

CSR and Stakeholder Dialogue: A Case Study of Sugar Cane Company in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Engaging in a genuine dialogue with stakeholders seems to be a pressing issue that corporate communicators are facing in implementing their CSR initiatives (Hess, 2008; Kaptein & van Tulder, 2003; O'Rordan & Fairbrass, 2008). However, communication features of stakeholder dialogue have yet been empirically delineated. Based on a qualitative case study of CSR initiatives by a sugar cane processing conglomerate in Thailand directed towards the sugar cane farmers as their beneficiary stakeholders, this paper attempts to characterize the lack of stakeholder dialogue from both parties. Group interviews with managers and in-depth interviews with farmers were conducted separately to identify their different perceptions, concerns, and the expected nature of dialogue. Findings from the study highlight the needs for participatory feature of CSR dialogue (Maclagan, 1999) as well as the perceived power imbalance that may exist in implementing CSR initiatives. Implications are also provided for corporate communicators to engage in genuine dialogue with their stakeholders.

Introduction

In recent years, it is almost undeniable that corporate social responsibilities (CSR) have gained interests among business sectors and their stakeholders. CSR has been developed from being a mere business practice to a multi-dimensional faceted concept that academicians have attempted to investigate and yet find it inconclusive (Cochran, 2007; Okoye, 2009). Many organizations treat their CSR efforts as a systemic organizational activity in response to social and environmental impact, rather than a process through which moral values and concern are genuinely articulated and negotiated among stakeholders (Maclagan, 1999). This systemic approach may allow organizations to meet fundamental social reporting requirements but it does not lead to a long-term citizenship mentality among corporations (Hess, 2008).

To create a genuine dialogue with stakeholders, van de Kerkhof (2006) argues that all perceived constraints and opportunities must be articulated so that needs and concerns are addressed honestly (Kaptein & van Tulder, 2003). Any deliberation or assumed CSR needs singly from the organizational perspective does not suffice (van de Kerkhof, 2006) and the organizational motives behind CSR will be scrutinized (Burchell & Cook, 2008). As such, meaningful CSR initiatives emerge in a "process, through which individuals' moral values and concerns are articulated" (Maclagan, 1999, p. 43).

To reinforce the participatory nature of stakeholder dialogues in CSR decision making (O'Rordan & Fairbrass, 2008), this paper reports a case of perceived discrepancies between a sugar processing conglomerate and sugar cane farmers in Thailand as the company attempted to develop their CSR efforts. Based on the assumption that once the perception gaps are identified, a genuine dialogue can be created, the paper uses this case as an illustration to delineate the challenges and opportunities for organizations to dialogue with their stakeholders in developing their CSR initiatives. Findings from the study also help establish a typology of dialectical tensions (Baxter, 1988), or opposing points, in CSR decision making. It is hoped that this framework of dialectical tensions can be taken into consideration by corporate communicators as they conduct stakeholder dialogues to develop their CSR programs in the future.

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Dialogue, Corporate Communication, and CSR

The dialogic nature of communication has appeared in philosophical and interpersonal communication for quite some time (c.f. Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004). Based on the work of philosophers including Martin Buber (1958) and David Bohm (1996), communication scholars have applied their ideas of dialogue to capture ideal interpersonal interactions. Johannesen (1971), one of the first authors who wrote about dialogic communication in the communication discipline, explicated that in dialogue,

“a speaker does not attempt to impose his or her own truth or view on another and he is not interested in bolstering his own ego or self-image. Each person in a dialogic relation is accepted for what he or she is as a unique individual ... The essential movement in dialogue is turning toward, outgoing to, and reaching for the other.” (p. 375)

Stewart (1978) proposes four distinctive features of dialogue that distinguishes this genre of communication from others such as conversation, discussion, or debate. First, dialogue emerges in a “dynamic, complex, context-dependent communicative transaction” (p. 184) where reciprocal bond and relationship is the focus of such an interaction. Second, dialogic communication is experiential as dialogue participants encounter the interactions and reflect to learn upon their direct experience. Consistently, the third feature of dialogic communication is its focus on self and subjectivity. As dialogue is learned through reflection, the notion of authenticity or sincerity as well as self-awareness and sensitivity becomes central to the emergence of dialogue. Finally, dialogic communication must be viewed holistically as it “embraces a multitude of interdependent cognitive, affective, behavioral, and contextual variables” (p. 185).

