HOW TO APPROACH CORPORATE SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTION

A practical guide

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OVERVIEW

We want to show the benefits, inevitability, and urgency of businesses to engage with society beyond revenue maximisation but also stress the opportunities that come along with corporate activism.

ABSTRACT

In the context of a block seminar about social and political activism in corporate organizations, our group of students sat down to compose this booklet of information on the topic. Our aim is to introduce practitioners, CEOs, and corporate departments to the topic of socio-political activism and provide some first steps and tools with which to realize a firm's social position while also using it for positive social change.

The booklet starts with an introduction to the topic of corporate activism, making contextual reference to social trends and pressures toward corporate responsibility and action in social questions. We then proceed to assess the opportunities for corporate actions and possible risks and rewards that companies face when engaging in social issues through an array of case examples. In the subsequent chapter, we built upon Kotter's 8-step model of change to go on to summarise concrete forms that activism can take. This ranges from individual, particularly CEO-actions, to more structural approaches like setting up a foundation or engaging in lobbyism for certain topics. Lastly, we explore the difficulties and possibilities of measuring and evaluating the impact of action before we summarise our main points and leave with a call for proactive engagement that bridges the economy with the social sphere.

WHY CORPORATE ACTIVISM?

With growing societal awareness of topics like racism, global working conditions, and the human impact on the climate, pressure is rising on corporations and other organizations to take responsibility and advocate for change. This pressure manifests itself on the one hand as consumer demand and is addressed by marketing strategies and products that respect certain social norms. On the other hand, businesses nowadays face a growing requirement to set up Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) departments and satisfy Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance (ESG) criteria. Businesses of all forms are expected to support some kind of social cause, invest in social change, and generally take part in changing the infrastructure of how business is done.

This surge in the expectation for corporate activism has many reasons about which one can speculate. For example, there have been more global political movements lately, such as Solidarity with Ukraine, Black Lives Matter, and Fridays for Future. The latter is inextricably tied to an understanding of consumption and an awareness of the impact of our economy on the environment. Furthermore, due to the increased speed of information flow, global inequality becomes ever more visible, perhaps adding to a need to rethink business. Lastly, we have just come out of a decade-long neoliberal tradition of separation of the economy and politics, the effects of which are becoming increasingly clearer.

Whatever the real historical reasons for this pressure on corporations, it is something to presently face and react to from a firm's standpoint. It is our conviction that all this is nothing to avoid or fear but rather that corporations and people in positions of power must embrace the current pressures from the outside world. It is an opportunity to proactively realize our individual, systemic roles and responsibilities in society while also engaging in shaping our world. We see four main reasons why firms should engage in socio-political activism:

Importance for stakeholders of all kinds
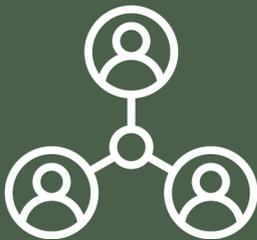
Whether employees, consumers, shareholders, or others, it is important for us to identify with the firm or the product, and firms are somewhat bound to what stakeholders want and need. An example is Gillette, which we will explore further in the next sections: In 2019, they engaged in a marketing campaign that arguably failed due to them not understanding their stakeholders' needs. There are many critical points to be learned here, but one important aspect is that one shouldn't underestimate the effect of stakeholders' reactions to a firm's actions. In a social tendency toward politicization of firms, it's important for shareholders to invest in the right companies, for employees to identify with their employer, and for consumers to consume the right products.

Market positioning and comparative advantage

Tying into the last point, responding to the market's social demands is an important strategic move for firms to secure one's current market position and future growth. The kind of social change one advocates for acts like an asset that consumers identify with, which helps create a market niche. Furthermore, businesses indirectly function as political players, too, as their relationship to the social demands of the stakeholders sends important signals to politicians about what is and isn't important. An interesting example from the subsequent section is Patagonia, who have invested their energy and resources into a more sustainable business model, practically changing the market in response to their success and creating new standards for companies to adhere to certain social ideals. This market position can then function as a gateway to successful lobbying.

