Can CSR engage employees in a new South African narrative?

Issued by icandi CQ   26 Jul 2019

The law demands it. Employees want it. Your company needs it. The case for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a business imperative is a done deal. Or is it? Maybe it's time CSR understands its power to engage employees in a new SA narrative.

CSR has evolved, but is it far enough?

We can all agree Corporate Social Responsibility has come a long way. Most people nowadays would laugh at a CSR strategy that boasted a top-down approach and pushed cheque handouts and charity golf days as their core mandate. The industry even managed to get past those years of debating if the focus should be on responsibility (CSR) or investment (CSI), only to marry the two sides off, or maybe let them elope and keep both their surnames. And when sustainability, the triple bottom line and corporate governance became key business directives, CSR was quick to adopt this new language into its vocabulary, if not its programmes. So yes, there's been much progress, evolution even, but is that enough, especially in the current South African socio-economic climate, where employees are struggling to work, let alone engage.

Employee engagement is more than just volunteerism

The good news is that employee engagement has created a small place in the greater CSR strategy, by way of employee volunteerism programmes, but it hasn't quite found a permanent home. And by this, I mean integrating employee engagement into the strategy, spend and mandate of CSR. For the most part, CSR and employee engagement sit apart, not even attending the same meetings, let alone collaborating in any meaningful way. And why is this harmful? That depends on how you view and value employee engagement. And CSR for that matter.

Employment engagement matters more, and for more reasons than you think

Let's cut to the chase. Engaged, motivated employees have more ideas, are more productive, less likely to call in sick, and more likely to recommend your company as a good employer. Essentially that means more retention, less attrition and greater employee attraction.

As a business management concept, employee engagement understands that engaged employees behave in ways that promote the interests of the company and impact business strategies, goals and outcomes for the better. And we all know how costly disengaged employees are. Very. According to Gallup, a single disengaged employee can cost a company more than $10,000 in lost revenue every year.

And we can't talk about employees without bringing in generational theory. Millennials are only the beginning of a new generational workforce that demands meaning and purpose in exchange for productivity and loyalty. In fact, a recent study by Glassdoor found that 75% of employees between the ages of 18 and 34 expect their employer to take a stand on important social and environmental issues. It's non-negotiable.

"Employees, particularly millennials, expect to work for a company that gives back. But they want to give back on their own terms and have a say in what causes their company supports and how and when they volunteer their time." This from Hilary Smith, Senior Vice President of Corporate Communications and Social Impact at NBCUniversal, one of the world's leading media and entertainment companies.

So yes, employee engagement adds up to a very valuable, or costly, business imperative, depending which side of the employment contract you sit on. But what about the value of CSR? And can the two work together instead of separately or, worse still, against each other?

CSR has a special role to play in South Africa

What does CSR actually do? We know what the annual sustainability report says. Uplift communities. Drive social impact. All that with the intention of making our communities and country a more sustainable place to live, grow and do business. That's it right? Yes and no. What CSR, or rather the employee arm of volunteerism does for employees, and South Africans in particular, goes beyond its mandate or measure. Think about it. We often focus on the fact that business confidence is at a low point in South Africa right now. What we neglect to mention is that so is "employee confidence". And CSR can change that.

Andy Hadfield, CEO of volunteering platform and CSI management tool forgood has been speaking this truth since 2017, when he said: "In South Africa we are seeing a renewed interest in employee volunteering programmes and their direct HR benefits; which include increased employee productivity, retention and morale." Morale. Did you read that? We would even go so far to say that, in the current socio-economic climate, when faced with high unemployment, constant social unrest and economic and political volatility, most employees are tired, scared and highly demotivated. At best, they come to work to take a break from the "reality out there". At worst, they don't see the point in investing their energy into a country that could break their industry and close their company.

The point is not to spread the doomsday message but rather to see CSR as an important tool to combat this feeling of hopelessness. CSR volunteerism programmes have a unique opportunity to help employees take their power back. Volunteerism lets employees grapple and engage with real social issues, enabling them to affect real change, one project and community at a time. It's true. There's nothing more demotivating than talking about social problems and not having the power to change it. Well, you can change that.

Bringing employee engagement and CSR together

Volunteerism, when driven by employee engagement, has the power to change this narrative in a very real and positive way. And by "engagement", we're not talking "bus in and bus out" team-building tours. We're talking real, engaged, grassroots projects with long term goals and impact. The kind of engagement that requires employees to sign up to a vision and plan they can believe in and commit to. In the long term. Just like your company. Just like our country.

Hilary Smith also believes we need to put employees and their needs first. "There is a growing trend for companies to craft their corporate social responsibility strategy around their employees' passions, first and foremost, as opposed to focusing mainly on their external brand reputation."

So maybe it's time to make a new case for a new way of thinking and approaching CSR, one that would involve collaboration with HR and engagement with employee engagement objectives and measurements.

Andy Hadfield agrees. "The link between CSI and sustainability is perhaps most established in the current landscape in South Africa. Perhaps less clear is the link between CSI and HR. Although these teams seldom sit in on the same meetings, employee wellness, engagement, performance and purpose are becoming increasingly integrated under the goal of business success."

Start small and simple. Start by taking a long, hard look at how your CSR and employee engagement strategies can and do help each other. But even before then, you can start by changing your own CSR narrative from thinking "CSR first" to thinking "employee first". Because, right now, South Africa needs an inspired and engaged employee base and volunteerism is just the vehicle to kick start it.

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