

Call and response: Identity and witness in legitimating CSR

Donald Nordberg and Tim Breitbarth

For BAM track on Identity

Abstract: How do social actors adopt a path alien to their organizational environment and, against the odds, get that environment to accommodate them? This developmental paper sketches an approach to answering that question, building on evidence from a series of conferences of themes related to corporate social responsibility. We see these events as facilitating construction of an identity that shields the participants from backlash in a less than accommodating institutional setting. Drawing on the concept of witness in religious practice, it suggests that a purpose of the events is the ritual enactment of practices that reinforce that identity, providing protection against hostility in the work environment. This version of the paper concludes with indications of the direction of the development and a request for suggestions.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, witness, institutional theory, identity

Introduction

How do social actors come to adopt a path alien to their organizational environment and, against the odds, get that environment to accommodate them or even embrace their stance? In many instances, efforts at organizational change falter because the substance of the change is deemed hostile to the interests of important actors or offends against deeply held beliefs. The change agents are left socially isolated or worse, and the change fails to take hold. The agent is left with the choice of accommodating the resistance and backing down, or vacating the field. But in other cases the change agent wins the day, overcoming institutional resistance and bringing a new set of arrangement into existence, legitimating them and setting on a path towards acceptance of their logic, for example through rhetoric and construction of a discourse (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Zbaracki, 1998). The literature on change management is replete with examples of both, but there is a third possible outcome, where the agent remains in place, full of belief but yet not either marginalized, forced into hiding or pushed to retreat.

This paper examines one such case, drawing of the concepts of identity and witness, to describe the processes through which actors in management come to enact and adopt corporate social responsibility as a norm of behaviour and a state of mind. In particular, it examines the role that meetings – conferences and exhibitions – play in creating rituals, support mechanisms and a safe space in which to engage in seemingly heretic ideas. By adopting alternative identities in that space, where they and other like-minded people engage in witness, agents create, defensively, a protective shield to help them withstand the pressures for conformance with organizational and institutional norms. In so doing, they also, offensively, draw external support for their internal struggles, validation of the position that helps to reinforce the message of change.

The defensive protection shields the agents from resistance to the proposed change by solidifying an alternative identity to the incumbent organizational or institutional one. The offensive stance draws external legitimation of a ritualistic nature adding persuasive power to the argument for change to assist in challenging incumbent logics. The act of witness is a response to the call for a new logic, and the periodic return to the sanctuary of the alternative logic creating the resilience in the face of resistance to change.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: First we sketch the opposition of much management discourse, with its hard, “winning” mentality and resistance, to soft ideas like CSR. Next we examine briefly the literatures of institutional change, multiple identities, and then witness, and with the latter the concept of sanctuary. We then consider data from a series of conferences where like-minded actors gathered to seek ideas for creating change in their organizations and over time in the organizational field and its embedded institutions. The discussion and conclusions then build articulate the contributions, showing how identity and witness contribute to a development of an alternative institutional logic to protect the individual in the organizational setting and assist in contesting established institutional arrangements.

Metaphor, management and social responsibility

The pervasiveness of sports metaphors throughout business life has long been a subject of scholarly interest, with the emphasis on teamwork, winning, leadership, and competition (Keidel, 1984), even when questionable (Hamington, 2009). The discourse of business, outside America as well as within, is littered with expressions of “baselines”, “home runs”, “slam dunks” “netting” new business, or succeeding “against the odds”, or in consumers

“swallowing” a marketing stance by “hook, line and sinker”. The sports industries themselves – whether professional or amateur teams, equipment makers, events companies or a host of support industries – are in some ways extreme examples and perhaps even caricatures of that discourse. They have strong, macho cultures dedicated to winning. They are task oriented, and through the increasing commercialization of sports at all levels, they are imbued with a logic that combines commercial success sporting prowess. Sports figures go on to become business coaches, and successful sports management figures command high prices in the market for after-dinner speakers. They represent, therefore, an example of a field in which we would expect to find little space or interest for soft thinking about expenditure that might not contribute to either sporting or financial success.