Ethical Reasons

It is too simple to separate the business world from the surrounding society. Our understanding of this has developed significantly from the heyday of neoliberalism. Take, for example, Milton Friedman, who once argued that the sole social responsibility of business is to maximize profit (Friedman, 1970). According to this motto, the Chicago Boys did their work in dictatorial Chile, which, against all expectations, did not lead to more general equality, a better life for all, and exorbitant economic growth but to rising inequality, human rights abuses, and an economic growth of little more than 2% [1]. One thing we can learn from this is that businesses have an inextricable social role to play, and not engaging with societal problems has just as many social consequences as proactively engaging. It, therefore, seems like an ethical obligation to try to steer the consequences of a corporation's actions into a socially desirable direction as best as one can.

Integrating the externalities of our actions

This last point is a compilation and a conclusion of all previous points, as it highlights the fact that, no matter our intentions and our self-perceived role in society, business actions have social consequences. What businesses do is perceived as signals for stakeholders, consumers, competitors, and politicians. Hence, understanding these externalities simply becomes an act of self-realization for players in the economy. It is imperative to understand how to steer these externalities and integrate them into a company's motives and actions.

This booklet tries to provide organizations with the tools and information needed to understand their social roles and make meaningful and responsible social decisions. To assess the social climate and plan a course of action, we will showcase different forms of corporate activism through case examples and explore the possible risks and rewards that these entail. We will then provide a list of hard and soft tools to tackle and approach corporate activism. Subsequently, we explore ways in which firms can evaluate the level of impact a corporate decision has before we provide an outlook for the future.

On the one hand, we hope to inspire organizations and individuals to rethink their role in the world. On the other hand, we hope to show concrete ways in which this rethinking can be transformed into decisions and actions that reflect the corporation's views and values, as well as their imminent social role. In this way, we all have the chance to add our voices to the discourse of social change.

CORPORATE OUTLOOKS ON SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVISM: RISKS & REWARDS

In this section, we will shed light on some practical challenges and explore the diversity of corporate social activism, including its potential risks, rewards, and impact on their organizations and society. Given that society comprises politically diverse individuals and organizations with unique interests, a company's sociopolitical activism can have positive and negative consequences, which can also result in unpredictable social and economic impacts.

POSSIBLE RISKS AND REWARDS OF CORPORATE SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVISM

In the following, we display the potential outcomes of socio-political activism, which can trigger societal attention and public awareness for the better or worse. To illustrate the scale of opportunities, risks, and rewards, we will present three cases.

Failing to anticipate the reaction from different stakeholder groups and the public may lead to risks and consequences. A company's contrary stance can cause boycotts, damage to its reputation, or legal and regulatory adaptations. This can be illustrated by the campaign PETA launched against Air France in 2012. By then, Air France was the only major European airline still carrying monkeys to laboratories for testing on voyages that took more than 30 hours. PETA subsequently initiated and executed a prominent campaign involving worldwide demonstrations, onboard protests, discussions with the corporation's executives, shareholder activism, interruption of high-level meetings, and prominent advertising such as airport billboards. As a reaction to these protests, Air France ultimately announced stopping these shipments once the current contract expired [2]. The company had to abandon that business due to a substantial public backlash to avoid further damaging its reputation (PETA-team, 2022). Understanding potential risks enables a company to develop mitigation strategies and make informed decisions.

GILETTE FACING RISKS WHEN LAUNCHING THE 2019 CAMPAIGN "THE BEST A MAN CAN BE"

The American company Gillette has been heavily criticized for its polarizing, male-targeted advertising campaign. Their lack of credibility and insufficient stakeholder mapping has made them a prime target for public outrage. Stakeholders, in general, include employees, customers, investors, shareholders, and the state. Balancing all of them is crucial for corporate decision-makers.

