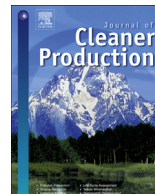




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Individual competencies for managers engaged in corporate sustainable management practices

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ABSTRACT

Corporations increasingly acknowledge the importance of sustainable practices. Corporate social responsibility is therefore gaining significance in the business world. Since solving corporate social responsibility issues is not a routine job, every challenge in corporate social responsibility requires its own approach; and management competencies are crucial for designing appropriate approaches towards the realization of sustainable solutions. On the basis of seven corporate social responsibility competencies synthesized from the extant literature, this research provides an empirical analysis of which of these competencies managers need in order to achieve corporate social responsibility goals within their specific context; and at which specific stage of the implementation process. The data sources are interviews with corporate social responsibility managers – whose positions and circumstances share many similarities – at four large multinational enterprises. The empirical analysis reveals that managers undertake four corporate social responsibility core tasks: I) orientation, II) reaching common ground, III) performing pilot projects, and IV) embedding results. Within the context of the analysis, the competencies: *Systems Thinking*, *Embracing Diversity and Interdisciplinarity*, *Interpersonal Competence*, *Action Competence*, and *Strategic Management* were found to be necessary. The *Embracing Diversity and Interdisciplinarity competence* was identified as the most relevant. This study contributes to the corporate social responsibility (education) literature by introducing an empirical test of which competencies are considered necessary for managers in various stages of corporate social responsibility implementation. Linking these competencies to core tasks makes them more concrete and increases the chances of interpreting them unambiguously, which in turn can aid learning trajectories in both business and education.

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1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is gaining significance in the business world, as corporations increasingly recognise the importance of ethical and responsible business practices to their survival and legitimacy (Dunphy et al., 2003). CSR is a business approach to sustainable development wherein companies

voluntarily integrate environmental, social, and economic concerns with their business strategies – and into their interactions with stakeholders – in a quest to contribute to society in a sustainable way (Dahlsrud, 2008). This definition emphasises the voluntary nature of CSR, in that businesses engage in CSR-related activities that go beyond compliance to laws and regulations; such voluntary activities have the potential to increase the competitiveness of companies. However, since these activities can be abandoned at any time (Lozano, 2012), it is critical that they be embedded in organisations. In order to distinguish CSR from sustainability in this article, sustainability is defined as the ultimate goal of society at large (Marrewijk and Werre, 2003), whereas CSR concentrates on the contribution of companies to achieve said sustainability goal, for instance by balancing people, planet, and profit in their business practices (Kaptein and Wempe, 2002).

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However, the problem is that issues like global warming, poverty, hunger and biodiversity decline cannot be solved in an easy and unilateral way. De Colle and Henriques (2013) underline this with their statement that: “despite being well-intended, CSR standards can favour the emergence of a *thoughtless, blind and blinkered* mindset which is counterproductive of their aim of enhancing the social responsibility of the organisation” (p. 1). Schwartz and Tilling (2009) paint a more nuanced picture. Although they acknowledge the necessity of standards (e.g. ISO 26000), they argue that CSR standards may lead to the isolation (or decontextualisation) of complex and contested social issues, while favouring their social legitimacy. Sustainability can be enhanced by (international) standards like ISO, but sustainability challenges beyond these standards have to be approached in an interdisciplinary way (e.g., people, planet and profit); by means of collaborations between different stakeholders, in which the time dimension and the context are taken into account as well (cf. Lozano, 2008). This means that sustainability remains a challenge, where every problem or challenge should be studied in its own particular context and time frame. This complexity grows even more because multiple stakeholders like businesses, governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) interact in sustainability issues with often conflicting value frames and ideologies (Peterson, 2009); this explains the complexity of many CSR practices as well. This complexity is also partly recognisable in other management areas like quality management or change management, but competing interests and value frames of stakeholders are particularly at stake where it comes to CSR practices.

