

# Doctrine of social responsibility

Experience, Responsibility



## Doctrines of Social Responsibility

The doctrine of social responsibility holds that individuals and organizations should advance the interests of society at large. They can do this by abstaining from harmful actions and by performing socially beneficial acts. Although the doctrine of social responsibility applies to people and organizations, much of the discussion focuses on business and the extent to which social responsibility should influence business decisions.

### Examples of Social Responsibility?

#### Answer

When individuals and organizations say they are motivated by social responsibility, they are referring to a feeling of ethical obligation to act in ways that benefit society.

In recent years, the mantra of social responsibility has been taken up by small businesses, non-profits, and corporations alike. Some notable examples of corporate efforts at social responsibility include: Ben & Jerry's, which started the Ben & Jerry's Foundation and donates 7.5% of profits to charitable causes; Kenneth Cole, which has supported AIDS awareness and research; and Pedigree, which distributes grants and food to animal shelters.

Each of these companies has recognized that success in business alone falls short of contributing to the societies they share in, and have taken the extra step to address their ethical obligations.

On an individual level, everyone can engage in acts of social responsibility, every day. Consider the consequences of your actions on society as a whole.

Turn off lights and electronics when they aren't needed to conserve energy. Donate money to trustworthy organizations that work to further causes that interest you.

### Volunteer

Remember, the smallest act of individual social responsibility can have a powerful impact when multiplied by an entire community.

### Voluntary Hazard Elimination

Companies involved with social responsibility often take action to voluntarily eliminate production practices that could cause harm for the public, regardless of whether they are required by law. For example, a business could institute a hazard control program that includes steps to protect the public from exposure to hazardous substances through education and awareness. A plant that uses chemicals could implement a safety inspection checklist to guide staff in best practices when handling potentially dangerous substances and materials. A business that makes excessive noise and vibration could analyze the effects its work has on the environment by surveying local residents. The information received could be used to adjust activities and develop soundproofing to lessen public exposure to noise pollution. Community Development

Companies, businesses and corporations concerned with social responsibility align with appropriate institutions to create a better environment to live and work. For example, a corporation or business may set up a foundation to assist in learning or education for the public. This action will be viewed as an asset to all of the communities that it serves, while developing a positive

public profile. Related Reading: Role of Social Responsibility in Marketing  
Philanthropy

Businesses involved in philanthropy make monetary contributions that provide aid to local charitable, educational and health-related organizations to assist under-served or impoverished communities. This action can assist people in acquiring marketable skills to reduce poverty, provide education and help the environment. For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation focuses on global initiatives for education, agriculture and health issues, donating computers to schools and funding work on vaccines to prevent polio and HIV/AIDS. Creating Shared Value

Corporate responsibility interests are often referred to as creating shared value or CSV, which is based upon the connection between corporate success and social well-being. Since a business needs a productive workforce to function, health and education are key components to that equation. Profitable and successful businesses must thrive so that society may develop and survive. An example of how CSV works could be a company-sponsored contest involving a project to improve the management and access of water used by a farming community, to foster public health. Social Education and Awareness

Companies that engage in socially responsible investing use positioning to exert pressure on businesses to adopt socially responsible behavior themselves. To do this, they use media and Internet distribution to expose the potentially harmful activities of organizations. This creates an educational dialogue for the public by developing social community awareness. This kind of collective activism can be effective in reaching social

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education and awareness goals. Integrating a social awareness strategy into the business model can also aid companies in monitoring active compliance with ethical business standards and applicable laws.

For other types of responsibility, see Responsibility (disambiguation). Social responsibility is an ethical theory that an entity, be it an organization or individual, has an obligation to act to benefit society at large. Social responsibility is a duty every individual has to perform so as to maintain a balance between the economy and the ecosystem. A trade-off always[citation needed] exists between economic development, in the material sense, and the welfare of the society and environment.

Social responsibility means sustaining the equilibrium between the two. It pertains not only to business organizations but also to everyone whose any action impacts the environment. [1] This responsibility can be passive, by avoiding engaging in socially harmful acts, or active, by performing activities that directly advance social goals. Businesses can use ethical decision making to secure their businesses by making decisions that allow for government agencies to minimize their involvement with the corporation.

For instance if a company follows the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) guidelines for emissions on dangerous pollutants and even goes an extra step to get involved in the community and address those concerns that the public might have; they would be less likely to have the EPA investigate them for environmental concerns. [3] " A significant element of current thinking about privacy, however, stresses " self-regulation" rather

than market or government mechanisms for protecting personal information”.

