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Responsible Leadership: A Missing Link

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Aguinis and Glavas (2013) ask, ''When and why does CSR lead to positive outcomes for employees, organizations, and society?'' Although the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is elusive and comprises a wide range of definitions, there is convergence on the voluntary nature of these actions. But who implements these voluntary initiatives? CSR will take effect, as Aguinis and Glavas point out, at micro levels, through the actions of lower-level units and employees. Thus, there is a need to specify mechanisms by which macro-level CSR policies result in microlevel outcomes.

Leadership, we argue, may be a missing link in some of Aguinis and Glavas' arguments. Through leaders, CSR policies will be articulated and implemented at lower levels in the organization and hence lead to the positive outcomes outlined by Aguinis and Glavas. At IBM, for example, an organization of over 400,000 employees worldwide, and despite the fact that the *Smarter Planet* initiative may be embedded, its meaning in the specific context of one's job will need to be articulated. In other words, the embeddedness of the initiative does not guarantee that each and every employee, from programmer to senior consultant and vice president, will understand its meaning for his or her job.

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The objective of this commentary is to add to Aguinis and Glavas' framework by proposing the concept of responsible leadership as a critical link between macrolevel CSR policies and microlevel outcomes. This commentary is structured as follows. First, we define responsible leadership. Second, we outline how formal leadership may serve as an engine of transmission for CSR policies. Third, we argue that responsible leaders can be considered corporate social entrepreneurs and organizational (CSR) champions. Then, we discuss the likelihood of emergence of informal responsible leaders in the two types of CSR initiatives defined by Aguinis and Glavas. Finally, we sum up and draw broad conclusions about the importance of responsible leadership for the success of CSR initiatives.

Defining Responsible Leadership

Organizational leadership has often been defined as a process of social influence toward a collective goal. However, most of the existing leadership frameworks view leadership rather narrowly, either adopting a dyadic (leader follower) or unit-level perspective that remains within organizational boundaries, a view too limited for CSR purposes. Indeed, when adding stakeholders to the equation, the classic view of leadership as a dyadic relationship between a formal leader and a subordinate becomes partial and makes it challenging to address how leaders can transcend organizational boundaries to accomplish

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CSR objectives. As an answer to this, the idea of responsible leadership has gained increasing attention in academic inquiry. For example, Voegtlin, Patzer, and Scherer (2012) emphasized the role of responsible leaders in guiding stakeholders toward a consensus on organizational strategy. Pless and Maak (2011) defined a responsible leader as someone able to reconcile the idea of effectiveness with that of CSR, by cultivating sustainable relationships with stakeholders. Many of these concepts were already present in Freeman's seminal work on stakeholder theory, which proposes that leaders and organizations are not exclusively responsible to shareholders but also to a wide array of stakeholders (actors that may be affected in diverse ways by organizational action; Freeman, 2010).

The original definition of leadership as a process of social influence toward collective action does not exclude broader definitions such as responsible leadership. The purpose of introducing the notion of responsible leadership is not to reinvent the wheel when it comes to explaining the leadership process. Rather, it is to leverage existing theories to apply them to leadership within a broader context, that of CSR, thus bridging the microlevel fields of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology and organizational behavior with the broader fields of strategic management and CSR. Using this definition, we will now turn to formal leaders as engines of transmission of a CSR vision and discuss how the existing leadership literature may support research at the CSR–leadership intersection.

Formal Leaders as an Engine of Transmission of CSR Vision

Aguinis and Glavas mention a number of processes through which CSR can impact microlevel outcomes. Of these, two are particularly relevant to the present discussion: meaningfulness and self-concept. They suggest that meaningfulness (both *at* work and *in* work) is essential to understanding the effects of CSR, and they propose that embedded CSR will be naturally more meaningful to employees than peripheral CSR. Even in the case of embedded CSR, however, this policy will need to be translated in a way that is meaningful and concrete for each employee. This can be done most efficiently by leaders at all levels of the organization, as leaders, through their vision, are arguably one of the most important mechanisms through which meaning is created and articulated (e.g., McDermott, Conway, Rousseau, & Flood, 2013; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

There are many ways to articulate one vision, some more effective than others. Strong leaders are adept at finding the right message and packaging it in a way that is adapted for different groups of employees and other stakeholders so that each can see a link between the vision and their own values and self-concept. This, in turn, should lead to greater commitment toward the vision. This mechanism of vision articulation applies to both embedded and peripheral CSR, but in the former case, it is more likely that leaders will be aware of the values attached to the CSR policies. The packaging might also be more straightforward because it is central to the organization's strategy. Therefore, we propose that it may also be more effective. To study the mechanisms related to the processes of vision formation, articulation, and delivery in a CSR context, the literature on value-based, visionary, transformational, and charismatic leadership will be useful.

Aguinis and Glavas also suggest that a disconnect between meaningfulness *at* work and *in* work may have adverse effects, and that this is especially likely in the case of peripheral CSR. To carry on with the IBM example, it is likely that, in the day-to-day life of an IBM employee, there will be slippages or misalignment between the values embodied by the *Smarter Planet* initiative and the actions of colleagues or supervisors. This disconnect may be conceptualized as a breach in this employee's psychological contract with the organization, and this breach may be real or perceived. Though leaders may be the initiator of this breach (if

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the disconnect occurs because of leader behavior perceived as going against the articulated CSR values), they can also help restore the employee's trust, perception of value congruence, and justice following a perceived breach (see, e.g., McDermott et al., 2013). One way or the other, the leader is a central actor in this process and its role should not be neglected.

Emergence of Informal Responsible Leaders

According to Voegtlin et al. (2012) and Freeman and Auster (2011), responsible leaders behave like social entrepreneurs: They decide to engage in some type of social innovation by adopting the role of change makers within organizational boundaries. As entrepreneurs, responsible leaders use vision, influence, and creativity to promote their ideas and get some buy in. More specifically, they assume the role of corporate social entrepreneurs, who may be considered organizational champions (Austin, Leonard, Reffico, & Wei-Skillern, 2006).

Champions are individuals who informally emerge and who actively commit to, and advocate for, the implementation of innovative ideas or projects. Champions rely on formal and informal mechanisms to sell their ideas and may even risk their own reputation when advocating for their convictions. In order to succeed, champions often tie their initiatives to broader organizational outcomes (Howell & Boies, 2004). Although most of the mechanisms specified in the literature on organizational champions and issue selling (e.g., Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001) probably hold in the context of CSR, more research is required to identify those mechanisms used when promoting causes that are not strictly and clearly justifiable through performance.

As CSR champions are informal leaders, one might wonder how they emerge. As with any entrepreneurial venture, we can expect that everything begins with the recognition of an opportunity. Though the entrepreneurial spirit is present, as corporate social entrepreneurs, CSR champions face a different type of constraints in comparison to traditional entrepreneurs because they are immersed in organizations with their own set of rules. They must therefore be adept at navigating the organizational context. This organizational context will include norms that may encourage or hinder the emergence of champions. We propose that organizations in which CSR is authentically embedded in routines, strategies, and operations create particularly appropriate norms and present auspicious conditions for the emergence of champions, thus creating a virtuous cycle.

Conclusion

Aguinis and Glavas called for greater integration of I–O psychology and organizational behavior with the field of CSR, and we entirely agree that this is needed. We offer one process, responsible leadership, which we believe may help bridge macrolevel CSR with microlevel outcomes. Specifically, we argue that formal leaders will serve as an engine of transmission for both embedded and peripheral CSR, though the mechanisms might differ in the two cases. Formal leaders in the organization might also help buffer the adverse effects of a misalignment between the articulated CSR values and organizational action, which is especially likely in the case of peripheral CSR. Finally, we propose that embedded CSR will present a particularly fertile ground for informal responsible leaders, as CSR champions, to emerge. Fortunately, the leadership field has a long and rich research tradition, which can be leveraged to support the more recent CSR field in its effort to articulate how routines, strategies, and operations may translate into positive outcomes for employees and other stakeholders.

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