

Why Human Rights are a Business' Business!

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"There's no place for a human rights discussion in this business school program ... go to the law school!" uttered a well known CSR Department Head of a prestigious Latin American business school! Incredibly, in the year 2010, human rights continue to escape the minds of many of our planet's top business leaders, and even of seasoned CSR experts, until it nips them in the tail.

Despite what the old school of business academia and many modern CSR gurus keep banging into the heads of young business students, that is, that CSR is merely about what a company does *beyond* its legal responsibility (that is, that *CSR is about voluntary corporate social work*), companies today are finding more and more that they *must* address their own impact on human rights in their day to day operations if they are to survive successfully. Making a public commitment to human rights is the first step in doing so.

Communities and people, are literally *on edge* about socially and environmentally sensitive industries. The NIMBY ("not in my back yard") factor fueled by advancements in modern communication technology such as twitter, facebook, and other social networking tools, is a driving factor engaging communities with the corporations around them, and rights-relevant concerns are high on the agenda. Today, corporations that choose to avoid complex discussions about human rights, complicity, and rights violations related to their industry, carry a larger risk than those who engage, and take on the issues early and steadfastly possibly staving off conflict before it actually happens.

Many companies assume too hastily that their operations have *nothing to do with human rights*. "We don't torture, kidnap, kill people, or repress their political freedom", "and we have all of our local permits in order" ... some business leaders say, and then add, "so we're not violating human rights". Or, "Human rights are for the State, not for business!" Guess again! Human rights are not only about the sorts of violations that occurred during dictatorships or in war-ridden or Stateless countries, they have to do with all things relative to local human development and sustainability. Besides the traditional basics, like right to life, physical integrity, and civil and political freedoms, human rights are also about health, education, fair wages, safety in the workplace, development potential, property, culture heritage, clean water and sanitation, access to information and participation, as well as the right to a healthy environment, children and women's rights, or indigenous peoples rights.

Companies need to begin by *relearning* this broader understanding of human rights. They need to scope out the key issues pertinent to their stakeholders and communities while being realistic about what they can and cannot do, how far down and up their supply and distribution chain they can realistically go to address human rights vulnerabilities particular to their industry, and to what extent, their influence can result in complicity with violations or in curbing human rights violations before they occur.

The company's policy on human rights needs to be formally adopted. Then management systems must be created, and tangible objectives set, to ensure that human rights issues materialize into the corporate culture that drives the company. Companies need to ensure that they are not violating human rights in production process and that the company is moving towards its goals and objectives. Monitoring, reporting and ensuring a progressive evolution to human rights impact and compliance are key to implementing a corporate human rights policy. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, companies must ensure that victims or potential victims of human rights violations that occur because of their operations have adequate and effective remedies within their reach to resolve the problems related to the corporate activity in question.

Business and human rights is not about building schools, providing security forces, or handing out textbooks or medicine, all of these worthwhile initiatives typically run out of CSR units can help individuals and communities realize human rights, but they do not make up for the human rights that a company might violate by doing business in unsustainable fashion.

If any company today pretends to develop with any degree of social and environmental legitimacy, a headstrong human rights policy for internal as well as external operations will be key to that company's success.