According to some experts, most rules and regulations are formed due to public outcry, which threatens profit maximization and therefore the well-being of the shareholder, and that if there is not outcry there often will be limited regulation. [5] Critics argue that Corporate social responsibility (CSR) distracts from the fundamental economic role of businesses; others argue that it is nothing more than superficial window-dressing; others argue that it is an attempt to pre-empt the role of governments as a watchdog over powerful corporations though there is no systematic evidence to support these criticisms.

A significant number of studies have shown no negative influence on shareholder results from CSR but rather a slightly negative correlation with improved shareholder returns. [clarification needed][6] The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits by Milton Friedman The New York Times Magazine, September 13, 1970. Copyright © 1970 by The New York Times Company. When I hear businessmen speak eloquently about the "social responsibilities of business in a free-enterprise system," I am reminded of the wonderful line about the Frenchman who discovered at the age of 70 that he had been speaking prose all his life.

The businessmen believe that they are defending free enterprise when they declaim that business is not concerned "merely" with profit but also with promoting desirable "social" ends; that business has a "social conscience" and takes seriously its responsibilities for providing employment,

eliminating discrimination, avoiding pollution and whatever else may be the catchwords of the contemporary crop of reformers. In fact they are—or would be if they or anyone else took them seriously—preaching pure and unadulterated socialism.

Businessmen who talk this way are unwitting puppets of the intellectual forces that have been undermining the basis of a free society these past decades. The discussions of the "social responsibilities of business" are notable for their analytical looseness and lack of rigor. What does it mean to say that "business" has responsibilities? Only people can have responsibilities. A corporation is an artificial person and in this sense may have artificial responsibilities, but "business" as a whole cannot be said to have responsibilities, even in this vague sense.

The first step toward clarity in examining the doctrine of the social responsibility of business is to ask precisely what it implies for whom. Presumably, the individuals who are to be responsible are businessmen, which means individual proprietors or corporate executives. Most of the discussion of social responsibility is directed at corporations, so in what follows I shall mostly neglect the individual proprietors and speak of corporate executives. In a free-enterprise, private-property system, a corporate executive is an employee of the owners of the business.

He has direct responsibility to his employers. That responsibility is to conduct the business in accordance with their desires, which generally will be to make as much money as possible while conforming to the basic rules of the society, both those embodied in law and those embodied in ethical custom.

Of course, in some cases his employers may have a different objective. A group of persons might establish a corporation for an eleemosynary purpose—for example, a hospital or a school. The manager of such a corporation will not have money profit as his objective but the rendering of certain services.

In either case, the key point is that, in his capacity as a corporate executive, the manager is the agent of the individuals who own the corporation or establish the eleemosynary institution, and his primary responsibility is to them. Needless to say, this does not mean that it is easy to judge how well he is performing his task. But at least the criterion of performance is straightforward, and the persons among whom a voluntary contractual arrangement exists are clearly defined. Of course, the corporate executive is also a person in his own right.

As a person, he may have many other responsibilities that he recognizes or assumes voluntarily—to his family, his conscience, his feelings of charity, his church, his clubs, his city, his country. He may feel impelled by these responsibilities to devote part of his income to causes he regards as worthy, to refuse to work for particular corporations, even to leave his job, for example, to join his country's armed forces. If we wish, we may refer to some of these responsibilities as "social responsibilities."

"But in these respects he is acting as a principal, not an agent; he is spending his own money or time or energy, not the money of his employers or the time or energy he has contracted to devote to their purposes. If these are "social responsibilities," they are the social responsibilities of individuals,

not of business. What does it mean to say that the corporate executive has a "social responsibility" in his capacity as businessman? If this statement is not pure rhetoric, it must mean that he is to act in some way that is not in the interest of his employers.

For example, that he is to refrain from increasing the price of the product in order to contribute to the social objective of preventing inflation, even though a price increase would be in the best interests of the corporation. Or that he is to make expenditures on reducing pollution beyond the amount that is in the best interests of the corporation or that is required by law in order to contribute to the social objective of improving the environment. Or that, at the expense of corporate profits, he is to hire "hardcore" unemployed instead of better qualified available workmen to contribute to the social objective of reducing poverty.

In each of these cases, the corporate executive would be spending someone else's money for a general social interest. Insofar as his actions in accord with his "social responsibility" reduce returns to stockholders, he is spending their money. Insofar as his actions raise the price to customers, he is spending the customers' money. Insofar as his actions lower the wages of some employees, he is spending their money. The stockholders or the customers or the employees could separately spend their own money on the particular action if they wished to do so.