In 2019, Gillette launched a controversial advertisement campaign to address toxic masculinity and promote positive behavior among men. While the general idea might be ethically motivated, the execution of the campaign had several drawbacks. A reaction that might have been expected is that men felt attacked by this commercial. However, an observable improvement of the issue at hand, self-reflection by men, was not achieved. Furthermore, although Gilette's intentions may have been sincere, they received significant criticism from supporters of the #metoo movement for instrumentally using the movement. Gilette's attempt to support feminism through this advertisement lacks credibility as they failed to make a tangible contribution to their business practices [3]. Although the company donates money to NGOs, it may not be enough to establish credibility. For instance, Gillette sells razors for women at a 37% higher price than those for men, commonly known as "pink tax."[4] Gillette also failed to provide any details of tangible steps taken to improve the working conditions of female employees in their company and throughout their supply chain. Addressing both examples would have demonstrated a genuine concern for feminist issues and enhanced credibility among both polarized factions of society.

The lessons learned are that risks can be reduced by listening to the different perspectives and differences of all stakeholders to achieve the intended goal. Additionally, it's vital to establish credibility by identifying and addressing weaknesses within one's business environment with effective solutions.

TONY'S CHOCOLONELY INITIALLY TAKING A RISK THAT TURNED OUT TO BE A REWARD

The company Tony's Chocolonely has adopted a bold business model by offering 100% slave-free chocolate, which is a significant departure from the industry norm. Unlike other well-known chocolate brands that rely on the two leading suppliers that entrench slavery in African production regions, Tony's Chocolonely has created its value chain, guided by five principles that aim to improve the working conditions and living standards of its farmer communities. This approach involved enormous risks, such as establishing new value chains, building efficient business processes, securing financial resources, and justifying the price premium to customers. The process took time to become sustainable and profitable. However, the challenge has been worthwhile, as Tony's Chocolonely has become an established player and market leader in the Netherlands while gaining significant market share in other European markets. This case demonstrates that even in price-sensitive industries, it is possible to drive sustainable change and thrive, not just survive, in the face of fierce competition [5].

Engaging in socio-political activism carries a significant risk of losing public legitimacy as an organization, especially if its primary focus is on short-term gains or maintaining a positive public image that doesn't align with its core values and principles. This approach can lead the public to question the authenticity and sincerity of the company's stance, creating confusion and skepticism about its overall business operations.

It's important to recognize that public opinion on social issues is dynamic and subject to change. If a company's activism is not in line with prevailing societal norms or public expectations, it may face criticism and experience a temporary loss of legitimacy. Companies need to carefully consider the evolving landscape of social issues and ensure that their activism is aligned with the values and expectations of their stakeholders to maintain public trust and legitimacy.
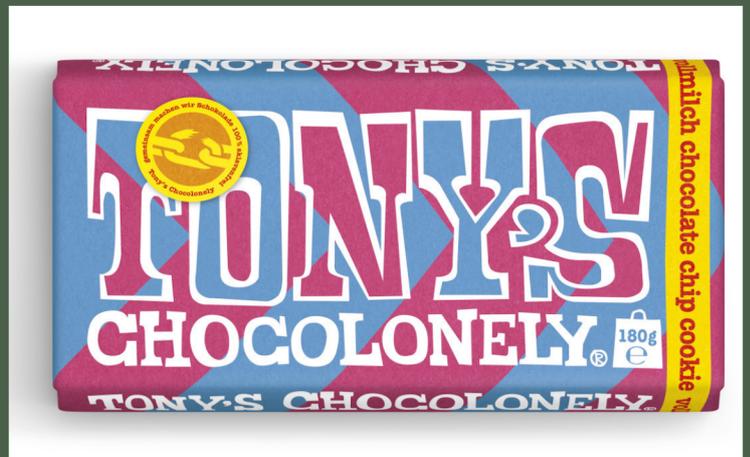
NIKE'S RISKY CAMPAIGN AGAINST POLITICAL INJUSTICE AND RACISM

TIn 2018, Nike unveiled a campaign starring Colin Kaepernick, a former NFL player recognized for kneeling during the national anthem to protest racial injustice and police brutality.
The campaign, with the slogan "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything," received both support and hostilities. [6] Many individuals, especially those who opposed Kaepernick's protest, condemned Nike for aligning itself with a contentious figure and what they perceived as unpatriotic behavior. The backlash included boycotts and public demonstrations, where Nike products were burned as a form of protest. Critics accused the company of disrespecting the Stars and Stripes flag and the military and raised doubts about Nike's motives. They suggested that the activism was driven by marketing and financial gain rather than genuine concern.