Management and CSR

Businesses in many industries, for example, investment banking, basic materials and privatized power generation and distribution, engage in many community-related activities, to be sure, and in charitable work. But it is usually with a deeply commercial purpose: brand building, reinforcing customer (and in sports, fan) loyalty, or generating the next generation of customers (Hovemann, Breitbarth, & Walzel, 2011). The version of CSR at work here is enlightened shareholder value (Jensen, 2001; Porter & Kramer, 2006, 2011) or in the case of some professional sports teams, with their lack of focus on profit, perhaps just enlightened revenue enhancement. While scholars have tried to assess consumer reactions against sceptical or even cynical uses of CSR (e.g. Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013), only less formal assessments have been made of the level of scepticism among managers in companies that profess to having strong CSR credentials.

Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that there is a concentration of people in social responsibility departments who adopt, with force of conviction, a stance towards CSR that runs counter to this. These are actors who engage, or come to engage, with CSR themes from a stance that eschews the instrumentalism of enlightened value of whichever variety, who see in sport something larger, a calling to give something back, even without – or especially without – a compensating benefit. If a commitment to social responsibility is based in individuals, then it is logically less obviously “corporate” (Hemingway & Maclagan, 2004). It is a stance that seems likely to encounter even more than in other settings a scepticism bordering on hostility, where winning at all costs is institutionalized, and one that takes a different, less utility-focused ethical stance.

CSR as ethics

Practitioners of CSR approach the field from a variety of perspectives, though the theme that unites them is one concerning an ethical approach to business. Concepts like enlightened shareholder value take an overtly utilitarian approach to ethics, though they run into difficulty when the utility indicated in gross margin was confronted by the stakeholder imperatives of treating employees well or concern for environmental damage, where the attempt to maintain a utilitarian stance often hinges on determining the appropriate discount rate in a calculation of net present value. One such argument was evident in the climate change argument over public policy between two prominent economists: Stern (2006) and Nordhaus (2007), which often lead back to a concept of utility over time and thus to a duty to future generation, turning the argument about utility into an implicit affirmation of duty. Stakeholder theorists often argue explicitly from a duty-based approach to ethics (Evan & Freeman, 1993), where the moral basis of the claim can take on something of a religious dimension (Bowie, 1999, 2000; Wicks, 1990).

The normative nature of ethical arguments calls to mind other, different sets of norms. These set the nature of law and regulation that govern the field of economic activity against other less formal rules of the game, the conventions of organizational and professional life, and against another set of values and principles that underpin much based in religious or other forms of faith. Together they embrace the institutions that shape the construction of social identity, the enactment of which can be viewed as the practice of witness.

Institutions, identity and witness

To examine the evidence in this case, two closely related themes – institutions and identity – are reflected against a third, one less commonly cited in the literature of organizations and management: the concept of witness. In this section we sketch the literature of institutions and institutional logics and how it relates to identity theory. We then turn to theology and the law to discuss witness, before tying those themes into the psychological and sociological implications of the others.

Institutions and their logics

Institutions are the norms, rules, rituals and routines that provide meaning to social actors and shape their actions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Because they are accepted as the way things are done, they confer legitimacy to organizations and individuals who adhere to their precepts and recipes, thus enabling certain kinds of actions and constraining those that do not fit the mould. Institutions thus sow the seeds of their persistence as other actors adopt their prescriptions and logics through isomorphism, whether by mimicking the actions of those who enact their rituals, through coercion and sanction, or by accepting the embedded norms of behaviour (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the institutional logics perspective (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012), actors adhere to an institution because at some time, in some way, it seemed logical and so helped them make sense of a complex social setting. Once accepted, the logic comes to be taken for granted.

Institutional theorists have puzzled about how a system so described could change (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002). The concept of the institutional entrepreneur emerged (DiMaggio, 1988), elaborated into a broader concept of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). Entrepreneurs – whether of the individual or organizational variety – might come from an adjacent social field and seek to import its logic, or elements of it, to the field they join. Such actions set off a contest between logics, a questioning of the incumbent, taken-for-granted elements of it, that resolves through blended or hybrid approach (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005; Lounsbury, 2007; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Because these logics are embedded and deeply held they are often left unarticulated and therefore resistant to cognitive disruption. But when either the entrepreneur breaks through the resistance to reconsider a logic or presents a compelling argument against its legitimacy, adherents can be rattled out of compliance with the institution's norms.

