Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), a management concept for the systematic integration of social, environmental and ethical aspects into core business operations in collaboration with stakeholders, has become central to the corporate world. Nowadays, few companies can afford not to position themselves with regard to CSR and communicate their activities to stakeholders. Whilst formal structures such as codes of conduct, policy documents and certification schemes are central for the successful implementation of CSR, their formal endorsement by company leaders alone often has little to no effect.

In the worst case scenario, public commitments to CSR without proper implementation easily lead to accusations of greenwashing or the symbolic construction of a CSR façade without any substance. CSR managers play a critical role in avoiding such problems, because they are responsible for implementing CSR practices internally and spreading a CSR mindset within companies. Our research shows that CSR managers have developed a set of creative and informal tactics that promise to facilitate a more effective implementation of CSR.
Building a network of internal allies. The creation of an internal network and the identification of likeminded others that act as allies in the quest for greater sustainability are key components of successful CSR implementation. Support from influential decision-makers that are embedded in the operational sphere (such as the Head of Procurement or Marketing) helps CSR managers to launch pilot projects. This helps to give CSR a strategic edge and shows that it ‘works’ and can be scaled up to other parts of the company.

TACTIC 2: Identifying adequate incentives. In order to “catch people where they can be caught” (as one informant put it), CSR managers need to identify the different and often very heterogeneous incentives and motivations of employees within a company, and adjust their arguments in favour of particular CSR projects to these incentives. This is important when convincing employees with different educational backgrounds of the importance of CSR for the company. Moreover, employees in different divisions of a company, such as accounting, production, sales or PR, often differ considerably in their level of openness to various CSR incentives. For instance, employees with managerial functions, in particular with a strong finance background, are more likely to be convinced if CSR can be quantified and a strong business case can be presented. By contrast, arguments with regard to reputation and long-term effects on stakeholders such as future employees or governments have more impact when a CSR manager is dealing with public and investor relations and HR staff.

External and internal benchmarking. Creating benchmarks against which to measure the progress of CSR projects is another important tool. CSR managers can use this tool in two ways. Internal benchmarking aims to compare different divisions within a company on related grounds, such as the carbon emissions or recycling quotas per unit for multiple production lines. It works well for creating internal competition for the best CSR performance. For instance, decision-makers may be more motivated to engage in CSR projects if there is an incentive to be the best, or not the worst, among all divisions or locations. External benchmarking is broader and aims to make the CSR performance of an entire company comparable to that of a competitor. For instance, this can be measured by looking at the placement in reputable CSR rankings, such as the Dow Jones Sustainability Index.

Identifying ethical and functional proximity. CSR managers who are able to connect abstract ideas about ethics and sustainability to everyday business routines create an important lever to foster commitment and support. This means explaining what sustainability means not only for the company, but also for specific people doing specific jobs. This can happen at the emotional level, where employees develop a feeling of personal responsibility for different CSR aspects (such as helping to reduce accidents in their factory or considering their own footprint). Equally importantly, functional proximity means explaining the sustainability impact of specific jobs in the company. For instance, showing how procurement or marketing roles can raise ethical problems and which steps are necessary to address these (such as measuring the carbon footprint of a company’s car fleet and adjusting procurement decisions in favour of more efficient cars).

Collectively, the results of this study suggest that having formal structures alone, such as a code of conduct, a CSR strategy, or policy documents for environmental or social aspects, has little impact, even if paired with CEO endorsement. Formal structures are important building blocks for starting the “CSR journey”, but they need to be accompanied by a range of informal tactics. Company employees and decision-makers need to be carefully and subtly encouraged to adopt CSR in their everyday roles, rather than allowing it to remain a lifetime concept. This is a difficult task, and one that confronts CSR managers with multiple challenges. This research reveals several innovative tactics that promise to make the task of CSR implementation more effective.

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