This example demonstrates how a company's involvement in socio-political activism can damage its legitimacy if perceived as divisive, inconsistent with stakeholder values, or opportunistic. It highlights the significance of considering enduring values and societal norms, involving stakeholders, and upholding authenticity to preserve public trust and legitimacy.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN THE CAMBODIAN CLOTHING INDUSTRY AS A CRUCIAL RISK AND MEASURE TO ENSURE THE SURVIVAL OF THE WORKERS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Potential risks also scale up when we look at the clothing industry and into one of their most relevant manufacturing regions that accounts for 45% of employed garment manufacturers worldwide: Cambodia.

The Cambodian economy relies heavily on the garment industry, and the global garment industry heavily relies on Cambodia. As of 2011, the industry was responsible for 80% of Cambodia's total exports. However, Cambodia is also infamous for its poor treatment of factory workers, particularly in the garment sector [7]. Moreover, the environmental conditions do not favor such an industry since a few regions are at risk of falling underwater. In this case, corporate activism can play a decisive role in stopping an environmental and human disaster. Although it implies extensive risks, it is important to trigger social awareness and speak up with the hope of changing the working conditions of employees and finding plausible alternatives for clothing production and the exploitation of cheap labor.

This example shows what positive opportunities can imply and creates a sense of urgency within society for risk-taking.

In conclusion, corporations engage in activism while being uncertain of the outcome. Their objective is to normalize certain behaviors and initiate innovative measures. In some cases, they have strong moral positions urging them to trigger changes and employ disruptive endeavors. Yet, these decisions expose them to high risks in the short run and potential rewards in the future. Therefore, inspiring companies to initiate change is advised. Means like issuing recognition and appreciation for pushing forward certain topics can save whole communities, specifically the environment and the humans living in it.

BEYOND COMPLEXITY – HOW TO GET STARTED

Embarking on a new path can be daunting, especially when taking those initial steps. The first mile is often the toughest. While this booklet may not encompass every idea and tool in existence, its purpose is to ignite inspiration and spark curiosity for further exploration.

It is important to note that the order of tools below does not imply the superiority or effectiveness of any specific tool. First, we introduce some basic concepts of change management that are always a starting point of activism. The following tools have been organized based on the level of influence required over an organization to employ them. Their applicability is highly dependent on the organization in question, as well as its reasons to become active.

CHANGE-MANAGEMENT TOOLS

To understand social roles comprehensively and make informed decisions, it is essential to delve into the basic concepts of change management. While organizations may employ specific measures, the fundamental requirement for any objective involving change is the application of change management principles. Numerous approaches, models, and tools exist within change management. This discussion will introduce the foundational elements to provide a broad overview.


The model developed by John Kotter outlines eight essential steps for approaching a change implementation. [8]

These steps hold particular significance when the change initiator lacks the same level of authority as, for instance, a CEO. In cases where the change process follows a "bottom-up" approach, it is advisable for employees to actively seek out other individuals to form a guiding coalition. Undertaking change single-handedly can be a challenging endeavor. Thus, collaborative efforts are crucial in driving the desired transformation.

