

INFLUENCE

To Get Companies to Take Action on Social Issues, Emphasize Morals, Not the Business Case

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FEBRUARY 14, 2019



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More employees are asking their companies and leaders to tackle important social problems.

If you are an employee who wants to create social change from within your organization, what is the best approach? Conventional wisdom is clear on this one: make the business case. Convince management that addressing the issue will help the company's bottom line. We've seen the business case for a plethora of social issues: increasing diversity, sustainability, corporate social responsibility, corporate philanthropy, corporate volunteering programs, reducing poverty, and treating employees well.

Yet some have questioned whether we always have to make the business case. For example, don't many organizational leaders want to improve society as an end in itself? Research also shows the business case can activate a leader's "economic schema," or a tendency to make decisions solely from an economic viewpoint, which can lead to less compassionate behavior.

So we set out to scientifically study whether the business case or the moral case for combatting social problems was most persuasive to managers.

The Research

We conducted several studies to look at this issue. In sum, we asked over 400 U.S. employees across several organizations whether they had ever "spoken up to management about an important 'social issue' to try to create a positive change that they thought would benefit others or society."

In general, about half of the employees reported raising a social issue to management. These issues focused on topics such as health, employee treatment, diversity, community issues, and sustainability.

We asked employees the extent to which they used business case language (e.g., it will help the company's bottom line), moral language (e.g., it is the morally right thing to do), framed the argument as fitting with the organization's broader values and mission, and were successful (e.g., their manager made efforts to address the issue). We also asked their managers to report on how much time, money, and resources they spent on the social problem.

Our findings were remarkably consistent across these studies. We found that economic language was never significantly related to effectiveness – managers were no more or less likely to devote time, attention, money, or other resources to address the social issue when the employee made a

business case. This finding is inconsistent with conventional wisdom about the persuasive power of the business case.

In general, using moral language had a weak or non-significant relationship with effectiveness. However, we found that when employees used moral language and framed the social issue as part of the organization's values and mission, they were far more successful. By tailoring the moral message to also fit with something perceived as legitimate – what the company stood for – it provided cover, license, and an impetus for the manager to put energy into working on the social problem.

The Implications for Employees Trying to Create Social Change

This research provides a number of important takeaways for employees who want to influence their leader to tackle a social issue.

Social change is often bottom up. Employees may feel powerless to enact change because they believe directives must come from management. However, research finds that employees have more agency to initiate change, even social change, than they typically perceive. Often times an employee does not have to go at it alone, as forming coalitions of employees can be a useful tactic to influence management. When multiple employees highlight the moral implications of an issue and highlight its connection to the company's core values, it may become difficult for a manager to dismiss their views as naïve or not core to the business.

Assume the best. A consistent finding in psychology is that people tend to not assume the best when considering others' motives: they believe others are motivated more by self-interest than upholding a moral virtue. For example, according to the “extrinsic incentive bias” people are more likely to think they are motivated by intrinsic reasons (i.e., to help others, to learn and grow) while others are motivated by extrinsic reasons (i.e., to make money, to get status).

Our research suggests that changing this narrative and assuming the best of others – that they want to make a positive difference – may be a more useful influence strategy for persuading managers to create social change. It may be too early to throw out the business case, but an appropriately framed moral case seems to be effective.

Target your message. Although it may seem obvious, people tend to focus more on what messages would influence them personally as opposed to what would influence others. Research finds that tailoring messages in a way that will resonate with a particular audience, based on their personality, values, and/or motivations, leads to the greatest influence. Thus, it is important to think about the characteristics and incentives of one's manager to craft a message that is most likely to appeal to them. For example, if a manager is evaluated in part on upholding a company's mission and values then arguments that tap into organizational purpose will likely be more effective.

Business organizations may be the best institution we have to address social problems. Fortunately, we need not sit back and wait for management to move forward. Employees at all levels have the agency to initiate social change – and a properly tailored moral argument isn't a bad place to start.



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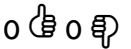
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KHEEPE MOREMI 15 days ago

The case for social impact or shared value as Porter and Kramer calls it should be integrative. In other words: 1) it is the right thing to do (moral case); 2) it gives us the license to trade; 3) It helps us save the planet; 4) it gives us a competitive advantage - in other words, it helps us drive a wedge between costs and willingness to pay.

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