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Date de création : 01.12.2004
Date de dépôt : 27.01.2005
Niveau : BAC + 6

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS IN STAKEHOLDER

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INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENTS - ASSESSMENT FORM
Planning Stakeholder Communication (PKC 550C)

How relevant and practical is Mitchell et al's *principle of who and what really counts to your own organisation?*

As a management problem the identification of stakeholders is not easily solved. It comprises a modelling and a normative issue, which need to be solved in connection with each other. My previous position in an organisation used to consider a strategy of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and had to address the question "to whom are we responsible?" "To stakeholders" was the common answer to this question, which means that, for managing a CSR strategy, the identification of stakeholders is crucial. To a certain extent, management of CSR has become stakeholder management (Donaldson and Preston, 1995).

A stakeholder is commonly seen as an individual or a group (e.g. Freeman, 1984). However, it must be emphasised that there are relationships between stakeholders. For example, coalitions of stakeholders are likely to have more influence than a stakeholder alone. Mitchell *et al.* (1997) describe how dependent Alaskan citizens became, in their terms, definitive stakeholders of Exxon by acquiring a powerful ally in government. Therefore, from a managerial perspective, it is important to consider also the systemic attributes of stakeholders and refer to a system of stakeholders. Furthermore, stakeholders are not objective entities.

"To whom are we responsible?" also leads, directly, to the stakeholder perspective on organisations. "The organisation is responsible to its stakeholders" is also a common answer to that question. A straightforward way of dealing with the stakeholder identification problem is to make a list of all the key actors in and around an organisation. This may lead to a host of parties: stockholders and other creditors, consumers, suppliers, governments, employees, management, trade unions, social communities etc. etc. This list demonstrates the difficulties of such an undertaking. When is the list complete? What makes a party a key actor? Is it possible or relevant to categorise the various parties in terms of their role or function for the organisation? Various ways of defining the stakeholder concept result in diverse answers. Freeman (1984: 46) gives a very broad definition: "[...] a stakeholder in an organisation is (by definition) any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives [...]" which could complete the list of stakeholders. This definition is widely acknowledged because of its "landmark" (cf. Wood, 1991; Clarkson, 1995) position in stakeholder theory. It has been numerously cited, however, usually as a starting point to give a more narrow view on stakeholders, in which categorisations, different from the distinction between "*can affect*" and "*affected*", are described. These categorisations are thoroughly analysed by Mitchell *et al.* (1997). They argue that the more narrow views attempt to define groups of stakeholders in terms of their direct relevance to the organisation's core interests or their necessity for its survival.

How do managers deal with this complex problem? In other words, how do they choose their stakeholders and prioritise between competing stakeholder claims? Mitchell *et al.* (1997) and, in a follow-up article, Agle *et al.* (1999) try to answer this question by developing the "stakeholder salience" model. Stakeholder salience is defined as "the degree to which manager give priority to competing stakeholders claims" (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997: 854). Their claim is that stakeholder salience is positively related to three key stakeholder attributes, i.e. power, legitimacy and urgency, which management believes

INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENTS - ASSESSMENT FORM
Planning Stakeholder Communication (PKC 550C)

to be present. Managers perceive a variety of stakeholder groups. They give a high priority to a stakeholder (-group), if they believe that this stakeholder has a legitimate claim, which calls for immediate action (i.e. urgent), and possesses the power to influence organisation's activities. This stakeholder, who is believed to possess all three attributes, is called a definitive stakeholder.

The practice of corporate social responsibility and therefore stakeholder management, means responding to a variety of stakeholders with different interests and needs. Consequently, there are always decisions to be made among conflicting interests and needs. Furthermore, by means of answering the boundary questions, this system of stakeholders can be modelled and it helps to reflect on the implications of decisions made.

Critically evaluate the relevance and validity of Nkwanko & Richardson's views on organisational leaders as political strategists.

Clarkson (1991) and Goodpaster (1991) argue that responsibilities of leaders include satisfying multiple stakeholder needs while responding to the economic interests of shareholders. Clarkson indicates that when leaders act ethically, the corporation's economic orientation does not take precedence over its social and moral orientation.