Dealing with CSR challenges is complex, and strategic and operational decisions have to be taken at the individual level or at the level of an internal (e.g. management team, board of directors) and/or external (e.g. multiple stakeholders) team of individuals with different backgrounds, interests and value frames. Furthermore, because of the complexity of CSR challenges, standard responses will not suffice; what worked in the past does not necessarily work for the future. This explains the importance of the individual level or, as it is framed by Hesselbarth and Schaltegger (2014), the level of “the change agent”. Change agents are crucial for the development of the necessary flexibility and adaptability of businesses in dealing with new and changing sustainability challenges, it is assumed that the flexibility and adaptability of change agents lie embedded in individual competencies (Rothaermel and Hess, 2007; Wals, 2010). Although it is clear that the individual level is crucial to the achievement of sustainability goals, current research in business and management literature mainly concentrates on factors affecting or enhancing sustainability performance emanating from the institutional and organisational level (see Aguinis and Glavas, 2012 for a review; Veldhuizen et al., 2013). There is a call for studies on the contribution of individuals that may affect organisational CSR-performance (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). In educational literature (i.e. education for sustainable development), the importance of the individual level is already recognized and better researched.

In Dentoni et al. (2012), CSR competencies in the business context are summarised by making use of existing sets of CSR and sustainable development (SD) competencies provided, for instance, by De Haan (2010) and Wiek et al. (2011). In general, these sets of competencies find their origins in educational literature and are based on literature reviews; without hardly any verification whether or how these competencies are connected with managerial CSR tasks. The goal of this paper is to empirically explore the competencies identified in the extant literature as to which of them enable managers to fulfil core tasks of CSR implementation in a specific business context. Relative to the existing literature then, this research introduces and applies a method for empirically

assessing CSR competencies in cases where CSR practices are implemented in other settings. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study analysing the links between CSR competencies and core tasks of CSR implementation in a business context. The first research question of this paper therefore is: 1) Which managerial CSR competencies identified in the extant literature can be connected to CSR managers' core tasks in CSR implementation? An additional research question has to be raised to answer this question, because competencies get more meaningful when related to the context in which they are performed (Mulder et al., 2005). The second research question is: 2) What core tasks of CSR implementation can be identified for CSR managers operating in a business context? Since this article concentrates on the business context, in the remainder of this article sustainability and CSR are used interchangeably to characterize the ongoing process within organizations to realise sustainable business practices.

This research is relevant from a scientific point of view because it is interesting to know which competencies really matter in CSR implementation practices, as empirical findings about what is required of the sustainability professionals are still limited (Hesselbarth and Schaltegger, 2014). Furthermore, linking competencies with core tasks makes it possible to operationalise competencies in a more concrete way, which is necessary as indicated by Adomßent et al. (2014). On the basis of several articles within the framework of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), they concluded that it is still necessary to operationalise competencies for measurement (i.e. assessment instruments) and educational purposes (i.e. education programmes). The latter is also important from a managerial point of view. The identified competencies, accompanied by core tasks, may enhance human resource practices (e.g. selection, development, assessment) and the development of these practices in the business (education) context.

The paper is structured as follows: first a theoretical framework for CSR competencies is presented, followed by a method section in which the methods applied are elaborated upon. Finally, the findings, conclusion and discussion are presented.

2. Theoretical framework

In this section the theoretical underpinnings concerning competencies are presented. The first part concerns itself with competencies in general while the second part discusses competencies specifically applicable to CSR.

2.1. Competencies

In education, as well as in the corporate world, the term competencies is used as a vehicle for communicating about performance and learning processes of individuals (Mulder, 2001). Boyatzis (1982) and McLagan (1989) were the first to link the practice of human resource management to development in organisations. Competencies are seen as useful (e.g., Dubois and Rothwell, 2004; Lievens et al., 2004), since they can be utilized in strategic workforce planning, selection, training and development, performance management, succession planning, and motivation and rewarding. Using competencies in organisations has benefits for both organisation and employee. The former is able to align its strategic goals with the goals of the employees, and the latter experiences more transparency (Mulder, 2001). Nonetheless, the concept of competence has been applied in widely differing ways in different countries (Gonczi, 1994), in different disciplines, and at different times. It is this widespread use that is one of the major pitfalls in working with competencies (Biemans et al., 2004). In order to fully understand what is meant by competence in this

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