Combining the initial steps from Kotter's model with Stakeholder Mapping proves particularly beneficial in the realm of corporate social-political activism. By creating four distinct fields, this approach aids in navigating the challenging aspects of these initial steps. [9] Understanding the positioning of stakeholders in relation to the change request allows for a more informed progression through Kotter's Steps. This integration of techniques enhances the effectiveness of the change management process.
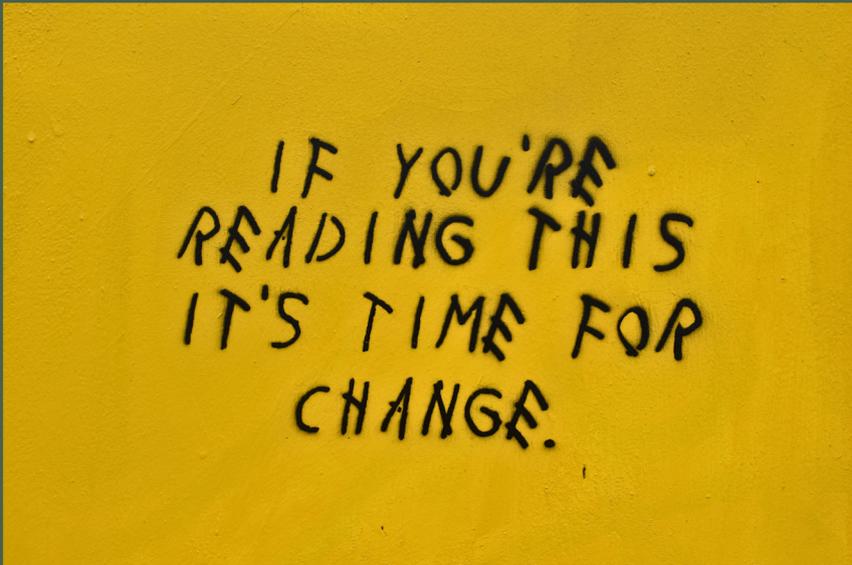
Depending on the context and maturity of the organization, the tools presented in the following paragraphs can be considered activism or just business as usual.

CERTIFICATION OF ACTION

In the realm of corporate social responsibility (CSR), there exist various certifications that companies can pursue to demonstrate their commitment to change, increasing positive and decreasing negative impacts across multiple dimensions.

To standardize and verify a company's efforts, certification is one of the most used tools in communicating its change and commitment. Certifications encompass product, reporting, and management standards that align with specific CSR goals, providing a framework for responsible business practices. As there are a plethora of possible certifications in this booklet, we limit ourselves to highlighting two. To find the right one, further individual research is needed.

One notable certification is the B Corp Certification. This certification offers a comprehensive assessment of a company's social and environmental performance, evaluating its overall impact in these areas. With more than 6700 certified B Corps worldwide, including renowned names such as Moodle, Ben & Jerry's, and Warby Parker, achieving B Corp certification signifies a rigorous and thorough validation of a company's efforts and impacts.

Another certification worthy of exploration is the ISO 26000 Certification. Unlike the B Corp certification's broader approach, ISO 26000 specifically focuses on a company's social responsibility. It provides guidance and a framework for integrating social responsibility principles into the company's operations and strategies. ISO 26000 emphasizes the importance of aligning with these principles and offers a structured approach to ensure effective implementation. By obtaining ISO 26000 certification, a company can demonstrate its commitment to upholding social responsibility standards and embedding them into its core business practices.

By pursuing these certifications, companies showcase their dedication to making a positive impact and gain credibility and differentiation in the market. A certification is a symbol of a company's commitment to social and environmental responsibility but also has limitations and is sometimes criticized for its main motivation being marketing purposes. A certification can be considered activism if it is not a common practice in the industry but a rather courageous step. It often has so-called indirect effects on other organizations in the field, e.g., competitors will try to catch up.

LOBBYISM WITH A CAUSE

Lobbyism is a powerful and multifaceted tool that shapes decision-making in society. Compared to the two tools introduced before, it tries not only to change the organization itself but to significantly broaden the scope of influence.

It involves individuals, organizations, and interest groups advocating for various causes. Despite common misconceptions of shady dealings and lavish lifestyles, the ethical implications are determined by its users' intentions. Transparency is essential to maintain integrity and protect the public interest.

Lobbyists employ various tools to influence decision-making, such as public participation through formal and informal channels that allow individuals to voice their concerns and contribute to the discourse. Another would be to create Associations and coalitions to unite diverse perspectives, lending collective legitimacy to shared causes. Building strong reputations and relationships with key decision-makers amplifies the impact of ideas.

