environmental topics, directly edited by Intel’s employees, its global partners and the Intel Social Media Center of Excellence. Intel allowed its employees to contribute to the discussion and promote the free exchange of ideas in accordance with their interests.

- **Use an inclusive, face-to-face approach**. Interpersonal communication promotes dialogue and helps create an emotional bond with employees. One-on-one conversations between managers and employees are the richest communication medium to directly engage with staff.

- **Combine rational and emotional content**. It’s true that stories are keys to the heart. They are so powerful because they convey complex ideas based on both information and emotion as well as on explicit and implicit knowledge. Rational arguments are insufficient. Employees need intuitive or emotional elements to be convinced to participate in the proposed organizational initiative.

- **Be honest about the organization’s situation**. The most effective stories start by describing a situation of broken equilibrium—for instance, an organizational crisis, a cultural change due to a merger or to top management turnover, or other practical difficulties employees may face in their daily lives—and then show how the organization tries to restore it. If you show and tell the hard truth of a situation, you will see that employees will try to help you achieve a good ending to your story.

- **Be durable and relevant for employees**. Stories must survive a change of characters as well as internal and external circumstances. Lessons conveyed through stories need to survive over time. Stories that engage employees should be relevant to them, such as those that emphasize employee safety or well-being, or explain how costs were decreased.

- **Promote prospective, not retrospective, sense-making**. Stories should not be used to give meaning to events that have already happened. They must allow employees to help co-create the future.

That’s precisely the concept of storytelling: a process through which the value of what a company is and does can be created, shared and expressed. Storytelling is the process of developing and sharing messages by using narration about the organization, its past, its present and its future.

**Working CSR into the organizational DNA**

The rapid sociopolitical and technological changes of the past few decades have made corporate CSR activities more sophisticated. Technology has allowed for increased civic engagement, and the democratization of the Web means that more people have access to tools like social media. There has been a consequent request by individuals for more transparency in communication from institutions, and widespread public skepticism of businesses and their claims.

Companies should be aware that communicating about CSR initiatives today is just a starting point. The more important goal should be to make the company’s stakeholders more aware of what it means to be a responsible organization, and to spread sensitivity about social and environmental issues, especially among internal stakeholders.

Throughout the research, two themes have emerged: the necessity of embedding CSR practices within the organizational DNA, and the increasing need to promote internal stakeholder engagement in order to accomplish CSR-based projects and to achieve organizational aims. Said one respondent: “CSR is an unavoidable value which is connected to our business practices. That is the reason why I strongly believe that there is no separated organizational structure. On the contrary, I think that CSR is totally integrated to the organizational DNA.”

Some companies focus on stimulating ethical behaviors through specific training sessions designed to improve work relationships by facilitating discussions, comparing experiences and providing examples of responsible cooperative behaviors. Such behaviors demonstrate that the company has an authentic, committed attitude toward sustainability, rather than simply aligning with CSR as the latest fashionable business trend. In addition, promoting internal stakeholder engagement by sharing best practices and enhancing continuous dialogue gives companies more credibility and, consequently, improves their CSR projects.

**Why storytelling works**

Simply providing information about organizational sustainable initiatives is not enough. Research conducted in 2011 by Stefen Wehmeier, Ph.D., and Friederike Schultz, Ph.D., that involved two large companies and two large nongovernmental organizations in Slovenia showed that dialogue is useful in meeting the need for mutual understanding and for effective meaning-sharing and decision-making processes concerning CSR issues and practices. Continuous exchange, dialogue and sharing of best practices are the main ingredients for a successful CSR initiative. Coincidentally, exchange, dialogue and sharing are also crucial features of storytelling.

Stories make a company’s position and viewpoint understandable, and allow the organization to gain stakeholders’ support by providing them with a space to share their own opinions and feelings, as well as stimulate a common sense of responsibility and participation. Especially with CSR, the engagement of key groups of stakeholders, such as employees and top management, can be crucial for the success of initiatives.

Organizational stories can support the relationship between management and employees at different levels: spreading information concerning organizational CSR initiatives, shaping listeners’ perception of corporate standpoints about a specific issue, and obtaining their support and involvement in organizational activities and processes. Such stories could be addressed to employees as well as to top management. Modern companies play the role of storytellers (or storymakers) more and more often, with the aim of sharing knowledge, fostering organizational change, collecting information about the internal environment, strengthening relationships among individuals, and stimulating employees’ identification with and commitment to the company. To foster employees’ commitment and involvement, one multinational pharmaceutical company, for instance, used testimonials: The CSR manager invited people outside the company who had
about the authors
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benefited from a particular CSR project to tell their stories in the presence of employees. The employees appreciated the initiative, which showed them the results of their contribution to a social cause.

If internal stakeholders are involved and satisfied, and if internal culture is positive and relationships are healthy, the stakeholders are more engaged.

Storytelling, not story-selling
A word of caution: Because they are so influential, stories can be used to convince an audience about the adequacy of a strategy or initiative. That can turn into story-selling, the art of seduction through good stories. Story-selling is not a proper strategy to gain employees’ support toward CSR initiatives. The aim should not be to sell a story, but to involve internal actors by stimulating them to interpret and understand past and present CSR experiences, as well as to formulate future expectations.

From a more practical point of view, when CSR managers decide to involve employees or engage with top management, they often employ stories by focusing on specific themes, content or arguments, sharing practical examples from the organization’s past or stories about competitors. The use of best or worst practices, for instance, is a common trend. Said one study participant: “We can learn from other companies’ experiences...companies that are or are not included in our network. We try to plan sharing moments with other organizations. During these meetings we welcome their suggestions, we activate initiatives or we discuss about how new activities can be inserted in our initiatives.... Examples from other organizational realities can help us to correct our behavior.”

To that end, other examples can illustrate the potentially negative consequences of unethical and negligent behaviors. “We organize CSR workshops in the company for our employees,” noted one respondent. “In these workshops we illustrate unethical and negative behaviors with real examples from different countries and departments. For example, we used a video to describe an example of bad practices in Brazil about inappropriate marketing sponsorship. The aim of these CSR workshops is to transmit the importance of ethical code fulfillment.”

The more this process is characterized by a collaborative orientation, the more effective it becomes. That means that each participant is asked to cooperate and contribute actively to the processes of meaning-creation. Employees can be required to propose new initiatives or to give their feedback on existing CSR projects. In some cases, they are invited to express their ideas through the use of stories in order to share them with other employees.

These stories can focus on the personal experiences of employees; their comments can refer to specific features of the projects or initiatives, as well as their feelings, their reactions and any opportunities they gained.

Organizational stories and storytelling can be used to involve internal stakeholders. Managers should become aware of the necessary prerequisites and consequences of using stories in the internal environment. Concerning the prerequisites, organizations should not focus simply on understanding how to tell a story effectively. On the contrary, they need to develop abilities and competencies for creating and using stories that meet organizational goals. Such stories constitute the memory of organizations, and they can be used to convey values and culture, to strengthen relationships, to direct and guide the understanding of events. Consequently, it’s clear that their implementation in a specific area such as CSR, characterized by the organizational need of involving and gaining legitimacy to operate, could enhance the strategic value within organizations.