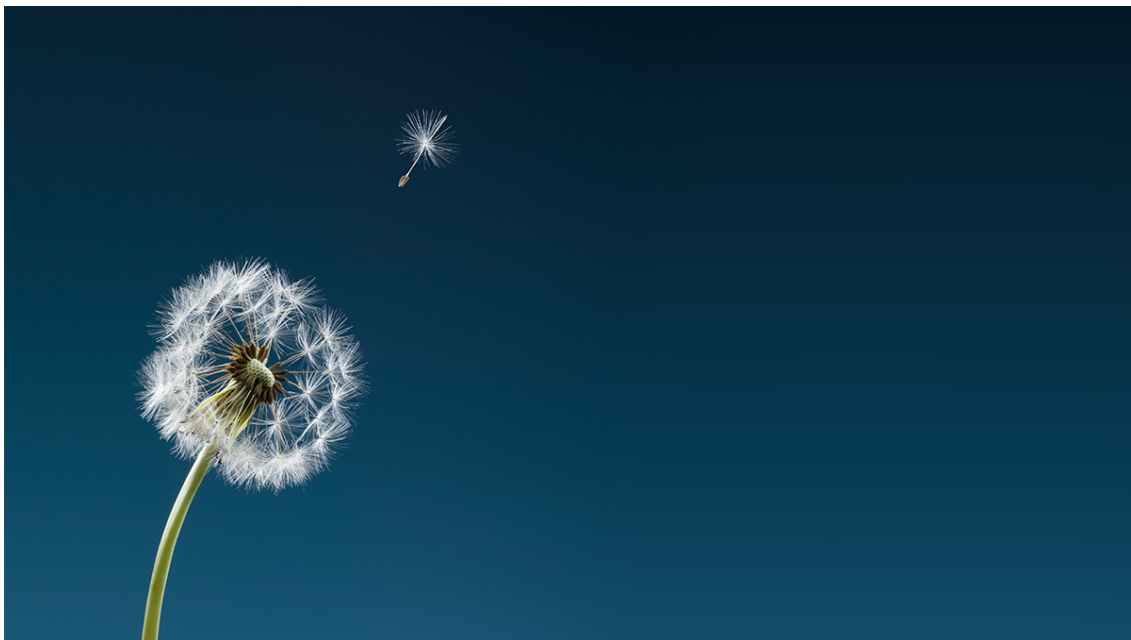# Harvard Business Review

Social Responsibility

How CSR Managers Can Inspire Other Leaders to Act on Sustainability

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Summary.   Many companies care about corporate social responsibility (CSR). But putting it into practice requires more than CEO speeches and company policies; managers and employees have to be on board, so that initiatives can be implemented and momentum for CSR can... **more**

Many companies care about corporate social responsibility (CSR). But putting it into practice requires more than CEO speeches and company policies; managers and employees have to be on board, so that initiatives can be implemented and momentum for CSR can be sustained. Our research found that CSR managers are critical change agents in this regard – but their role needs to be recognized and strengthened if firms want to become leaders in sustainability.

In 2013 we interviewed a cross-sectional sample of 54 CSR managers in German multinational corporations. The sample included companies such as Bayer, BMW and SAP, and we typically spoke with the Head of CSR in each company. We wanted to know what their goals and biggest challenges were, and what strategies they found most effective for pitching organizational change. Although these original insights date back several years, recent discussions and presentations to practitioners convinced us that they are still highly relevant. Despite the undeniable progress made with respect to CSR, creating momentum for sustainability and social change still remains a major challenge that requires further examination.

We learned that it often fell on the CSR manager to nudge other middle-managers — in marketing, procurement, production, and sales — to think about sustainability and participate in new initiatives. This could be a struggle. While many of their CEOs and senior leaders had recognized CSR as a "must have", they told us that most middle managers had not. They believed there was low motivation and interest around sustainability, and that people felt too overburdened to participate in new CSR projects. Interviewees emphasized that when middle managers were asked to incorporate new CSR practices in their day-to-day work and decision making, the typical response was that those tasks weren't in line with their financial goals.