Institutions and identity

Recently institutional scholars have turned to the concept of identity to help explain such transformations of views. For example, Kodeih and Greenwood (2014) examine how pressures for institutional change set off conflicting view of organizational identity, forcing uncomfortable changes in policy and procedures in a group of French business schools.

Similarly, Glynn and Abzug (2002) see symbolic isomorphism at work in the name changes of organizations undertake to respond to field-level imperatives, with implications for organizational identity.

Rao and colleagues (2003) recount how the path of pressure can work in the opposite direction, as what they term movements to expand individual-level role identities provoke institutional change. Lok (2010) examines how even types of elite actors, in the persons of senior corporate managers and officials of large asset management organizations reworked their identities and practices in response to a shift of logics. In a study with parallels to the present one, Creed and colleagues (2010) examined how marginalized actors in one field drew upon their strong identification with another to inform change in the former.

Identity theorists tend to take an individual-centric approach to trace the roots of allegiances back to imperative of the organization, the profession or characteristics of personal backgrounds. Brown and Lewis (2011), for example, argue that subjectively constructed identities are disciplined by organizational routines. If such routines arise not from the organization's own procedures but are rooted in institutional norms and rituals, then institutional arrangements would govern and even control identity work. Repetition of these routines reinforces the identification of the self with the constructed identity. The ritual nature of some routine practices calls to mind a conceptual link to another area of practice: the demonstration of religious faith through witness.

Witness

Traces the concept of witness come from the Greek - Homer's *Odyssey* and Plato's *Gorgias*, where the latter recognizes a distinction between two concepts of witness. The first is the person, in a narrow sense of the word, has seen something and becomes a witness to say what happened. There is another view, reflected through the notion of the "false witness", someone who attests to something knowing it not to be true. Witness testimony must be scrutinized lest it falls short. In Socrates, that scrutiny comes in Socratic debate, and when the person becomes convinced by the rationality of the argument, that conviction makes the person the announcer of the truth, that is, the witness. Plato recognizes two distinction concepts, one of which moves towards the biblical concept of witness, Trites (1977, p. 12), writes adding, "testimony in Plato can mean 'the attestation of an opinion which someone cherishes' or 'the truth of which someone is convinced' The witness thus takes a stand for the truths of which he is convinced. Thus the trial of Socrates shows that the practical act of being willing to stand for one's convictions is necessary when the testimony is given against the background of hostility and persecution." In this way the concept of witness is linked with suffering or conflict, which comes close together in times of persecution. Witness is, in this way, linked literally and metaphorically with two different settings: the court of law and the battlefield.

By implication, what this understanding of the term means is that the concept of witness entails both a statement of a truth, factual or opinion, and a public statement of commitment to controversial cause. The latter involves acceptance of the terms of an argument, that is, of its logic, with a conviction in its truth that supersedes argument and logic. Through reinforcement that conviction becomes embedded, unless logic of the former is sufficient compelling to result in a rejection of the prior belief. Through the Old Testament, the concept of witness draws mainly on the judgemental and legal metaphor, but in the New Testament the weight in usage fall on the statement of conviction and commitment (Trites, 1977).

This meaning of witness is reflected elsewhere in writing about art and literature. For example, Hodder (2001) speaks of the "ecstatic witness" of Henry David Thoreau, the

American transcendentalist, in his writing about the experience on Walden Pond. The art historian William Wallace (2003), discussing Caravaggio's depiction of Saint Francis of Assisi, says the artist invites viewers to "witness" the transformative power of faith.

Direction of development

This developmental paper is a precursor to a full one currently under development. The authors will describe a qualitative research project that involved interviews and observations during CSR conventions and the effect of these events on the self-perception and practices of participants. The fieldwork involved interviews with and observations of executives from a range of industries at a series of CSR related conferences in Germany in the period 2006-10, when many of these people were seeking to learn about CSR, that is, to become familiar with its language, terminology and issues, that is to construct their own understanding of the field.

As part of the process for developing the paper, we would welcome comments from BAM participants about a) the interaction of the theoretical perspectives outlined here, b) similar types of studies we may have missed in the literature review, and c) techniques for data analysis beyond the narrative analysis we have planned to conduct from the conversations collected in fieldwork.

While the empirical work focuses on CSR events, we believe the implications of the findings are wider.

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