

CSR through the heart of the Bodhi tree

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper seeks to explore an alternative direction to break the theoretical impasse in CSR.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The study employs ancient insights from the core of Buddhist teaching, featuring the Four Noble Truths and the concept of “me” and “mine”, for the modern application of CSR by investigating the crux of major related theories.*

Findings – *The Noble Truths emphasize that suffering should be eradicated at its root. The Buddhist model of CSR suggests that beyond doing good such as supporting philanthropy and avoiding evil as mitigating the impact of corporate malpractice, which are consistent with major CSR theories, it is also crucial to purify the hearts of stakeholders from the “self” and “what belongs to self”, the genesis of suffering. Detachment is the key.*

Research implications – *The shift from an institutional to an individual level, more specifically the transformation from a mindset of over-consumption to one of conscious consumption, is an alternative direction to the progress of theory and practice in CSR.*

Practical implications – *Defiled by greed and profitability, consumers and investors, who provide income and funding to an organization and define its business practice, are of the highest priority among all stakeholders to start the change according to the Buddhist model of CSR.*

Originality/value – *This paper takes Buddhism as timeless insight, rather than a religious belief, to propose an alternative model and direction to development of CSR in theory and practice.*

Keywords *Buddhism, Corporate social responsibility, Consumption, Ethics, Self, Stakeholders, Corporate governance, Organizational culture*

Paper type *Conceptual paper*

The paradox between the popularity of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the continuation of economic, environmental, and social devastation from business malpractices signals that attempts in developing and applying major related theories are likely to end in stalemate. Since the end of 2008, a sharp drop in the world economy and negative environmental and social impacts from globalization have gradually escalated the suffering of the stakeholders affected. Taxpayers express their anger at governments for supporting the bankers and fund managers who spun wealth for the plutocrats and themselves to the extreme, yet leaving the working class in a great recession (The Economist, 2009). The history of the robber baron practices during the industrial revolution (Wren, 2005) tends to repeat itself today amidst the current proliferation of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Philanthropic contributions from profiteering businesses seem unlikely to leverage the well-being of the society at large. Such a failure leads to the quest for a more meaningful direction of CSR and more importantly, a condition to make CSR work.

This paper proposes an alternative angle by employing the Buddhist perspective of the cause-effect relationship of interdependent nature to examine the crux of CSR concepts. Contending that suffering should be eliminated at the root, the Four Noble Truths – including suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to cessation of suffering – complement a common emphasis of various CSR theories on tackling the

The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the late Panyananda Bhikkhu, who introduced him to Buddhism. This paper is dedicated to him.