Given the primary of applications of dialogic communication in interpersonal settings, business scholars have adopted this approach to communication to enhance organizational cohesion among members and to prevent conflicts. Dialogue is believed to be instrumental for cohesive team building (Isaacs, 1999) as well as creating an organizational learning culture where individuals are open to new ideas (Senge, 1990). Not until recently have business researchers paid attention to the applications of dialogue for organizations to deal with external stakeholders due to the pressures organizations are facing from NGOs, lobbyists, policy makers, more informed and educated consumers etc.

Dialogic communication has a great potential for corporate communicators to successfully implement their CSR initiatives. For example, Pederson (2006) argues for the participatory approach to CSR initiatives whereby the “company actually involves stakeholders in the decision-making processes” (p. 14). This author characterizes stakeholder dialogue with five features including inclusion, openness, tolerance, empowerment and transparency. These features of stakeholder dialogue are based on the author’s compilation of previous literature. To better appreciate stakeholder dialogue for CSR initiatives as well as to create and engage genuine dialogic interactions, empirical evidences are essential. Moreover, successful and non-successful cases are needed to confirm our understanding of stakeholder dialogue and to help build a repertoire of dialogic stakeholder engagement for CSR activities.

Research Method and Data Collection

The present research employed a qualitative case study approach to investigate the interested phenomenon in a real-life setting (Yin, 2009). Among the various applications of case studies, this type of research is used to illustrate the issues under examination and develop a theory from the selected case (Stake, 1995). This project studied the bounded phenomenon, or the challenges of stakeholder dialogue, faced by the selected organization and their stakeholder as an instrumental case to illustrate the ways in which a corporation struggled to develop their CSR efforts by engaging the relevant stakeholder (Stake, 1995). Qualitative method was adopted given the exploratory nature of the study and it allows the researchers to explore the phenomenon holistically.

Description of the selected case

A major sugar processing conglomerate with its more-than-half-a-decade establishment in Thailand was chosen as a case in this study. The site for this project covered the northeastern part of Thailand, the country that was ranked as the sixth largest sugar producer and second largest sugar exporter in the world (Suksawat, Piewthongngam, & Tenglolai, 2008). This sugar company has set up various factories around the region to process sugar and to allow convenience for sugar cane farmers to distribute their canes to the company as transportation could be a major obstacle among them.

Given a fierce competition in the sugar industry in this region (Polyorat 2011), sugar cane farmers had several options to sell their harvest to other companies via several outlets. Therefore, the selected sugar processing company in this study attempted to conduct their CSR programs directed towards sugar cane farmers in order to improve the quality of sugar farming and processing as well as to establish the sense of loyalty among sugar cane farmer to their company at the same time. Their dual goals in CSR activities were perceived to create some challenges for them to be a “good” partner with the sugar cane communities and to be a successful business enterprise in the region at the same time. Based on the interview in this study, the manager of the company who was in charge of their CSR initiatives for sugar cane farmers hopes to establish a sugar cane community where farmers are well equipped with knowledge and technology for their farming as well as using farming technique that is environmentally friendly at the same time. The company has attempted to reach out to sugar cane farmers by providing assistance including monetary loans, fertilizers, pesticides and insecticides, sending experts to conduct workshops for farmers, etc. However, the company did not seem to be successful in gaining collaboration from the farmers and hence they were interested in searching for a way to better dialogue with the sugar cane farmers in the region. Therefore, the relationship between this company and sugar cane farmers in this case serves as a good illustration of the lack of dialogic elements in their stakeholder engagement communication.

It is important to note that this paper is a part of a larger research project that aims to understand the decision-making process of sugar cane farmers throughout their supply chain process. The research team determined that CSR efforts or initiatives of sugar cane processing companies could be one important factor that influenced sugar cane farmers to conduct business transactions with certain companies or agents. This paper focuses only on the study the CSR efforts of the selected case of sugar processing conglomerate and their sugar cane farmers as their beneficiary stakeholder to illustrate the importance and challenges of stakeholder dialogue in conducting CSR initiatives. This paper addresses the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What communication challenges in CSR efforts were perceived by the sugar processing company and the sugar cane farmers?

RQ2: How did perceived communication challenges enable and/or constrain the sugar processing company and the sugar cane farmers from engaging in a genuine stakeholder dialogue?

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through two group discussion sessions with mid-and high- levels managers of the company to explore past CSR initiatives with sugar cane farmers as well as the organizational needs, motivations, and process in developing CSR programs with this specific group of stakeholders. In addition, eight in-depth interviews were conducted with sugar cane farmers in eight different villages in the northeastern provinces which are the major areas for sugar cane production in Thailand (Polyorat, 2011). Among the eight interviewees, two were female and six were male participants. Their experiences in growing sugar canes ranged from two months to throughout their lifetime. Appendix I illustrates the basic demographic information of the interviewees from eight villages. Appendixes II and III display the interview guides for group discussions with the company managers and in-depth interviews with farmers respectively.

