Course syllabus: Stakeholder dialogue, the interaction of business and civil society

Online course description

Context and aims

Especially since the 1980s, large corporations have become strong actors that actively use their influence to impact the rules of engagement in the global economy. Simultaneously public interest in the ethical dimensions of corporate conduct has risen steeply over recent years and has created a situation where ignoring critical signals from civil society can cost a company dearly. Reputational damages, disengaged employees, loss of public legitimacy and customer loyalty or stricter regulatory environments are just a few of the possible resultant repercussions.

Those companies however, that actively engage with their civil society stakeholders will gain on two levels. First they develop a platform to enhance their public legitimacy and, second, they obtain a tool to better reflect on possible reactions from society regarding various possible courses of business conduct.

Central point of contact for engaging with civil society, are actors such as NGOs, grass roots organizations, government agencies or international organizations who can formulate and represent stakeholder claims. How to respond to such claims, what characteristics constitute a dialogue, what the pitfalls and difficulties in establishing mutually beneficial relationships are and how they can be overcome are some of the questions this course is aiming to answer.

Focusing on case examples for fruitful interaction between civil society actors and large corporations, this course will deliver insights on prevalent success factors for fruitful stakeholder dialogues. Participants will discuss, analyze and experience stakeholder dialogue as a tool to resolve conflict between business and societal actors. In doing so, participants will gain a better understanding of ways in which businesses can respond to stakeholder claims and align business and societal interests.

Course design

The course is designed around three main blocks providing a theoretical framework, presentations of research results in a role play or team presentation and the exchange with practitioners engaged in stakeholder dialogue.

- First, the participants will gain an understanding of variations in legitimacy and stakeholder theory and their main tenets through a mix of readings, interventions with real life examples by the lecturer and group discussions. Thereby participants will gain terminological and conceptual clarity on the topic of this course enabling them to research and analyze fitting case examples within their team assignment.

- Subsequent to the first block the teams will independently research a case example of a stakeholder conflict that has led to a dialogical solution. This case will be described in a short paper of two to three pages and the teams will prepare their role play or team presentation.

- In the second block participants will not only present their cases in a role play or presentation in three to four member strong teams, but they will be responsible for designing and managing a one hour long class including the contextualization, explaining the relevance of the case, presenting the stakeholder interests, the solution that was found, and moderate a discussion that will focus on what management can learn from their respective cases.

- As a third pillar of this course, participants will have the opportunity to reflect and share their insights with management practitioners in a panel discussion at a business organization or NGO during the last class of the course.

Didactics for personal growth

This course is built on enabling and facilitating a shared learning experience. Participants enhance their reflective capacity through the argumentative confrontation with conflicting stakeholder interests. By researching a stakeholder conflict that has led to a dialogical solution acceptable to all parties involved, students will experience how compromise can be reached through stakeholder dialogue. In doing so they are

called to weigh up the validity and gravity of various stakeholder interests by making use of the theoretical concepts that are introduced in the beginning of this course.

Using role playing as the preferred presentation method for the research conducted by the participants is especially valuable in the context of stakeholder dialogues as it enables students to not only comprehend but also experience the dynamics of constructive dialogical confrontation. For this it is pivotal to adhere to a set of ground rules that are constitutive for a dialogue. The course also provides ample opportunity to refine presentational and team working skills and all participants are called to actively participate throughout the course adopting a supportive role towards the presenting teams during the discussions. In addition an excursion to a business organization or NGO engaged in stakeholder dialogue will provide the opportunity to interact with practitioners that can share real life experiences.

Should pragmatic constraints make it difficult for participants to have sufficient preparation time for a role play, group presentations can be held instead.

Time frame, schedule and deliverables

This course can be offered in 20 – 30 classroom hours in three blocks.

- The first block provides the theoretical background introducing stakeholder theory in connection with variations in conceptions of legitimacy.
- The second block consists of the role plays and student led classes where participants reenact the conflict and its dialogical solution
- The third block is a visit to a business organization or NGO that is actively engaged in stakeholder dialogue.

The graded deliverables of this course are twofold. Subsequent to the first block participants will submit a short paper (two to three pages) introducing the case they want to present and offering reasons for why the chosen case is a good fit to demonstrate fruitful interaction between business and civil society stakeholders. Secondly participants will be graded on the session they conduct where the role play (or team presentation) takes center stage. The short paper receives a 30% and the student-led session a 70% weighing while the whole team receives the same grade.

To facilitate easier travel arrangements the second and third block can be combined.

Faculty

Dr. Ernst von Kimakowitz is Director and co-founder of the Humanistic Management Center (www.humanisticmanagement.org), an independent think–tank, learning institution and non-profit advisory firm. He is also a lecturer in leadership skills at the University of St Gallen, Switzerland, a director of the Humanistic Management Network, co-editor of the Humanism in Business book series at Palgrave Macmillan, advisor to the Impact Investing Platform in São Paulo, Brazil and senior ambassador of the UK based Globalization for the Common Good Initiative (GCGI). Ernst's specializations include corporate responsibility, business and economic ethics, development theory and impact investing.

Ernst von Kimakowitz holds a M.Sc. from the London School of Economics (LSE), UK and has worked in strategy consulting with a leading management consulting firm based in London, England. Subsequently he went to the University of St Gallen in Switzerland where he earned an award winning Ph.D. from the University's Institute for Business Ethics.

Ernst frequently speaks at conferences, lectures at universities around the world and is consulting businesses as well as international organizations on questions regarding corporate social responsibilities, stakeholder engagement and development-conducive business conduct.

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