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CSR partnership initiatives: Opportunities for innovation and generative learning

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This article is about the intersection of innovation, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and transferable generative learning. Generative learning is learning how to solve unstructured, complex problems for which there are no single right answers. The article addresses corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that occur when corporations form or join a partnership with other organizations – community, government, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other for-profit companies – to address a social, health, and/or environmental problem. The focus is on the for-profit corporation's and employees' motivation, engagement, and contributions in such partnership initiatives.

This form of CSR occurs when a company crosses organizational and possibly national boundaries to help solve a problem – for instance, bring clean water to a remote village in a third world country or address issues of poverty and education in an inner city neighborhood. The problem is addressed by individuals from the various organizations working in one or more teams. The problem may require a specific expertise, product, or service that the corporation possesses that needs to be adapted to the local situation. Or the problem may entail considerable uncertainty and need for creative solutions and invention. The problem may be centered in one location, but the issue and process can be generalized, so that local solutions can be applied elsewhere (scalability) and the organizations involved can learn and transfer innovation development processes.

The general case occurs when a company offers, or is invited, to donate expertise to help solve a problem that is being addressed by public and not-for-profit organizations and community groups in a particular location. The problem may come to the attention of corporate representatives by chance (e.g., an executive reads about the issue or observes the problem while on a trip to the region). The effort may be initiated by the corporate representative who first becomes aware of the problem and wants to find a solution. The effort may be ongoing and the corporate representative secures and

offers company resources to help. Or the corporation may be known as having needed expertise and is contacted by an agency and asked to join the problem solving team. The effort could deal with disease, hunger, migration of refugees, water resources, poverty, economic development, access to technology, or combinations thereof – any issue or problem of socio-political-economic significance.

A study in Scandinavia found companies that initiated social efforts that have global dimensions. For instance, Novo Nordisk spearheaded an effort to support a growing international advocacy platform to put chronic disease prevention on political agendas. Philips formed a Green Flagship process to gather and measure the best lighting products that fit eco-design criteria. An electricity company fostered power access in developing parts of the world such as Mali, Morocco, and South Africa, which would otherwise be "off grid." A joint venture between Telenor and Grameen, the micro-financing bank for millions of poor people in rural villages throughout Bangladesh, provided administrative support for the bank. Telenor benefitted from market access and distribution systems, and Grameen was able to introduce new types of products into their business model.

IBM's Corporate Service Corps – a corporate version of the Peace Corps – sends teams of top emerging company leaders to work on community-driven economic development projects in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. One project helped Nigerians get access to free healthcare no matter which remote clinic they visited. IBM employees networked servers in each clinic through cloud computing, with fingerprint reader cars to ensure accuracy and security of patient information. IBM recognizes that such efforts prepare the company for growth in emerging markets as it develops high-potential employees for leadership. Employees gain team skills for work in complex, unstructured environments, increase their global awareness, and acquire cultural knowledge and sensitivity.

Consider some other examples: Levi Strauss & Co.'s Community Involvement Teams of employee volunteers carry out projects on their own with start-up money from the company. Nestlé's Shared Value Approach supports collaboration between the company, governments, and NGOs for such initiatives as training agronomists and field technicians, advice about quality control systems, providing financial support through microfinance loans, and the development of enterprises that support local employment. At Abbott Laboratories, highly specialized employees volunteer in countries such as Tanzania to support health care and economic development. Experts from the company offer extensive training and mentoring for lab staff in healthcare institutions. Other company experts volunteer to work on problems in construction, engineering, facility and equipment maintenance, health care management, information technology, security and waste management. British Petroleum uses site visits as part of its staff training strategy to teach employees about community development. Bankers Trust in Manila has local staff help villagers with business plans and offers technical assistance to build new roads and other infrastructure.