Based on the assumption of naturalistic inquiry (Potter, 1996), these participating farmers were purposively selected as they appeared to be opinion leaders (cf., Polyorat&Tenglolai, 2009) who were willing to share their needs and concerns about sugar farming and industry and served as representatives of other farmers in their community(Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). In addition these famers had experiences dealing with the selected company, the feature and process that was the focus of this study (Silverman, 2006). The analysis was conducted following the grounded theory procedure as interviews and filed notes were transcribed and coded inductively to respond to the research questions. Constant comparison was performed to develop emerging themes until saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

As mentioned above, the lack of dialogic features in communication between the two parties in this selected case was evident throughout the interviews. In this section, findings are discussed in detail based on the two research questions. In particular, two themes, including intermediary stakeholders and the nature of communication, emerged as the communication challenges addressed by RQ1. At the same time, the

perceived business needs and formal business transactions led both parties to avoid direct and honest communication with each other and hence emerged as responses to RQ2.

RQ1: What communication challenges in CSR efforts were perceived by the sugar processing company and the sugar cane farmers?

Intermediary stakeholders

The first communication challenge that both the organization and sugar cane farmers faced in this case was the fact that there were three intermediary stakeholders that mediated the communication between the two parties. The first group was the other experienced sugar cane farmers or villagers in the community themselves who served as opinion leaders and/or persuaders of the sugar cane farmers. More than half of the interviewees in this study accepted that they turned to grow sugar cane because they were persuaded by their neighbors and these people who were more experienced served as role models for them. Farmer 3 in this study, for example, elaborated that he decided to grow sugar cane following his neighbor not knowing whether his neighbor really had knowledge about farming and that neighbor did not really teach him formally. In addition, some neighbors or other farmers in the village usually influenced each other to not communicate directly with the sugar cane company when they interacted with the agricultural experts sent by the company. For example, farmer 1 described that after the farmers in his village listened to a new farming technique from the experts and tried it out, they found that the technique did not work. So they just consulted among themselves and followed instructions from the more experienced farmers in the village and formed an informal group that taught each other new techniques in the village without providing any feedback to the experts. This showed that the villagers did not have “trust” in the experts or CSR initiative by the company that attempted to educate them.

The second intermediary stakeholder that was brought up by nearly all interviewees was the middlemen. In the supply chain process of sugar cane processing, some farmers sold their harvest to the middlemen who then delivered all the canes and sold them to the company. These middlemen seemed to be strong influencers among the farmers who decided to work with them. Farmers 4 and 6, in particular, indicated that they had grown other crops such as rice or beans but they were persuaded by the middlemen to turn into sugar cane farming. These farmers tended to have a great sense of loyalty to the particular middlemen. The female farmer 2 suggested that switching middlemen or deciding to communicate directly to the company almost seemed unethical to the farmers.

The last stakeholder that sometimes served as an intermediary between farmers and the company was government agriculturalists who were based in the village or offices nearby. In the rural areas of Thailand, these agriculturalists were officials who were sent by the central government to work with farmers in the area and to help educate them. In reality, these agriculturalists even took more roles than specialized experts. Based on the interviewees, they were treated almost like leaders in the villages as farmers even relied on them for other personal issues more than just the farming problems. Farmers 7 and 8 elaborated that villagers sometimes turned to these agriculturalists to help with their family issues as the officials were regarded highly in the community and were expected to be able to handle all issues including the farmers’ personal lives. Therefore, when the company sent their experts to conduct some workshops for farmers, these villagers tended not to listen to those sent by the companies that well because they relied more on their own governmental agriculturalists who were based in the villages.

Interestingly, during the group discussions with the managers, it seemed that only middlemen were commonly perceived by the company as the intermediary stakeholder as this group of people was regarded as “competitors” in their business process. The management team in this study primarily hoped to gain trust from farmers and established their genuine relationships with the villages in comparison with the middlemen. Not much was discussed or brought up by the managers about the roles of other experienced farmers and government agriculturalists. This suggested that the perception of managers on intermediary stakeholders was still partial.

Frequency, availability, and usefulness of communication

The second theme addressing the challenge of communication between farmers and the company in this study was the nature of communication itself. Due to the long distance from the location of the company and villages, both managers and farmers in this study mostly agreed that they did not communicate with each other on a regular basis. Two farmers, in particular, explained that they relied on the middlemen, rather the company, when they have farming problems because those middlemen were available for them to consult almost anytime. “The middlemen were like a 24-hour clinic that we can turn to whenever we want.