However Boatright (1994) posits that the interests of all stakeholders are ends to be served by corporations and that the interests of some stakeholders cannot be ignored to serve the financial ends of others. A lack of balance among stakeholder interests in decision making yields potential for unethical actions can be found.

Some corporate executives can and do make personal and professional decisions that may be political or may be perceived as political. First, explanations for political leadership can be found in the "conception of control" (Fligstein, 2001) that prescribes the maximisation of shareholder wealth and influences the leadership mindsets of executives.

Therefore in the field of political psychology, which highlights the notion that personality characteristics of leaders (e.g. Deluga, 1997) are important determinants of leadership behaviours (e.g. Cox and Cooper, 1989 ;) that affect the governance of corporate organisations (Khurana, 2002).

Conventional management scholars and stakeholder theorists agree on the basic premise that organisations must balance the needs and interests of multiple stakeholders. These scholars establish a clear distinction between the shareholder-wealth-maximising model and the stakeholder model. According to Kochan and Rubinstein (2000), a key distinction stems from the fact that the shareholder-wealth-maximising model focuses on the single, super-ordinate goal of profitability as the ultimate moral end of corporate organisations. On the other hand the stakeholder model holds that the profits derived from value creation serve as means that enable the satisfaction of multiple stakeholders, constituting the ultimate moral end of corporate activity, and also that the balanced satisfaction of the needs of all stakeholders is essential. The shareholder model constitutes a dominant discourse that is often emphasised in response to pressure from shareholders (Kochan, 2002). Executives experience pressures from investors to concentrate on shareholder interests.

INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENTS - ASSESSMENT FORM

Planning Stakeholder Communication (PKC 550C)

Additionally, those controlling important shareholder blocks, such as the managers of major pension funds, have decided to exert persistent and growing pressure for continuously increasing earnings, and, consequently, have critically considered the decision making performance of senior executives. Many such shareholder critics bear fiduciary responsibilities to their own investors and are equally pressured for superior performance. The message is clear, perform now or else! Predictably, executives who face the threat of criticism and dismissal by corporate board members on the basis of poor short-term financial performance will make decisions in such a way as to respond to those powerful pressures. The pressure pushes executives to make whatever decisions appear instrumental in enhancing the bottom line.

When the dominant discourse places financial targets ahead of corporate strategic objectives and social responsibility, shareholder wealth becomes the ultimate moral end of the corporation, and, consequently, any decisions made in the name of financial criteria are construed as moral (Friedman, 1970). There is no doubt that profitability is a desirable means by which corporate responsiveness to stakeholder groups can be sustained. However, one should consider that stakeholder welfare remains an arguably preferable outcome for corporate decision making (Boatright, 1994). Unfortunately, the dominant discourse fosters present ethical concerns by favouring tunnel-vision mindsets (Nwankwo and Richardson, 1996) among some executives who currently use shareholder wealth maximisation as a guide for executive decision making. Such mindsets induce a pluralist view of stakeholder interests, implying that when some stakeholders make political gains, some others lose out. Fligstein (2001) argues that this mindset becomes institutionalised in a generally accepted "conception of control" which executives do not question and which resists change. From a political standpoint, satisfying the interests of powerful shareholders, who present legitimate and urgent claims, is the right thing to do.

The political mindsets of executives influence the practical decisions regarding governance that directly affect multiple stakeholders. The shareholder-wealth-maximising paradigm can shift the attention of executives, from principles of decision making based in the consideration of the consequences of their actions for all stakeholders, to more pragmatic and utilitarian concerns. Selecting which stakeholder interests will be satisfied using a narrow view of "who or what really counts" (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997, p. 856) for the core economic interests of an organisation is a direct consequence of such a focus on wealth maximisation.