An illustrative example of using lobbyism as a tool of corporate activism is Levi Strauss, which supported housing, care, and awareness initiatives during the early stages of the AIDS Crisis. [10] Later, they influenced policymaking regarding the rights of workers with AIDS/HIV, demonstrating a commitment beyond its business realm.

Approaching lobbyism with integrity empowers marginalized voices and fosters positive change, such as the LGBTQA+ community. [11] It shapes legislation, tackles societal challenges, and paves the way for a brighter future. Recognizing the complexity and potential of lobbyism enables us to advocate for a more transparent and accountable policymaking process.

Supporting studies, research, and engaging experts bolster advocacy efforts. By addressing unanswered questions, developing new ideas, and providing evidence-based support, research strengthens the case for change. Financial contributions to associations, NGOs, and like-minded political parties also significantly advance causes and drive meaningful change.

CEO-ACTIVISM

ILike any individuals, CEOs and company owners hold unique values and beliefs. In some cases, these leaders choose to align their personal convictions with their professional endeavors. This engagement allows them to harness their power and influence to tackle societal concerns, enact meaningful change, and positively contribute to communities and the environment.

Given the diverse range of beliefs and examples in this realm, there is no definitive guide on approaching or defining this form of activism. Each CEO brings their perspective and methods to the table, resulting in a rich tapestry of approaches to corporate social engagement.

Some CEOs started to engage in activism and did not consider other evaluations. One example of this can be seen in the case of David Green, CEO of a craft-store chain and founder of Hobby Lobby, who has cited his religious beliefs when opposing the Obamacare requirement that health insurance for employees includes coverage for the morning-after pill for women. [12] It is advisable for CEOs to intensively educate themselves, for example, via stakeholder dialogues with, e.g., employees, customers, or multistakeholder initiatives. An example of a comprehensive dialogue format is the format from Lidl, called "Lidl im Dialog". [13] It hosts representatives from consumers (German: Verbraucherschutzzentrale), scientists, major actors in the supply chain, and everybody who wants to join as it is usually streamed online and features a chat function for questions. A professional moderator ensures order in the discussion and integrates questions from the public and a live audience. Further best practices are to be found in the paper "Best practices in global governance" by Bernstein & van der Ven. [14]

Another noteworthy case comes from the German multinational software company SAP, which has taken a leading role in refugee integration. Former CEO Bill McDermott spearheaded the "Autism at Work" initiative, creating employment opportunities specifically tailored to individuals with autism. Additionally, SAP established the "Internship for Refugees" program, facilitating the integration of refugees into the German labor market through internships and comprehensive training.

These instances vividly demonstrate the power of corporate social activism, as CEOs transcend their traditional roles and address pressing social and environmental issues head-on. By leveraging their companies' vast resources and influence, they drive positive change, open doors of opportunity, and pave the way for a more inclusive and sustainable future. The commitment and dedication displayed by these leaders inspire others to embrace this paradigm shift, where business becomes a force for social and environmental progress..

SETTING UP A FOUNDATION

Most likely not an option for many at first, but to ultimately ensure that the set purpose and positive actions of a company will be continued over generations, a foundation is a vehicle guaranteeing this. It can also make sure that profits will go towards a good cause.

Setting up a foundation by transferring the company ownership obviously needs the buy-in of the owners and investors and thus has been a rare event so far.

The technical details of setting up a foundation vary from country to country. Prominent examples are the transfer of ownership from Patagonia to the Patagonia purpose trust.

In Germany, the "Stiftung Verantwortungs-eigentum" works with companies who want to ensure their organization cannot be sold anymore. The respective governance structure of the so-called "Gesellschaft mit gebundenem Vermögen" is built up in a way that makes sure that the original purpose of the company is pursued instead of its profit maximization at all costs. [15] Especially family business, which can not find a successor and care about the preservation of the original company purpose and values are well-advised to consider this governance form.

Keep in mind that this is just a brief selection of the possible tools one can make use of. As important as it is to choose a starting point by using a specific tool, it's also important to closely monitor and evaluate the results of certain activities.