Sometimes when the insects destroyed our harvests all of a sudden, the middlemen could help us right away within just a phone call. They could diagnose our problem and gave us solutions immediately unlike those experts from the company," farmer 6 explained.

In addition, farmers did not perceive the usefulness of communication with the company, especially when the agricultural experts from the company visited the villages to train them or to organize some gathering sessions. As mentioned earlier, there were incidents when the farming technique taught by the company expert did not work well and the farmers only relied on their neighbors to solve their farming problems and did not tell the company experts directly. Farmer 1 explained sarcastically that when he used the fertilizers that the expert suggested, it turned out that he had more weeds than usual. "The fertilizer must have been too good and that's why it grows more weeds than sugar canes ha haha." In addition, farmer 8 shared that people in his village always attended the gathering sessions organized by the company or experts when they visited to conduct some workshops "only to get some give-away stuff without really paying attention to what was discussed during the gathering session because they did not believe in the usefulness of those sessions."

RQ2: How did perceived communication challenges enable and/or constrain the sugar processing company and the sugar cane farmers from engaging in a genuine stakeholder dialogue?

Business needs as the main motivation to communicate with each other

Based on the discussions with farmers and managers, it seemed that perceived business needs, rather than genuine intrinsic motivation, forced them to interact with each other. Unlike those farmers who worked with middlemen in their supply chain process, most farmers explained that they dealt with the sugar cane processing company, rather than other local agents or middlemen, only because they were provided with technical convenience in the supply chain flow. All of them seemed to lament that they had no other choices and they were stuck in this process that they had no control over. At the same time, during the group discussions with managers, the respondents also presented themselves in an "underdog" position. Even the main manager mentioned that their company's survival depended primarily on whether or not the farmers decided to work with them directly. The management team felt "hurt" because they had tried to provide any assistance they could but they were not able to gain trust from the farmers. In general, both parties in this case revealed that they felt they were in a "losing" or "powerless" position and they communicated with each other only to complete their business transactions and to merely achieve their business goals. This perception of their position in the communication process prevented them from having a genuine dialogue with each other.

Formal business process hindered genuine dialogic communication among both parties

While the company attempted to be transparent and offered loans as well as other assistances to the farmers with a formal written contract, farmers perceived the business deal to be "negative" and money-minded transaction with the wicked will of the company. Farmers 3 and 5, in particular, seemed to have a strong negative view on the process of receiving assistance from the company and described themselves as "being trapped" with the contract they signed with the company. Farmer 6 also juxtaposed the assistances he got from neighbors and explained that these assistances from neighbors made him feel more "comfortable" and created a communal spirit. Among all interviewed farmers, only farmer 7 who came from a successful village that won the outstanding model of entrepreneurial community felt comfortable with the business transactions and formal business contracts as they believed they were well prepared and had the bargaining power. It was obvious that the formal business process and the goodwill of the sugar cane company in being transparent were misinterpreted by the farmers. This conflicting view of the nature of business transaction prevented both parties from directly and honestly communicating with each other.

Discussion

Consistent with previous research, both sugar cane farmers and the company indicated explicitly that their relationships would be strengthened if the corporate social responsibility initiatives were mutually beneficial to both parties (Bhattacharya, Korchun, & Sankar, 2009). However, when asked about the discrepancies or challenges in CSR efforts, all participants revealed these challenges subtly through their unmet needs. Specifically, these challenges can be conceptualized into two dialectical tensions (Baxter, 1988), or opposing points that both parties struggled to balance as they articulated their needs for CSR initiatives.

First, the both parties wrestled with the goal to be successful in their business while becoming a good citizen of the community. As both farmers and the company relied on each other in their business transactions, they hoped to maintain good relationships with each other. However, when asked how they communicated the way they balanced these two goals, company appeared to employ traditional business tactics such as asking farmers to sign written contract when offering certain agricultural assistance to them. At the same time, the farmers tended to see the company mainly from their entrepreneurial side and yet still relied on the company for most assistance. They both hoped to work with each other on an equal partnership basis but their communication appeared to perpetuate the imbalanced roles.

Second, when asked to discuss the previous CSR initiatives they hope to have received and provided, both parties struggled with the balance between material and intellectual assistance. Both parties saw the value in providing material assistance such as fertilizers, insecticides, or irrigation while how-to knowledge in sugar cane farming was also important. However, the way these assistances were presented led to some unintended consequences and misperceptions between the two parties. For example, while the company attempted to provide effective fertilizers and insecticides, farmers expressed their heartened fear for using chemical substances that will affect their health and environment.