The desires of persons who actively pursue executive positions are influenced by the dominant paradigms that empower, enable and reinforce those individuals. Ideally, leaders who are concerned with the needs and interests of multiple stakeholders should have high levels of altruism. They should display a socialised power orientation that is collectively oriented, egalitarian, and non-exploitative as opposed to a more personalised power orientation that is self-aggrandising, non-egalitarian, and exploitative (Conger and Kanungo, 1998; House and Howell, 1992; McClelland, 1975). These leaders should seek the common good as a way to satisfy multiple stakeholder needs and interests. However, the dominant shareholder-wealth-maximising paradigm, the attribution of charisma and the political control, may work contrary to the purposes of individuals with ideal characteristics who aspire to executive positions.

INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENTS - ASSESSMENT FORM
Planning Stakeholder Communication (PKC 550C)

Does the Internet offer a viable medium for stakeholder communication?

The explosion of channels of communications, in press, radio and television meant that communicators could reach sections of the population with information that was mostly, and in some cases exclusively, intended for the recipients. Most of this information spread from one public to another slowly, if at all, and often only by word of mouth.

In the Internet world everyone can see almost everything they are interested in. In looking for subject –specific information, they come across information that may have been aimed at a different narrowcast organisation of group of people or even an individual; interest is aroused and wider understanding is immediately available (Holtz 1999).

Internet users choose what information they want to receive. They also choose who they will accept it from. In addition, they too can distribute information and it can be available to millions of people all over the world. People migrate towards web sites that reflect their interests, lifestyles and concerns at the time that they choose to satisfy their immediate needs. In addition they visit discussions lists and comment on their interests and experiences with like-minded people among this global audience. The characteristics of the new communication economy are interactivity, immediacy, information richness, individualisation and integration (Philips 2001). As well as increasing expectations amongst stakeholders, for instance that emails would be answered within eight hours, it also allows PR practitioners to develop dialogue with their constituency, evolving to Grunig's original model of two-way symmetric communications. Information has become more educative rather than attempting to sell products, and this could be customised to suit individuals and specific journalists. Enhance PR into corporate reputation management and brand leadership.

The traditional PR model that segmented the population into social, economic and market sectors and interests, does not translate well to the Internet. The interests of people are more complex than the neat boxes of interests that have been traditionally used for communication management. For example; an individual can be concerned about environment and yet buy exotic fruits flown halfway around the world. Traditional concepts about PR publics have to be revised to accommodate these complex motivations. The principles of Grunig, however, remain consistent for Internet relationships. Grunig defined in his 1982 paper "The message attitude behaviour relationship: Communication behaviour of organisation", three types of publics and they are as relevant to the internet as to every other form of public relations:

- Latent publics; are low in problem recognition and involvement. They may be affected by an issue, but are not involved in any activity concerning it.
- Aware publics; while high in problem recognition may be constrained in their action and involvement.
- Active publics; are high in problem recognition and involvement and have few constraints for action.

INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENTS - ASSESSMENT FORM

Planning Stakeholder Communication (PKC 550C)

In 1984 Grunig and Hunt added a fourth public, non publics, defined as having no interest in the issue. Today, these people can be identified in Internet terms as those who do not have ready access to the Internet.

His theory can be translated as follow. When an organisation or its constituents seek to affect each other they create PR issues and when these people choose to react, they can become members of a public. Publics form around issues.

The Internet constituents will readily identify a problem with an organisation, its web site, promise, service, products or even culture. In recognising a problem, people actively seek information about the issue that concerns them. When browsing the Internet, this is easy. The user is already plugged into the world's biggest library, the Internet. People notice the extent to which there are obstacles that limit their ability to do things, find information, or buy products. The level of a person's problem and constraint recognition will determine whether or not they are likely to seek information actively or passively. This process is made easy and fast by the functionality of the Internet (Philips 2001).

Critical questions

- What are the means for practitioners to handle rogue web sites and activists' stakeholders?
- What relationships do want the stakeholders toward the organisation?
- Stakeholder groups have differing interests and points of view and inevitably some stakeholder groups will ``win'' and some will ``lose'' when a CEO makes a decision. So how should a CEO balance these differing factions warring for their own interests?

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Planning Stakeholder Communication (PKC 550C)

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