The executive is exercising a distinct "social responsibility," rather than serving as an agent of the stockholders or the customers or the employees, only if he spends the money in a different way than they would have spent it.

But if he does this, he is in effect imposing taxes, on the one hand, and deciding how the tax proceeds shall be spent, on the other. This process raises political questions on two levels: principle and consequences. On the level of political principle, the imposition of taxes and the expenditure of tax proceeds are governmental functions.

We have established elaborate constitutional, parliamentary and judicial provisions to control these functions, to assure that taxes are imposed so far as possible in accordance with the preferences and desires of the public—after all, "taxation without representation" was one of the battle cries of the American Revolution. We have a system of checks and balances to separate the legislative function of imposing taxes and enacting expenditures from the executive function of collecting taxes and administering expenditure programs and from the judicial function of mediating disputes and interpreting the law.

Here the businessman—self-selected or appointed directly or indirectly by stockholders—is to be simultaneously legislator, executive and, jurist. He is to decide whom to tax by how much and for what purpose, and he is to spend the proceeds—all this guided only by general exhortations from on high to restrain inflation, improve the environment, fight poverty and so on and on. The whole justification for permitting the corporate executive to be selected by the stockholders is that the executive is an agent serving the interests of his principal.

This justification disappears when the corporate executive imposes taxes and spends the proceeds for "social" purposes. He becomes in effect a

public employee, a civil servant, even though he remains in name an employee of a private enterprise. On grounds of political principle, it is intolerable that such civil servants—insofar as their actions in the name of social responsibility are real and not just window-dressing—should be selected as they are now. If they are to be civil servants, then they must be elected through a political process.

If they are to impose taxes and make expenditures to foster "social" objectives, then political machinery must be set up to make the assessment of taxes and to determine through a political process the objectives to be served. This is the basic reason why the doctrine of "social responsibility" involves the acceptance of the socialist view that political mechanisms, not market mechanisms, are the appropriate way to determine the allocation of scarce resources to alternative uses.

On the grounds of consequences, can the corporate executive in fact discharge his alleged "social responsibilities?" On the other hand, suppose he could get away with spending the stockholders' or customers' or employees' money. How is he to know how to spend it? He is told that he must contribute to fighting inflation. How is he to know what action of his will contribute to that end? He is presumably an expert in running his company—in producing a product or selling it or financing it.

But nothing about his selection makes him an expert on inflation. Will his holding down the price of his product reduce inflationary pressure? Or, by leaving more spending power in the hands of his customers, simply divert it elsewhere? Or, by forcing him to produce less because of the lower price, will

it simply contribute to shortages? Even if he could answer these questions, how much cost is he justified in imposing on his stockholders, customers and employees for this social purpose?

What is his appropriate share and what is the appropriate share of others? And, whether he wants to or not, can he get away with spending his stockholders', customers' or employees' money? Will not the stockholders fire him? (Either the present ones or those who take over when his actions in the name of social responsibility have reduced the corporation's profits and the price of its stock. ) His customers and his employees can desert him for other producers and employers less scrupulous in exercising their social responsibilities.

This facet of " social responsibility" doctrine is brought into sharp relief when the doctrine is used to justify wage restraint by trade unions. The conflict of interest is naked and clear when union officials are asked to subordinate the interest of their members to some more general purpose. If the union officials try to enforce wage restraint, the consequence is likely to be wildcat strikes, rank-and-file revolts and the emergence of strong competitors for their jobs.

We thus have the ironic phenomenon that union leaders—at least in the U. S. —have objected to Government interference with the market far more consistently and courageously than have business leaders. The difficulty of exercising " social responsibility" illustrates, of course, the great virtue of private competitive enterprise—it forces people to be responsible for their own actions and makes it difficult for them to " exploit" other people for

either selfish or unselfish purposes. They can do good—but only at their own expense.

Many a reader who has followed the argument this far may be tempted to remonstrate that it is all well and good to speak of Government's having the responsibility to impose taxes and determine expenditures for such "social" purposes as controlling pollution or training the hard-core unemployed, but that the problems are too urgent to wait on the slow course of political processes, that the exercise of social responsibility by businessmen is a quicker and surer way to solve pressing current problems.

Aside from the question of fact—I share Adam Smith's skepticism about the benefits that can be expected from "those who affected to trade for the public good"—this argument must be rejected on grounds of principle. What it amounts to is an assertion that those who favor the taxes and expenditures in question have failed to persuade a majority of their fellow citizens to be of like mind and that they are seeking to attain by undemocratic procedures what they cannot attain by democratic procedures. In a free society, it is hard for "evil" people to do "evil," especially since one man's good is another's evil.