We identified four tactics the managers found to be most effective at mobilizing others. Although these were not necessarily equally present in each and every company, the majority of the managers we interviewed discussed some version of them. They emphasized that importance of systematically applying these strategies to overcome

resistance to change and successfully implement CSR initiatives. Recent studies on 'micro CSR', focusing on the role of individuals in CSR implementation, suggest that these tactics are still or perhaps even more useful today.

Build a network of internal allies. Identifying colleagues who shared their passion for sustainability, and creating a network of employees interested in advancing CSR, was key to getting initiatives off the ground and establishing the business relevance of sustainability in different departments. CSR managers indicated the need to have support from senior management to develop pilot projects: "If you want to successfully integrate CSR topics in the company, you need to build up a network of people who know the company, and whom you know," said one respondent. "You have to invade the system and, basically, establish flagship projects to give people an orientation and then scale things up," said another.

Make sustainability resonate. Connecting abstract ideas of sustainability to the daily business routines of employees was another important lever for fostering commitment and support. This involved explaining what sustainability means for the company but also for specific people and specific jobs. One manager noted: "you really need to approach every employee, independent of what his or her job is, and explain the relevance of sustainability for them".

Our interviewees stressed that while CSR initiatives can offer a sense of purpose for many employees, this needs to be contextualized to their personal situations. For instance, when trying to get factory workers to handle hazardous materials more carefully, it was more effective to frame the initiative as helping them take responsibility for oneself and one's co-workers, rather than as a part of the broader company objectives.

CSR managers also talked about the impact of sustainability on the differing functions in which people worked. Several interviewees organized workshops with departments like HR, accounting, and sales to break down what the sustainability-relevant challenges were

for them specifically. For example, they might help an HR manager see the link between stronger CSR and stronger talent recruiting, whereas when talking to an engineer, they'd focus on issues of eco-efficiency or pollution prevention. Rather than promoting an overwhelming vision of a "better world" that was incomprehensible for most people with regard to their daily routines, the focus was on establishing business relevance for specific job environments.

Identify adequate incentives. People have different opinions about sustainability, so CSR managers had to spend time identifying how different employees felt about CSR. As one CSR manager noted: "you will only be able to convince them if you get into their way of thinking, their paradigms." Another manager pointed at the need to "find out what moves people, what touches them with regard to CSR." Usually this involved developing long-standing relationships and regular conversations with other middle-managers throughout the entire organization. Then the CSR managers had to make sure they were using the right language and incentives for the right audiences.

Some managers said, for example, that employees in managerial functions, especially those with a strong finance background or business education, are more likely to be convinced to participate if CSR can be quantified and a strong business case can be presented. In contrast, arguments about reputation and long-term effects on future employees or consumers resonate stronger when dealing with marketing, investor relations and HR. The CSR managers we interviewed also said that shop-floor employees and blue-collar workers were more motivated by presenting CSR as the "right thing to do", independent of how it might enhance profits.

Use external and internal benchmarking. Creating benchmarks against which progress of CSR projects can be measured is another important tactic. Who wants to be the laggard when it comes to sustainability? The CSR managers explained two ways to do this: First, internal benchmarking allows for comparing different divisions within a company on goals, such as reducing carbon emissions or

increasing recycling quotas. One interviewee said he established an internal competition among factories across the globe for the most environmentally sustainable production, based on a set of commonly agreed indicators. This CSR performance challenge led to sharing of best practices within the company.

Second, external benchmarking allows for comparing the CSR performance of an entire company against that of its competitors. For instance, this can be measured by looking at the placement in reputed CSR rankings such as the Dow Jones Sustainability Index. This tactic worked better when approaching staff functions such as marketing or HR who were generally more receptive of what the competition was doing in CSR and didn't want to be seen as lagging behind their key rivals.

Many companies employ a CSR manager or have an entire department responsible for pushing the company towards greater responsibility. But our research shows that CSR manager face resistance within their companies and need to employ a few key strategies to get others to prioritize sustainability. Making corporate social responsibility a reality today requires a collective effort of everyone in an organization.

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