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THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF STAKEHOLDER

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

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TOPIC OF ASSIGNMENT: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF STAKEHOLDER
MANAGEMENT

ASSIGNMENT FOR LEARNING PERIOD.....	MAXIMUM MARKS	STUDENT'S MARKS
Suggested answers to three critical questions posed by lecturer	24	$\frac{\quad}{8} + \frac{\quad}{8} + \frac{\quad}{8}$
Your own two critical questions	6	$\frac{\quad}{3} + \frac{\quad}{3}$
TOTAL	30	

Lecturer's comments

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Is it really tenable to state that it makes strategic business sense for organisations to adopt a clear stakeholder approach?

In his best-selling book *The State We're In*, Will Hutton argues for a democratic political economy that relates to the whole of European society. He criticises business for being short-termist and relentless in pursuit of some of the highest financial returns in the world: "Companies are the fiefdoms of their Boards and sometimes of just their Chairmen; and companies are run as pure trading operations rather than productive organisations which invest, innovate and develop human capital" (Hutton 1996).

In contrast of this view of companies being dominated only by the idea of improving returns for shareholders, the concept of stakeholding advocates a democratic approach to business which values relationships with a range of stakeholders.

The term stakeholder refers to groups or individuals who have an interest or stake in an entity such as an organisation, community or country. In corporate terms, a company's stakeholders include employees, suppliers, members of the local community and customers. Each of these groups can affect or be affected by the "actions, decisions, policies, practices or goals of the organisation" (Freeman 1984).

There is no firm consensus on the meaning of stakeholder theory. It has been described variously as being based on Keynesian economics (Hutton 1996) communitarianism (rights matched by responsibilities) (Burkitt and Ashton 1996) and the Kantian notion of duty (as opposed to utilitarianism) (Burkitt and Ashton 1996).

The concept of stakeholding is manifest in the report "Manufactures and Commerce Inquiry into British business", from the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts (RSA). The final report of this investigation foregrounds the importance of developing reciprocal rather than adversarial relationship with-and-between- employees, customers, suppliers, investors and the community in order to increase business performance and competitiveness. The rationale for this approach is linked to the death of difference –employees, customers and communities increasingly expect individuals' needs and values to be respected. Other key concepts of the report include:

- Inclusive leadership: A shift from an emphasis on physical assets to realising the creative and learning potential of all people with whom the company interacts.
- Sustainable development: Rather than looking for quick financial returns, companies should pursue development which can be sustained over time.
- Establishing a licence to operate: To be successful, organisations must maintain public confidence in the legitimacy of their operations and business conduct. "Licence to operate" and competitiveness are closely linked.

A company which undermines its licence to operate by the wrong behaviour exposes itself to a range of sanctions. Whatever the issue – from animal rights to top executives pay- companies seen to be insensitive to changing standards can find themselves at the centre of public and media outcry (RSA 1995).

The RSA concept of inclusive management clearly resonates with Grunig and Hunt's two way symmetrical, ethical, model of public relations practise. Indeed, just as

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Hutton argues for an end to short-termism in the financial community, Grunig and Hunt's excellent model calls for public relations practitioners to take a long term view in managing organisational relationships with a range of stakeholders and publics. Grunig and Repper distinguish between stakeholders and publics, arguing that whereas many stakeholders are passive, publics are stakeholders who have become aware or active in relation to an organisation: "publics organise around issues and seek out organisations that create those issues- to gain information, seek redress of grievances, pressure the organisations, or ask governments to regulate them." (Grunig and Repper 1992).

Excellent practitioners, however, do not wait until publics are actively campaigning before communicating with them. Effective public relations strategists are involved in organisational decision making. Stakeholder theory is used by public relations practitioners to inform a pragmatic, strategic approach to practice, but its implications are more far reaching. Stakeholding is "intimately connected to societal values, power relations and interactive with them. Culture, polity and society are conceptualised as inextricably connected with the economy, each being highly interactive with each other" (Burkitt and Ashton 1996). It remains to be seen how pervasive this philosophy is, however still public relations practitioners ignore the values of stakeholding at their peril.

<p>What are the major principal issues that make it difficult to reconcile a shareholder view with a stakeholder view of the organisation?</p>

Milton Friedman, the Nobel prize-winning economist and advocate of "laissez-faire" capitalism, argued against the stakeholder approach. One of his key arguments, sometimes referred to as "the agency argument", is that managers of corporations are merely agents of the shareholders in the companies they work for. The owners of businesses, the shareholders, are the only people to whom managers are accountable and the only responsibility managers have is to act in their interests. This means maximising profits so that the shareholders will make as much money as possible from their shares. Friedman presents his premise about a manager's role vis-à-vis the shareholders as a "statement of legal fact" (Chryssides and Kaler 1993). While other interests may be taken into account, Friedman is largely correct in stating that the managers of a corporation must ultimately serve the interests of the shareholders. However in certain western countries law, the corporation is a separate legal entity and is not identified solely with any particular group – employees, shareholders or directors. It is precisely this issue of "legal identification" which incorporation is meant to resolve. This means that whilst employees, shareholders and directors may, and do, change, the corporation carries on as the identifiable possessor of rights and duties.

