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COMMENTARY

Integrating discrimination training with CSR programs

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As noted by Hayes et al. (2020), organizations are increasingly turning to implicit bias training in the aftermath of high-profile organizational crises involving discrimination. Though such a reactive approach could help organizations appear to be socially responsible, empirical work (Donia et al., 2017; Groza et al., 2011) in the corporate social responsibility (CSR) domain suggests that reactively implementing social initiatives can be perceived as greenwashing (i.e., disingenuous and inauthentic) by internal (i.e., employees) and external (e.g., local communities or customers) stakeholders. Greenwashing is a term that originally referred to inauthentic organizational behavior concerning environmental sustainability, but it has come to refer to all forms of inauthentic CSR initiatives and stands in contrast to CSR programs enacted with a genuine desire to help others. Opting for a reactive approach to CSR is but one of several pitfalls that could potentially affect stakeholder perceptions of organizational motives when implementing social initiatives, including those designed to prevent harassment and discrimination. Misalignment between the initiatives and current organizational practices is another worth noting.

In this context, Hayes et al.'s (2020) call for organizations to integrate diversity and inclusion training with an embedded CSR strategy warrants further attention with regard to organizational authenticity and the threat of greenwashing accusations. A more in-depth analysis of the concerns inherent in such an approach will be detailed in the subsequent sections. However, my core assertion is that embedding racial discrimination and sexual harassment training into organizational CSR programs will influence cultural norms of diversity and inclusion only to the extent that employees perceive that training to be authentic, consistent with organizational policies and practices, broad in scope, and reflective of the organization's image and reputation. I briefly review the utility of integrating sexual harassment and racial discrimination training with CSR before outlining the concerns inherent with this approach. Finally, I propose best practices that may be employed to mitigate the threat of greenwashing accusations.

Integrating diversity training and CSR

Is there utility in integrating diversity training and development with broader social responsibility programs? Indeed, micro-CSR researchers (scholars who investigate how CSR affects employee-level outcomes) have linked the workplace diversity dimension of CSR (Mueller et al., 2012) to positive employee outcomes. Empirical evidence that CSR perceptions are positively related to organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g., Mueller et al., 2012) and negatively related to colleague-directed counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., Shin et al., 2017) is also germane to the discussion. Integrating diversity initiatives with a broader CSR strategy may have the potential to strengthen these associations, especially for members of minoritized groups. As Hayes et al. (2020) suggested, interventions and training efforts designed to foster diversity and protect employees from the threat of discrimination and harassment in the workplace

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certainly fit within the conceptual focus of CSR. Organizations should, therefore, be encouraged to work toward synergy between diversity training programs and other CSR initiatives. Not only is there potential for organizational climate benefits (e.g., ethical climate and diversity climate), but using such an approach may directly influence work-related attitudes and behaviors relevant to harassment.

Diversity training and charges of greenwashing

Despite the potential benefits of coupling diversity training and CSR, there remain several questions to address regarding greenwashing. For example, can an organization build norms around inclusion and antiharassment via training programs if training is implemented reactively and is inconsistent with existing CSR activities? Do organizational image and reputation influence how employees perceive such training, particularly if there have been recent organizational events or crises involving discrimination? What are the dangers of misalignment between training goals and current organizational policies and practices? Finally, how does the broadness of scope of training—or, whether training provides equal coverage of issues relevant to varied protected classes—affect behavioral outcomes and whether employees attribute the training to other-serving or self-serving motives? Recent empirical work on the negative effects of CSR inconsistency is informative in this regard (Rego et al., 2010).

The questions outlined above are complicated, and the answers might depend on the characteristics of the organization in question and other contextual factors. Nonetheless, these concerns regarding diversity training—reactive versus proactive, alignment with organizational policy and reputation, and balance and broadness of scope—could potentially serve as signals to employees about the authenticity and value of the training. These signals may in turn shape employee perceptions and reactions, thereby influencing training effectiveness. In this way, charges of greenwashing have the potential to derail even the most well-intentioned sexual harassment and racial discrimination training plans.

Reactive versus proactive CSR

Most organizational behaviorists would likely agree that strong climates and cultures with established norms are fostered and cultivated, not instantiated overnight with impromptu training. Therefore, ongoing diversity-focused CSR efforts should outperform a reactive approach, an argument that is in accordance with prior research on reactive CSR (Groza et al., 2011; Hayes et al., 2020). Importantly, a proactive approach would signify that diversity is indeed as part of organizational norms and not merely a response to a reputational crisis. Fryzel and Seppala (2016) noted that "while there are [organizations] that are seen to pursue CSR for the purpose of playing a positive role in society, there are also [organizations] engaging in CSR for instrumental reasons, including protecting against reputational damage" (p. 312). It is reasonable to conclude that if organizations reflexively implement such training without appropriately considering the factors mentioned above, training may have limited effectiveness, as employees may attribute the organization's actions to disingenuous or symbolic motives.