When asked about the ultimate goals of their business successes, both parties interestingly addressed similar hopes. The management team explained that they wanted a strong sugar cane community consisting of farmers who were knowledgeable of farming techniques to be developed and sustained so that they can rely on the farmers' harvests. At the same time, the farmers wanted to develop their strong communities to enhance their bargaining power in the business process. This similar goal was somehow obstructed from the lack of open communication among the two parties.

Findings from this study also provide some implications for corporate communication in conducting stakeholder dialogue. The two parties, the management team and the farmers in this case, were both Thai and their cultural value in communication was supposed to be similar. Thai communication style is characterized as implicit and receiver-oriented as the communicators usually want to maintain social harmony by lowering their selves through their indirect communication style (Chaidaroon, 2003). However, this case illustrated that when dialogue is needed to enhance participatory process of CSR initiatives, the implicit communication style may not work as it is hard for both parties to assume the needs from each other. Corporate communicators in such a situation need to find communication process that allows the beneficiary stakeholder to feel comfortable to voice their concern without any hesitation. Such communication process or mechanism should be a subject for future research.

In addition, most literature on corporate stakeholder dialogue adopts the ideology of this communication process from interpersonal literature. As this study suggests, stakeholder dialogue for corporation encompasses its own challenges and hence will require its own unique practice. One main feature of interpersonal dialogue is the fact that both interlocutors experience their presence primarily face-to-face to manage the dynamism of their interactions. In corporate stakeholder dialogue, on the other hand, the parties may not communicate synchronously and probably use various media choices, rather than just face-to-face communication to express their feelings, needs, and stances on the issues. Moreover, the positions of the intermediary stakeholders who may be either obviously present or quite invisible in interactions will certainly affect the quality of dialogic process. While parties involved in interpersonal dialogues are quite clear to be seen, intermediary stakeholders in corporate dialogues are multi-faceted, dynamic, and most of the time hard to identify. Organizations will only recognize their intermediary stakeholders through active listening and monitoring their communication process. In short, this lack of synchronous communication as well as the intermediary stakeholders differentiates the nature of stakeholder dialogue from interpersonal dialogue.

Conclusion

This paper reported findings of an exploratory study to identify the lack of dialogic features in communication and role discrepancies between a sugar processing company and sugar cane farmers. Both parties faced communication challenges that prevented them from engaging in a genuine dialogue as they had other intermediary stakeholders that prevented them from direct contact with each other and the farmers, in particular, did not perceive communication with the company to be as useful. As a result, both management team and farmers were constrained from having an open communication with each other. Two

dialectical themes were identified through qualitative data including (1) balancing business goals and becoming a good community citizen and (2) intellectual and material CSR initiatives. While these two themes are based on data from this sugar cane industry case, they seem to be useful for other organizations to consider as they engage in a dialogue with stakeholders to make a decision for their CSR initiatives.

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Appendix I

Demographic Information of Sugar Cane Farmers Participating in the Study

	Gender	Age Range	Length of Sugar Farming
Farmer 1	Male	60-70	All his life
Farmer 2	Female	40-50	2-3 years
Farmer 3	Male	40-50	4-5 years
Farmer 4	Male	60-70	2-3 years
Farmer 5	Female	40-50	1 year
Farmer 6	Male	40-50	2 months
Farmer 7	Male	40-50	All his life
Farmer 8	Male	20-30	10 years

Appendix II

Interview Guide for Group Discussion with Managers of Sugar Cane Processing Company

1. How is your company currently handling CSR activities? Who is in charge?
2. What CSR projects have you conducted over the past 3-5 years? Please describe the project.
3. Which stakeholders are important to the organization? Rank them in order.
4. Which stakeholders appear to be difficult to deal with? Why? Please provide examples.
5. Describe your relationship with sugar cane farmers in the region. Explain how the relationship has been developed and maintained.
6. What forms of assistance have you provided for the farmers?
7. What areas of improvements does your company want to see in the area of CSR?

Appendix III

Interview Guide for In-depth Interviews with Sugar Cane Farmers

1. Who taught you how to grow sugar cane? When you have technical problems, whom do you usually consult?
2. What is your overall impression of the sugar processing company?
3. What forms of assistance have you received from the sugar processing company? Are they useful for your farming & community?
4. What other forms of assistance do you think the company can provide?
5. How do you communicate with the sugar processing company?