Chryssides and Kaler (1993) note that: "[...] Because they are employed by the company rather than the shareholders, changes in shareholding do not, of themselves, affect the legal position of employees, be they managers or workers, they continue to be employed by the same company. In an important respect, changes in shareholding do not even affect ownership. It is the company as a corporate entity which owns the assets of the business. What the shareholders own is a right to a share of any distributable financial surplus. They in effect own the company rather than its assets. Consequently,

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the right of the company, acting through its employees, to utilise those assets is legally unaffected by changes in shareholding. [...]"

Managers therefore are not directly the agents of the shareholders in the way that Friedman wishes to imply, although shareholders are, in roundabout way, the owners of the business. Friedman's assertion that the interests of the corporation ought to be exclusively identified with its shareholders' must be seen in the context of his advocacy of the values of free enterprise. These values involve a combination of egoism and utilitarianism, a view that claims that if everyone pursues their own self-interest within a free market, the result is the greatest happiness, or economic well-being, for the greatest number of actors within the market. This argument, that only the interests of shareholders are important, is not universally accepted. There is, in fact, an argument that the managers should act as the agents of all groups associated with the corporation and not just the shareholders. Those who support this view reject Friedman's "shareholder model" in favour of the "stakeholder model".

The stakeholder model argues that the task of a corporate manager is to balance the interests of all the different groups who have a "stake" in the company. These groups might include shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, the local community and even broader society. This approach requires the corporation to take account of its social responsibilities. Evan and Freeman (1993) argue from a Kantian perspective for adoption of this model. They utilise Kant's categorical imperative to argue that all human beings have a right not to be treated as merely a means but as an end in themselves. Corporate policy must consider all its stakeholders. Corporation coordinates stakeholder interests. It is through the corporation that each stakeholder group makes itself better off through voluntary exchanges. From this perspective companies must pay as much attention to its social duties as it does to maximising profits.

This approach seems attractive, it should be pointed out that there are issues here also which need to be resolved. The issue of "power" seems to be largely ignored. It might be possible to think of a situation where all relevant groups are represented regarding an issue but it is difficult to imagine a situation where all the participants will be accorded a same attention. There is an additional problem in that process where an issue to which everyone agrees might not be possible. A decision might have to be made which is only in the interests of the majority and it is hard to see how one could prevent this from collapsing into utilitarianism, where you rely on maximising happiness for the greatest possible number.

Are there certain conditions where a predominant stakeholder approach may be detrimental to the very existence of an organisation?

It is clear from stakeholder theory that owners would have no special position in the organisation, and, for this reason, it is unlikely that rationality would prevail in the decisions made by stakeholders. A host of considerations other than profit would be relevant to things such as plant relocation, remuneration, severance (if it were allowed), and takeovers (if they were ever permitted). The problem is that there is no ordering principle equivalent to the price mechanism that could be used by stakeholders in the typical decisions affecting corporations. If the stakeholder idea were taken seriously,

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decision-making in a corporation would resemble that of a parliamentary assembly: the board room would be a battleground for warring pressure groups (Barry 1998). It is no coincidence that stakeholder theorists refer to the groups influencing corporate decisions as *constituencies* (Evan and Freeman 1993).

Corporate management, in the absence of any clear priority rule, would have to negotiate with each of the "constituencies" that could validate—most likely on an *ad hoc* basis—their claim to stakeholder status. Were each valid stakeholder claim to confer an entitlement, then management would have a fiduciary duty to each stakeholder group, analogous to its current fiduciary duty to the firm's stockholders. Since stakeholder theory normally is unable to prioritise the conflicting claims of various stakeholder groups, management would have little to go on but the expediencies of interest-group liberalism in responding to these claims (Donaldson 1989).

Stakeholder theory, however, made a significant contribution to the debate about corporate takeovers. The standard collectivist argument is that the company is not the property of its stockholders and, therefore, the choices the stockholders make should not be the only consideration in questions about the company's future. The clearest difference between Anglo-American capitalism and its Japanese and German rivals is that hostile bids are scarcely known in the latter two economies. Here the company is, in effect, "owned" by stakeholder groups (trade unions, banks, managers, and so on), so that in Germany, for example, even though stockholders have the final say in such matters (despite the obligatory presence of trade unions on supervisory boards), no one owner can vote more than 5 percent of his stock no matter how much he might own. This dilutes the force of ownership. But individualist Anglo-American capitalism, with its concern for stockholder value, could not function in such a world. In the absence of a takeover threat, managers would become rent-seekers and divert income to themselves that should go to the stockholders.

On simple utilitarian grounds, Anglo-American capitalism is proving to be superior to its rivals. The German social market is under great pressure at the moment, and the country's companies are increasingly threatened by foreign predators. But there is nothing particularly moral about this model; neither German commentators nor capitalists have any objection to their companies making hostile bids for businesses in other countries. This suggests that the model has more to do with nationalism than either rational economics or a universal ethic. The much-admired Japanese economy has been mired in recession for over a decade, but its anti-individualist bias and alleged corporate responsibility have masked for decades a type of immorality that would have been exposed quickly by the open economies. In Japan, small shareholders are treated poorly; they are paid derisory dividends and are excluded from any serious role in the management of companies. Criminals seem to be more influential in corporate governance than regular stockholders are (Barry 1998).

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Critical questions

- How do managers prioritise their stakeholders between competing stakeholders claims? What stakeholders do managers have to take into account?
- Are the standard stakeholder categories now outmoded? Is it more interesting to look at employees, who are also owners, or customers who are also competitors, or customers who are also employees and community members?
- Do the stockholders or shareowners have a special status among stakeholders?

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