

Not dinosaurs but dynamos: The roles of middle managers in CSR and SD issues

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Current approaches analyze corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development (SD) as an organizational-level phenomenon that develops in response to institutional forces (for example, consumers' pressures for the adoption of legitimized best practices) or because of top management instrumental motivations (the 'business case' for CSR). This focus limits our understanding of how CSR and SD initiatives are conceived, developed, and implemented. While top managers may define CSR strategies, it is middle managers that implement these strategies in the day-to-day concrete operations. Moreover, middle managers are in permanent contact with external stakeholders and in a privileged situation to scan their environments and perceive needs and claims. Under certain circumstances, middle managers are the exclusive channel of communication between specific groups of stakeholders and organizations, as it is the case international branches of multinational corporations. Because of their in-between position, they can synthesize this external information to influence the top management while promoting social and environmental issues throughout the whole organization. Noteworthy, due to their involvement in implementation, they remain essential to avoid ceremonial or incomplete implementation that, in turn, could lead to misconduct, compartmentalization, green-washing, or window-dressing of CSR practices. Therefore, in light of our knowledge about middle managers from the strategy literature, the goal of this work is to explore how, according to the CSR and SD literature, middle managers in charge of CSR or SD initiatives perform their managerial roles. Drawing on their knowledge of operations and context, their position at the interface of different stakeholders inside and outside the organization and their values, we found that middle managers in charge of CSR and SD initiatives perform three types of roles: influencing, implementing, and connecting. Based on these findings, we reflected on future research avenues that can better support practitioners' engagement toward a more sustainable business environment.