Aligning training and organizational practices: "Walking the talk"

Cording et al. (2014) asserted that "a misalignment between what the firm is doing and what it is telling its stakeholders it values signals a lack of organizational authenticity" (p. 40). Indeed, the enemy of authenticity is misalignment or a discrepancy between what is said and what is done—in other words, failing to "walk the talk" (Charles et al., 2017). This discrepancy, or the perception thereof, has been linked to employees' affective attachment to CSR.

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For example, Fryzel and Seppala (2016) demonstrated that "affective attachment to CSR is strongly and positively related to [the] authentic evaluation of CSR motives and negatively related to instrumental evaluation" (p. 317). That is, employees will buy in to an organization's CSR stance and related initiatives if they perceive CSR activities to be authentic. It follows, then, that if the organization's goals are to achieve emotional buy-in and cultivate organizational norms surrounding diversity, tolerance, and inclusion, aligning training interventions with organizational practices and communication should be a prime consideration.

Training broadness of scope

It is reasonable for organizations to be hopeful that implementing diversity training will signal organizational concern for inclusion, allyship, and a safe working environment for minoritized groups. The CSR literature (Schons & Steinmeier, 2016), however, suggests that there exists some variance in how employees interpret and perceive CSR initiatives, especially if those initiatives are not implemented consistently across groups (i.e., are narrowly focused).

Thus, it is important to consider training broadness of scope when deciding on training content and which groups to target. Organizations should be mindful of whether CSR initiatives are implemented evenly across the various stakeholder groups—in this case, the various protected classes affected by, or at risk of being affected by, discriminatory behavior. This would mean designing diversity-focused interventions such that they are not disproportionately directed at improving the working conditions of a specific minority group relative to others. The work of Rego et al. (2010) suggests that employees can interpret and perceive inconsistency and unevenness in how organizational CSR activities are directed at different stakeholders. Further, generalized exchange theory suggests that even if an employee is not a member of the forgotten or overlooked group, inconsistency in CSR activities may still be detrimental to behavioral outcomes (Yamagishi & Cook, 1993).

Taken together, it is reasonable to conclude that when evaluating diversity-focused CSR initiatives, employees will likely look for other cues regarding an organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion, including whether the initiatives are distributed consistently across groups and are consistent with the broader CSR program.

Best practices and concluding remarks

In summary, the integration of racial discrimination and sexual harassment training with organizational CSR frameworks appears to be a necessary direction to achieve more positive outcomes for diversity training. I argued that the extent to which such training will influence norms of diversity and inclusion depends on employees perceiving the training and development to be broad in scope, authentic, internally consistent with other company CSR activities, and in accordance with the reputation and image of the corporation. These concerns fall within the purview of greenwashing, as employees are likely to make determinations of whether corporate actions are for societal good or attributable to less altruistic motives (e.g., profit or reputation). To mitigate the threat of greenwashing, I urge those involved with training and development to take the following steps:

(a) Consider that prior research on CSR suggests that implementing social initiatives (e.g., diversity interventions) reactively, particularly in response to a reputational crisis, could lead to perceptions of inauthenticity. Along these lines, proactively implementing diversity training as part of an embedded CSR strategy could be an important step toward inoculating the organization against charges of greenwashing.
(b) Consider the impact of organizational authenticity, evaluating whether actions and communication are in alignment. Make it a priority to "walk the talk" by ensuring that

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antiharassment and antidiscrimination training is in accordance with corporate image, corporate policies, organizational practices, and written and spoken communication regarding diversity and inclusion.

(c) Consider empirical evidence of CSR inconsistency that suggests that giving equal attention to stakeholders—in this case, protected classes or any group affected by harassment and discrimination—should have more positive outcomes than disproportionately directing training toward one minoritized group over others.

These guidelines and best practices are by no means a panacea to avoid charges of greenwashing, as a variety of other factors not discussed may shape employees' evaluations of authenticity (e.g., history of diversity at the organization or top management support). Nonetheless, the concerns outlined above speak to the importance of looking beyond the mere presence of antidiscrimination and antiharassment training to strongly consider the qualitative and contextual factors that may hinder the effective inclusion of diversity training in the CSR context.

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