



The loneliness of the CSR manager

Who would have thought that such an attractive, promising, transversal function would turn out to be a deceiving, solo position?

The ethical Eldorado

10 years ago a rush began into the golden job : expression of values, ethics in practice, tomorrow's challenges were put in the hands of the happy few, the CSR managers. They managed to convince the bosses that they were multifunctional, multi-faceted, ultra-sociable. They would engage with stakeholders, convince the operators that sustainability was important, train teams on the triple bottom line, conclude new partnerships with NGOs or foundations, attend workshops and publish all types of communications on the responsible performance and investment of their organisation. At the crossroads of information, confidence, new facts and figures, they represented the future of a healthy, open-minded management. They most often came from the fields of human resources, communication and public affairs, or the environmental. Strangely, not from the economic sphere.

Here we are, 10 years later. As agreed, talented CSR managers had high-level training, met fellow CSR managers, gained in-depth knowledge of selected topics, studied emerging standards, improved their reporting, consulted stakeholders. Yet the CSR world has changed. They know tables are turning, they know where their organisation must go to. Yet, they're stuck.

Hitting the new glass-ceiling.

Let's not be mistaken: they don't face the classical form of resistance to change from conventional colleagues, nor the usual cynics who undermine any new idea. On the contrary, you could say that their colleagues believed in it too, in a way. They were even, in some cases, looking forward to this evolution, hoping that their company would engage in a more valuable business. They felt reassurance that their own values could somehow find a place in their work, and that a new dialogue was open on what they expected from a responsible company. Reconciling their own beliefs with those of their employer? What a bargain! They wanted to believe!

What happens is worse. CSR managers are blocked by the very persons who gave them the mandate to be CSR managers: the top management. The board of directors, the executive committee, the CEO, "up there", did not see the evolution. Or doesn't not want to admit it. They thought they could wrap up the sustainability trend by appointing a CSR manager, who would manage it all for the company. After all, it was a mixture of communication, public affairs, environment and philanthropy, wasn't it? But it was not. As years went by, social responsibility turned a serious corner. It met materiality.

CSR could no longer be a nice to have, a beautiful vitrine, an alibi, a side order. It was becoming central, crucial, strategic. CSR managers saw the evolution coming; they were maybe the first to notice, in their small circles of experts, consultants and academics. So they told the boss: it was rising on the societal agenda, getting closer to the boardroom.



And the masks fell: “CSR, not strategy”

There was no way CSR managers would start talking about strategy, business models, operating costs, externalities, process design, ethical conduct, transparency at the very top. Hard figures and practices were not the business of CSR, it was the business of the board. They were paid to do CSR, not strategy. See the problem?

CSR, not strategy: This misunderstanding was without appeal. Who is a CSR manager to tell his/her boss that (s)he has it wrong? That (s)he doesn't know anything about CSR? That (s)he cannot keep on doing business like before? That (s)he doesn't see that this change is an irreversible trend? How can the CSR manager tell the boss (s)he's not a fool?

We have seen excellent sustainability strategies sink into oblivion, sharp materiality analysis thrown out the window, CSR diagnosis causing the dismissal of the messenger, and many, many CSR managers burn out, become depressed.. and leave their company.

What's after the CSR manager?

If there is one thing a CEO must not do these days, it's creating a CSR position. This floating mandate serves nobody's purpose anymore. It may have been a progressive idea early on. But today it is wrong. The sustainability agenda cannot be outsourced to someone outside the boardroom anymore.

The last – or best? - thing a CSR manager can do still is transfer his knowledge to his/her top management. Or make sure it gets updated on what social responsibility has become: an essential perspective for long term optimisation of company social and financial performance.

Actually, it's bringing the power of CSR decision-making back where it should have been since the beginning. CSR needs positive-impact minded, daring, audacious leaders. Where are they?

Luckily, a few prominent figures are out there, showing the way. How long will it take before all the other CEOs recognise them as peers worth being inspired by? Maybe the time it takes for the former CSR managers to become CEOs in visionary companies.

In the meantime, we congratulate the CSR managers for their efforts and wish them all the best...

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