Microsoft's department of corporate citizenship supports social initiatives in strategic planning and program development, field readiness and training, marketing and communications, business integration, and stakeholder engagement. Just as partnership is integral to Microsoft's business model, the company's CSR efforts are partnerships with other companies as well as government agencies and NGOs. Microsoft's goal is to use technology to address societal needs and deploy software to benefit the millions of people they serve. One example of the business strategy-driven CSR is the commitment to reduce the impact of computer use on the environment through power management and energy efficiency. Microsoft formed a partnership with several companies and other organizations to launch the Climate Savers Computing Initiative to offer guidance to individuals and businesses on how to take advantage of industry innovations and best practices that improve energy efficiency and power management. Another Microsoft partnership, the Community Technology Skills Program, teaches basic computing skills to people in emerging and underdeveloped economies around the world. A related effort creates learning materials for teachers to teach others in their country about the computer and allows them to customize the materials to meet the needs of the various audiences. Microsoft recognizes that the value of corporate citizenship is branding — associating a more educated international society to the products and services of the company, and as a result, allowing shorter time cycles for acceptance of new software and products.

Another form of CSR comes from startup social entrepreneurs. Startups begin with social entrepreneurs who wish to solve problems with scalable, sometimes profit-making, solutions. They see a problem and seek partners and support for developing solutions, obtaining funding, and establishing the venture to deliver products or services to an impoverished region in line with social or environmental needs. The Scandinavian research cited above provided examples of startups that become learning organizations through social entrepreneurship partnerships: (a) Fair Unlimited, a company that reduces poverty by helping producers in Third World countries grow, selling corporate gift products with a fair-trade

label, (b) FIN, a clothing manufacturer that applies good labor conditions and high environmental standards in their worldwide supply chain, (c) Audur Capital, a financial services provider of women investors who are dedicated to making socially responsible investments, (d) Clewer, inventor of an innovative water purification system that uses precision bacteria to remove contaminants, and (e) Durat, an environmental firm that reduces pollution by collected raw plastic waste from manufacturing plants and turning it into products used in modern technology and molding systems.

In both the case of corporations and startups, CSR initiatives stem from a problem, engage in problem solving, and generate and test alternative solutions. The process requires engagement — the investment of time, energy, expertise, and money. It also requires the commitment of the participants — the demonstration of caring and valuing their participation. The task is generative in that it entails analyzing problems, brainstorming new ideas, and formulating new work processes. In the process, participants acquire new skills, knowledge, and information, and benefit from diversity of expertise and background. The outcomes are innovative solutions — those that go beyond existing methods and likely incorporate new or different ways of using technology. The participants learn how to be generative, which they can then apply in other situations. The company can incorporate generative methods in its regular operations as employees gain team problem-solving skills. The startup can become a flexible, responsive, learning organization.

REASONS FOR CORPORATE INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL INNOVATION

Companies may use social issues as a learning laboratory to identify unmet needs and develop solutions that create new markets while also addressing significant social concerns. Companies can create profitable markets while also helping the poor address urgent needs. Strategic CSR occurs when companies accept social responsibility and integrate it into their core business strategy.

Focusing on current social and environmental needs gives corporations a chance to develop sustainable products or services and be drivers for social change. Firms consider traditionally unrepresented stakeholders, including the environment and future generations, as they meet a "triple bottom line" — attention to people, planet, and profit. They become, or are, innovative enterprises. Innovating enterprises differ from optimizing enterprises. Innovative enterprises create transformations in technology and/or market conditions, whereas optimizing organizations develop adaptations to maximize efficiency.

Innovating is a generative process, and people, teams, and organizations can learn to be generative. CSR teamwork offers opportunities for learning to be generative and innovative. The work addresses problems that have value to the corporation's reputation and bottom line. It addresses them directly through solutions that may be commercialized, and indirectly through transference of knowledge to other aspects of the company's products or services. The process requires openness to new ideas and ways of thinking, understanding of multiple parties' perspectives (those providing expertise and those affected directly by the problem), and

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