

Courage as a Corporate Value:

The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility



In the realm of corporate social responsibility (CSR), courage is often an understated value. It can conjure wrongheaded ideas about taking unnecessary risks, or be linked to someone telling their truth at a particular moment just to prove a point. Depending on the corporate culture, an act of courage can be seen as a career killer in the wrong organization.

In a Harvard Business Review article by Kathleen Reardon, courage in a business context was described as a skill developed overtime that centered around taking calculated risks.

According to former Medtronic CEO Bill George, “Courage is the quality that distinguishes great leaders from excellent managers.”

In many ways a courageous act is also a bet on the future. It is the courageous companies that lead the way in making impactful changes and setting benchmarks for others because they find the future first.

What employer with a healthy culture doesn't want strong leaders in their organization—including employees that take calculated risks from time to time?

Courage asks the tough question that disrupts groupthink or makes an employee make the ethical choice instead of the easy one.

If a company has any espoused corporate values at some point those same values become more real when an employee demonstrates the courage to execute those values when it is easier to not do so.

According to Lucidity, a strategic planning consultancy, “teamwork,” “customer-focused,” and “respect” are among the top corporate values for US companies. It isn't difficult to imagine scenarios where courage might be required for employees to live these values.

Consider the courage it takes to have tough conversations about a team member not pulling their weight on

a project, a front-line worker bending rules to better meet the customer's needs, or even challenging someone who is disrespectful.

Courage not only makes corporate values real, but they inherently speak to a better future possibility—the better team, the better customer experience, the improved behavior in the scenarios mentioned above.

But courage in business is not just about bold investments, managing workplace issues, or innovative products; today it's about the audacity to uphold ethical practices and to commit to the long-term well-being of communities and the environment.

In the 2017 Cone Gen Z CSR Study, millennials (Gen-Y) outpaced the general population in an expectation that corporations support important social issues. While Gen Z had the highest expectation that corporation be a good employer which includes making products that are good for individuals and families, helping the environment and donating to causes in the community. Gen Z and millennials wanted companies to address racial equality, women's rights, immigration, climate change, gun control and LGBTQ issues at higher rates than the general population.

At the same time, we also know that according to a 2022 Gallup poll that confidence in big business ranks below the US criminal justice system and just above the US Congress in confidence by the American public. While small businesses are among the most trusted institutions in the country right now.

A 2023 Wall Street Journal titled “Companies that Embraced Social Issues Have Second Thoughts” highlights how companies have struggled to navigate this new world where customers and employees have high expectations, and they make everyone unhappy.

It is also become political with progressives and conservatives very publicly challenging corporate positions.

Corporations are being pushed by customers and employees to act, while facing tough political realities all while trying to build widgets or provide a service. And no one can perfectly predict the future.

But gone are the days of simply pursuing profit maximization.

In 2019, the Business Roundtable, a collection of the largest US corporations declared that the purpose of the corporation wasn't just about the primacy of shareholders but rather a commitment to all stakeholders including customers, employers, suppliers, communities, and shareholders.



MARSHAWN WOLLEY
President and CEO
Black Onyx Management, Inc

Companies today are increasingly evaluated not just on their financial performance but on employee satisfaction and the company's contribution to social equity, environmental sustainability, and community development.

Incorporating courage as a corporate value means more than just making donations or sponsoring events; it means embedding a sense of responsibility into the very fabric of the company's culture. It means being willing to make difficult decisions, to invest in community empowerment, and to ensure that business growth is inclusive and equitable.

Corporate courage is about asking the right questions in the right order. Its understanding what the right thing to do is first, as difficult as that maybe, then trying to figure out how best to proceed. It is strategic but principled with an eye to the long view—a perspective about the future.

It is the strategic leveraging of social and political capital at the right time for the right reason.

In the coming months and years, we are likely to have substantive policy discussions on a host of social issues both at a state and even federal level. Corporations will need to determine where they stand and how they balance progress for a community.

We have seen corporations retreat from bold statements and advancements in DEI programming efforts. DEI staffing has reduced. But we know the US will be more diverse, not less.

It is easy to be “courageous” when things are going well, and commitments have yet to be challenged or attacked.

Courage in corporate social responsibility must be about the possibility of better measured against the reality of now.

We need more courage to reach our full potential as a community, city and state. ●

We support courageous leaders seeking to advance EQUITY.



BLACK ONYX
MANAGEMENT
A BENEFIT CORPORATION

blackonyxmanagement.com