EVALUATING IMPACT - EXTERNAL, ORGANISATIONAL & INDIVIDUAL DIMENSIONS

Evaluating the impact of actions enables actors to make informed and strategic decisions about actions of socio-political activism - to continue, start, or dismiss. However, in socio-political action, intangible aspects can challenge the communication about the action's impact. This highlights the need for managing expectations and using tangible data, where available, to support the actor's persuasive effort.

PLANNING, GATHERING & REPORTING

Starting with the **planning** phase, it is helpful to approach the whole process from a change management perspective and to define clear dimensions of impact. Here, it can be beneficial to think not only of tangible and quantifiable aims but also about intangible, qualitative aims [16]. Defining the goal and finding consistent terminology also helps formulate realistic goals and manage stakeholder's expectations. [17] [18] This could concern the company size or resources allocated to the project.

Another aspect is to enrich existing evaluation processes with the new indicators of impact rather than create purely new ones. An evaluation of the learning process is highly recommended. In the design stage of impact evaluation processes, stakeholders should be able to contribute.

As a tool to visualize and organize concrete planned actions, mapping the desired outcome can be very useful.

In gathering data, it is useful to use tested and reliant methods for qualitative and quantitative analysis. It is helpful to let stakeholders be part of data collection and strengthen their capacity to do so if possible.

For the reporting, finding new and creative ways to use the results is good for innovative persuasion, mobilization, and engagement of all stakeholders. [19]

Thinking about who should benefit from the impact and who could be impacted by it, the following three dimensions can give some direction: external, organizational, and individual [20].

EXTERNAL IMPACT

This dimension investigates the external entities and stakeholders directly impacted by the action. That could be the media, policymakers, influencers, and interest groups. For evaluating its quantitative and qualitative impact, one can measure the quantity of media coverage and the positive or negative perception.

In the Gillett Case, a video went viral with 4 million views within 48 hours, which signals a strong quantitative impact. [21]
On a qualitative note, the video received 23,000 likes and 214,000 dislikes at that time. [22]

Some other data might be collected in existing stakeholder evaluations of the company, but most other external data might be harder to get or time and cost-intensive. However, the benefit of having data can help companies prioritize certain stakeholders and communicate more effectively.

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT

Often, this is the easiest impact to evaluate because the company has available data or can generate it more easily. For instance, the company can measure the volume of fundraised money, the number of engaged volunteers, or a change of an internal directive regarding values or wording. The indicator can be quantitative, but it might also be qualitative.

Salesforce assessed that their 1% translates into "$240 million in grants, 3.5 million hours of community service, and ... product donations for more than 39,000 nonprofits and educational institutions." [23]

In the case of shareholders, some are opposed to such action on an organizational level [24]. But more and more shareholders are in favor of activism within organizations or even trying to foster it [25]

On the one hand, this organizational information can help a company mobilize and organize activism [26]. On the other hand, it helps to demonstrate what causes the company is committed to by allocating their resources.

CALL TO ACTION

With this booklet, we wanted to give practitioners, CEOs, and corporate departments an introduction and inspiration on corporate socio-political activism. After an extensive introduction to the topic, we have explained some major risks and rewards with examples from real businesses like Gillette or Nike. In the subsequent chapter, we built upon Kotter's 8-step change model to summarise concrete forms that activism can take. This ranges from individual, particularly CEO-actions, to more structural approaches like setting up a foundation or engaging in lobbyism for certain topics. Lastly, we explored the difficulties and possibilities of measuring and evaluating the impact of socio-political activism along the external, organizational, and individual dimensions.

With this collection of examples and possible actions, we want to empower you to embrace the power of social-political engagement! We have seen that organizations and individuals can shape a world where single voices are heard, actions shape policies, and positive change becomes a reality. This reality starts with your active participation in political-social activism.

We want to inspire you to take action: attend town halls, engage with officials, and raise your voice on important issues. Volunteer, join grassroots organizations, and rally with like-minded individuals. Educate yourself and others. Embrace the power of political-social engagement and let your actions catalyze a brighter future. Create the movement and kick-off building a better world today.

THANK
YOU !

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