I have, for simplicity, concentrated on the special case of the corporate executive, except only for the brief digression on trade unions. But precisely the same argument applies to the newer phenomenon of calling upon stockholders to require corporations to exercise social responsibility (the recent G. M. crusade for example). In most of these cases, what is in effect involved is some stockholders trying to get other stockholders (or customers

or employees) to contribute against their will to "social" causes favored by the activists.

Insofar as they succeed, they are again imposing taxes and spending the proceeds. The situation of the individual proprietor is somewhat different. If he acts to reduce the returns of his enterprise in order to exercise his "social responsibility," he is spending his own money, not someone else's. If he wishes to spend his money on such purposes, that is his right, and I cannot see that there is any objection to his doing so. In the process, he, too, may impose costs on employees and customers.

However, because he is far less likely than a large corporation or union to have monopolistic power, any such side effects will tend to be minor. Of course, in practice the doctrine of social responsibility is frequently a cloak for actions that are justified on other grounds rather than a reason for those actions. To illustrate, it may well be in the long run interest of a corporation that is a major employer in a small community to devote resources to providing amenities to that community or to improving its government.

That may make it easier to attract desirable employees, it may reduce the wage bill or lessen losses from pilferage and sabotage or have other worthwhile effects. Or it may be that, given the laws about the deductibility of corporate charitable contributions, the stockholders can contribute more to charities they favor by having the corporation make the gift than by doing it themselves, since they can in that way contribute an amount that would otherwise have been paid as corporate taxes. In each of these—and many

similar-cases, there is a strong temptation to rationalize these actions as an exercise of "social responsibility."

"In the present climate of opinion, with its wide spread aversion to "capitalism," "profits," the "soulless corporation" and so on, this is one way for a corporation to generate goodwill as a by-product of expenditures that are entirely justified in its own self-interest. It would be inconsistent of me to call on corporate executives to refrain from this hypocritical window-dressing because it harms the foundations of a free society. That would be to call on them to exercise a "social responsibility"!

If our institutions, and the attitudes of the public make it in their self-interest to cloak their actions in this way, I cannot summon much indignation to denounce them. At the same time, I can express admiration for those individual proprietors or owners of closely held corporations or stockholders of more broadly held corporations who disdain such tactics as approaching fraud. Whether blameworthy or not, the use of the cloak of social responsibility, and the nonsense spoken in its name by influential and prestigious businessmen, does clearly harm the foundations of a free society.

I have been impressed time and again by the schizophrenic character of many businessmen. They are capable of being extremely farsighted and clearheaded in matters that are internal to their businesses. They are incredibly shortsighted and muddleheaded in matters that are outside their businesses but affect the possible survival of business in general. This shortsightedness is strikingly exemplified in the calls from many businessmen for wage and price guidelines or controls or income policies.

There is nothing that could do more in a brief period to destroy a market system and replace it by a centrally controlled system than effective governmental control of prices and wages. The shortsightedness is also exemplified in speeches by businessmen on social responsibility. This may gain them kudos in the short run. But it helps to strengthen the already too prevalent view that the pursuit of profits is wicked and immoral and must be curbed and controlled by external forces.

Once this view is adopted, the external forces that curb the market will not be the social consciences, however highly developed, of the pontificating executives; it will be the iron fist of Government bureaucrats. Here, as with price and wage controls, businessmen seem to me to reveal a suicidal impulse. The political principle that underlies the market mechanism is unanimity. In an ideal free market resting on private property, no individual can coerce any other, all cooperation is voluntary, all parties to such cooperation benefit or they need not participate.

There are no values, no "social" responsibilities in any sense other than the shared values and responsibilities of individuals. Society is a collection of individuals and of the various groups they voluntarily form. The political principle that underlies the political mechanism is conformity. The individual must serve a more general social interest—whether that be determined by a church or a dictator or a majority. The individual may have a vote and say in what is to be done, but if he is overruled, he must conform.

It is appropriate for some to require others to contribute to a general social purpose whether they wish to or not. Unfortunately, unanimity is not always

feasible. There are some respects in which conformity appears unavoidable, so I do not see how one can avoid the use of the political mechanism altogether. But the doctrine of "social responsibility" taken seriously would extend the scope of the political mechanism to every human activity. It does not differ in philosophy from the most explicitly collectivist doctrine.

It differs only by professing to believe that collectivist ends can be attained without collectivist means. That is why, in my book *Capitalism and Freedom*, I have called it a "fundamentally subversive doctrine" in a free society, and have said that in such a society, "there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud."