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Communication in Responsible Business

*Strategies, Concepts,
and Cases*

Roger N. Conaway
Oliver Laasch



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Communication in Responsible Business: Strategies, Concepts, and Cases

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Abstract

Communication in Responsible Business sets the stage for social, environmental, and ethical business. These topics have risen to the forefront for many businesses and communication of them has become crucial to business success. This book offers an extensive toolbox of the most effective instruments for communicating social, environmental, and ethical business to a variety of stakeholders. Each chapter covers specific situations for communicating responsible business. We provide examples of social and cause-related marketing, sustainability reporting, issues-and crisis communication, the use of vision, mission statements and codes, and web-based stakeholder communication. The book gives practitioners hands-on concepts and actual illustrations. Chapter cases provide rich practical coverage and translate concepts to solutions for day-to-day business realities.

Keywords

Corporate Responsibility, Corporate Sustainability, Business Ethics, Marketing, Communication, Stakeholder Management

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CHAPTER 1

Setting the Stage

CSR principles and the question of how to communicate them represent a challenge for businesses (...), but also an opportunity, as they can potentially increase the financial worth of companies very significantly.¹

Communicating responsibility is probably the most critical part of the responsible management process. Getting the job right can create value in different ways among the various stakeholders that affect or are affected by your business.² Communicating well with these groups is the essence of communicating responsible business.

Let's compare two companies and examine how they communicated social and environmental topics to their stakeholders. One might guess it to be an unequal match between TOMS shoes, a medium-sized shoe company from California and the industry giant Nike, much like a David against Goliath scenario. Surprisingly the smaller company TOMS seems to lead the way in successfully communicating social and environmental business performance.

In 2006, TOMS shoes was founded by the entrepreneur Blake Mycoskie who had no previous experience in the shoe business. The decision about building a shoe company was neither based on special skills nor a perceived business opportunity. TOMS shoes was created from a necessity to help the cause of shoes for poor children in Argentina. After visiting the

Company:	TOMS
Industry:	Shoes
Tool:	Cause-Related Marketing
Lesson:	Credibly communicating cause commitment can create immense stakeholder goodwill and, when connected to a product, will serve as a tool to successfully penetrate even mature markets.

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country, Mycoskie came up with an idea that at first seemed counter-intuitive. “What about if I started a company and every time I sold a pair of shoes, I gave a pair away?” The “One for One Movement” was born and became the centerpiece around which Mycoskie built his company. Mycoskie’s innovative idea was rewarded by almost instant public attention. When the entrepreneur returned to the USA with his first 250 pairs of shoes for kids, newspapers instantly picked up on the story. Immediately following the trip, TOMS sold 22,000 pairs of shoes through its website. By October of 2006 TOMS had sold more than 10,000 pairs of shoes and was ready to give back the same number to poor kids. By October 2010 TOMS had sold and channeled 1,000,000 shoes to children in 23 countries on four continents.³

The social and environmental communication tool used by Mycoskie is referred to as cause-related marketing, in which a product’s connection to a good cause becomes a sales argument. Cause-related marketing creates a product-anchored commitment and communicates to stakeholders integrity between walk and talk. External media endorsements helped TOMS shoes to become the new rising star in the mature shoe industry.

Another shoe company that is one of the strongest brands worldwide is Nike. Nike has become famous for an ongoing, but so far not very successful, stakeholder dialog about the issue of sweatshop production of its sneakers.

Nike’s “sweatshop” issue unfolded in the late 1990s in several episodes, each of which provided profound lessons on how to not communicate social and environmental business performance. By the early 1990s, Nike had developed enormous brand-power, which served as a solid advantage over competitors such as Adidas and Reebok. The secret to Nike’s

Company:	Nike
Industry:	Shoes
Tool:	Issues and Crisis Communication
Lesson:	The stronger your brand, the more attractive it is to criticism and the weaker the socio-environmental performance of your businesses’ core operations, the more vulnerable it is to criticism.

(Continued)

successful business model was based on strong brand recognition achieved by the swoosh logo, “The Just Do It!” slogan, and prestigious sponsor relationships with sports celebrities such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods. Another distinct feature of Nike’s business performance was the almost complete outsourcing of production activities to low-wage countries, which provided the basis for low operational costs and the possibility of concentrating on its core-competences of marketing and innovation.⁴

It was the very combination of branding and performance that made Nike highly attractive and vulnerable to labor activists’ campaigning. On one hand the production operations of Nike left the company open to attack, based on the often questionable labor conditions in provider factories. On the other hand, Nike had much to lose. Damage to Nike’s reputation was a considerable threat to the company’s competitive advantage. As a matter of fact, during the period of strongest activist criticism, Nike’s stock value plunged from \$38 per share in 1996 to \$19 in mid-1997.⁵ While the whole loss cannot necessarily be attributed to the sweatshop criticism, a strong causal connection is likely. The following chapters will highlight interesting aspects of Nike’s communicative moves and stakeholders’ reactions.

Effective Stakeholder Communication Makes Money Sense!

As shown in the preceding examples, communicating and marketing social and environmental business performance can achieve considerable financial gain or incur significant losses. How positively (or negatively) your various stakeholders perceive your company ultimately translates into financial value creation as seen in the case of TOMS or value destruction as seen for Nike. The mechanisms of value creation differ from one stakeholder to another and from case to case:

- The stakeholder *customer* may react positively with increased willingness to purchase products, such as in the case of TOMS. Or the customer may react negatively with a reduction of

consumption of a certain product or even aggressive consumer boycotts. This customer indicator directly influences the amount of revenues generated by the company.

- The stakeholder group of *investors* is very sensitive to the future cash flows expected from business operations, as cash flows ultimately translate into dividends. For instance, eco-efficiency reduces operating costs, while investments into sustainable innovation products can open new markets or increase the purchasing price in existing markets. Lower cost and higher revenue jointly result in higher profit margins and higher dividends that will likely be achieved from responsible business activities. Well-managed social, financial, and ethical factors reduce company and investment risk. Risk and profit margin are two decisive factors influencing shareholder goodwill toward the company. Shareholders' rewards are an increase in investment and higher stock prices.
- The *employee* stakeholder reacts positively to responsible business conduct in at least three well-documented ways. First, it is easier for a responsible company to attract employees. Studies have revealed tendencies that include a decrease in wage expectations the more responsible a company is considered to be, and a complete refusal to work for a company which is seen as irresponsible. Responsible businesses also often have more contented workers. Work satisfaction increases because of physically improved work conditions and the pride to work for a "good company." Positive financial repercussions range from lower operational costs from higher work efficiency to a reduction in job placement and training costs because of higher employee retention rates.

As illustrated in the preceding three examples, it makes *money sense* to keep stakeholders happy by creating goodwill. In order to create stakeholder goodwill, companies have to *first achieve positive social and environmental performance*, and, *second, communicate effectively* the progress made to the stakeholders. Isolated communication activities

unconnected to real progress are often labeled as “greenwashing” (see Chapter 2) that may have serious financial consequences.

This book presents suggested management tools for communicating and marketing social and environmental business performance that creates goodwill among the various stakeholder groups connected to any business’s activity. Recommended tools vary among stakeholder groups and communication purposes. The social marketing tool, for instance, is used to bring about behavioral change with customers and community stakeholders. Cause-related marketing aims at marketing a product among customer stakeholders and providing a social, environmental, or ethical sales argument such as TOMS does. Reporting tools for responsible business activities primarily are directed at Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and investor stakeholders. The following chapters elaborate on powerful *communication tools* for creating stakeholder goodwill among a wide variety of stakeholders. You will also encounter a broad set of real-life business cases that illustrate the application of these tools. A recurrent theme will be topic of congruence between walk and talk, between communication and actual business activity. Communication might appear as attractive and profitable “icing on the cake” (the responsible business); but the most beautiful icing cannot compensate for a distasteful cake. Because of the strong communication focus in this book, we will not provide detailed illustrations of implementation activities. However, we will constantly refer to both implementation flaws and best practices in actual company cases.

Understanding and Communicating Responsible Business

While responsible business in its different versions is a popular buzzword, the term also connotes confusing vagueness. Companies may talk about their sustainability when referring to environmental performance. Additionally, terms like corporate philanthropy and corporate responsibility (CR) are often used as synonyms and social entrepreneurship is often understood as a fashionable new type of NGO. All of the previously mentioned connotations related to responsible business are wrong in a strict sense.

In order to excel in responsible business communication, a *sine-qua-non*, a necessary condition, is needed to clarify what one wants to communicate. Otherwise, misunderstandings will result. Responsible business does not exist in one broadly acknowledged and understood definition, but rather stems from a set of prominent traditions. Each tradition, such as ethics, sustainability, and citizenship, is understood in the context of a broader set of values, practices, terms, and concepts. Once you and your audience have reached a basic understanding in these background areas of responsibility, it becomes easier to decipher meaning, assumptions and the broader contexts behind the words used.

Figure 1.1 illustrates six of the main traditions that have lead to a common understanding of what responsible business is and does. Responsible business conduct in a specific case is always a mixture of characteristics of several of those traditions. For instance, a new Coca Cola PET bottle is designed with up to 30 percent of plant-based plastics and involves the idea of improving the environmental part of the company’s **triple bottom line (sustainability)**. It also requires a commitment to the customer **stakeholders (responsibility)** and reduces the impact of waste on the **community (citizenship)**. Thus, this initiative can be interpreted as a good **ethical decision (ethics)**.⁶ One could even say that responsible business does not exist as an independent entity, but is a cloud of characteristics borrowed from those background theories.

Attempts to find a generally accepted definition for responsible business or corporate social responsibility (CSR), which has been the current buzzword for the last 20 years, have failed for this very reason. The



Figure 1.1. Responsible business as an intersecting “cloud” of traditions.

mix of characteristics of responsible business is different for every situation, for every company, every business region, every product, and every activity. Through time, several different responsible business background traditions have been accepted as dominant. The 1980s were the time of business ethics. The 1990s to today have been the times of CSR, with a brief interruption highlighting corporate citizenship at the end of the 1990s. It appears that like the second decade of the millennium will be a time of social entrepreneurship.

The following paragraphs illustrate main background traditions, and their respective *core concepts**. Core concepts are important for communication because they are the few “safe areas” that are theoretically sound and generally agreed upon. Understanding these core concepts provides communicators in an emerging field with legitimacy in their own messages and the ability to evaluate or even to question others’ usage:

1. Ethics in the form of *business ethics* fosters morally right, *ethical decisions* in business. More than 2000 years of moral philosophy from ancient Greek virtue ethics to late 20th century ethics of rights and justice can be applied in the business context. Communicators who are based in the ethical tradition tend to speak about right, wrong, and morality. They make normative statements about what business should or should not do.
2. Philanthropy in the form of *business philanthropy* centers on the core concept of *altruism*. Business philanthropy can be traced back to early Christian merchants who gave a part of their fortune to the poor and followed the biblical ideal of the Good Samaritan. The word philanthropy has Greek roots and translates as love for mankind. Thus, business philanthropy can be defined as business activities done out of love for mankind. Donations, disaster relief, and volunteering activities often are communicated as philanthropic activities. Communicators based in philanthropic thinking tend to speak about altruism, cover topics with social impact, question businesses’ philanthropic motivation, and criticize nonaltruist profit seeking.

* The illustrated traditions are presented in a broad chronological order of their emergence.

3. **Business responsibility** involves **stakeholder** perception and the assumption of the responsibilities businesses have to various stakeholder groups. The field of business responsibility began in the early 1950s with the book *Social Responsibility of the Business Man* by Bowen.⁷ CSR, CR, corporate social performance, corporate social responsiveness, and business accountability are all related terms. Communicators based in a business-responsibility background typically call for businesses' adoption of responsibility and accountability in relationship with stakeholder groups and critique the idea of shareholders as a business's single principal.
4. Sustainability in the form of **sustainable business** has the so-called **triple bottom** line at its core.⁸ The triple bottom line concept integrates social, environmental, and economic outcomes, which are the three pillars to reach sustainable world development. The ultimate goal of the triple bottom line is to assure planetary human survival and wellbeing. The birth of the sustainability tradition goes back to the 1987 Brundtland report of the World Commission for World Development.⁹ Communicators based in a sustainability background tend to emphasize intergenerational justice, seek to preserve the planet for the next generations, and focus on "three-dimensional" management style to achieve a sustainable triple bottom line.¹⁰
5. Citizenship in the form of **business citizenship** has **community thinking** as its core. Companies are seen as citizens of a community and are given the responsibility of contributing to the community's development and wellbeing. Corporate citizenship is the main term of this tradition that held prominence from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. Community may refer to many types of communities, from the local community a company operates in, to the broad global community. Communicators thinking in citizenship terms will refer to civic responsibilities, social investment and capital, and the political role of companies.
6. Entrepreneurship in the form of **social and environmental entrepreneurship** has at its core the **entrepreneurial process** of seizing opportunities through innovation. Social and environmental entrepreneurs address social and environmental issues with an

entrepreneurial mindset. The actors of entrepreneurial ventures for society and environment might be business founders,¹¹ entire corporations,¹² or individuals using established organizations as their

Put it to practice!

Learning to “speak the language” of each tradition is an indispensable prerequisite for successfully communicating in responsible business. Check your understanding with the following examples, all quoted exactly from Samsung Electronics 2011 sustainability report.¹⁴

Mark the respective number (1–6) of the applied background tradition next to each example. Solutions are given in the appendix of the book.

#1 Ethics #2 Philanthropy #3 Responsibility #4 Sustainability #5 Citizenship #6 Entrepreneurship

Statement	Background tradition #
(A) Global harmony with people, society and environment	
(B) Our social contribution endeavors in Africa include an initiative to foster 10,000 local engineers and doing away with illiteracy in the community. ¹⁵	
(C) Currently, the Board of Directors (BOD) is composed of seven members, with four of them being outside directors. The outside directors hold the majority in the BOD, thus ensuring the independence and transparency of the Board’s decision-making process. ¹⁶	
(D) We believe that we have a responsibility to resolve social issues while achieving growth. A fast-aging population is a global phenomenon and people are increasingly seeking ways to lead healthy lives. Against this backdrop, Samsung Electronics decided to invest in health care as a future business in 2010 with the objective of improving quality of life and sustaining growth. ¹⁷	
(E) Samsung Electronics is now equipped to log, respond to, and resolve stakeholder queries and concerns in a systematic manner through the development of a global stakeholder communication system.	
(F) Samsung Electronics employees in Korea donated KRW250 million to this cause and the company matched this, raising a total of KRW500 million. ¹⁸	

vehicles.¹³ Entrepreneurial approaches became well-known alternatives during the first decade of the new millennium. Communicators applying an entrepreneurial mindset typically refer to social or environmental opportunities, innovative approaches, and social ventures.

However, different these background traditions to responsible business sound in their focus, they have one important characteristic in common. All six traditions result in business activities and performance that go beyond the traditional economic profit imperative and integrate social, environmental, and economic business concerns.

The Myth of Sustainable Business and the Reality of Responsible Business and Management

First of all, there is no such thing as a completely sustainable business. What business could be considered truly sustainable in line with the global sustainable development imperative? A working definition derived from the common understanding of the term will aid in our discussion of sustainability:

*A **sustainable business** (the ultimate goal) is one that has a neutral or even positive environmental footprint, a business that creates positive value for society, and is economically viable or profitable. That is a business with a neutral or positive triple bottom line in all three performance dimensions.*

A sustainable business is the proverbial holy grail of responsible business, a myth, but yet to be sought after. Nevertheless, envisioning such a business fulfills an important “lighthouse” function, an imaginary role model for the companies that take responsible business seriously. The wording, sustainable business, which is used by both scholars and practitioners in the field, evokes a wrong impression of businesses that have arrived in their overall sustainable impact. It is more credible to say that sustainable businesses have made a commitment to be responsible businesses and conduct responsible management. In the context of this book, we will frequently use other

terms to provide clear understanding Figure 1 illustrates the relationships among these terms.

*A **responsible business** (committed company) is a company that has made a credible commitment and taken action to tackle its **immediate responsibilities** toward a broad set of stakeholders, and progressed toward its **long-term responsibility** to become a sustainable business.*

It is important to emphasize that the term responsible business is not a frequently used term. This infrequent use gives the term the advantage of not having a common meaning or misinterpretations. The definition given above is an umbrella definition, that integrates background traditions from sustainability to ethics. In sum, responsible management refers to management activity that deploys a broad variety of tools for managing social, environmental, and economic business performance:

Responsible management (the management activity) is the management activity necessary to achieve the responsible businesses' social, environmental, and economic performance. Responsible management includes planning, implementation, and communication activities.

The responsible management process is based on two types of responsible management instruments. **Specialized responsible management instruments** include stakeholder management, ethics management, and life-cycle impact management (Figure 1.2). Those management instruments

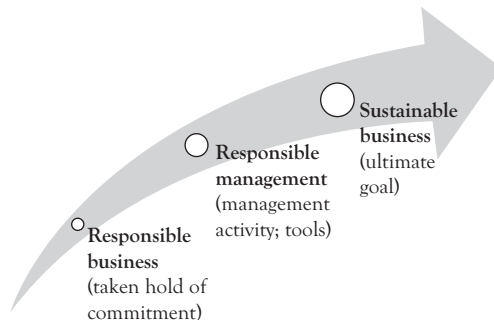


Figure 1.2. Working definitions of central terms.

are cross-functionally important throughout any management activity in responsible business. *Mainstream responsible management instruments* are well-known traditional management instruments that have been adapted to also manage social and environmental business performance. Green logistics, social marketing, sustainability accounting, and sustainable innovation are some examples.¹⁹ Both specific and mainstream responsible management instruments are mostly combined in responsible management activities. Let's apply those working definitions to the two shoe companies illustrated before.

*TOMS shoes uses a combination of the **responsible management** tools as elements of the company's basic business model. The instruments applied are social entrepreneurship, cause-related marketing, and life-cycle assessment. Nike uses sustainable innovation together with sustainable operations management for developing shoes with a lower waste impact. We assume TOMS shoes has made strong commitments to its stakeholders and toward becoming a sustainable business in the long run. We can call this a **responsible business**. We can also do so for Nike if we assume their commitment to tackle both social responsibilities for third-world employers and to make serious moves toward reducing the environmental footprint of running shoes closer to zero. Until either company has reached a neutral to positive impact in its social, environmental, and economic performance, it cannot be called a **sustainable business**.*

Our focus in this book is on the communication process of responsible management. As we illustrate in the following section; communication in responsible business is crucial for cross-functional stakeholder management of responsible business activity, from employee volunteering to sustainable product development.

The Role of Communication in Responsible Management

Critics of responsible business communication may doubt the validity of such efforts and call it window-dressing, greenwashing, or a mere public

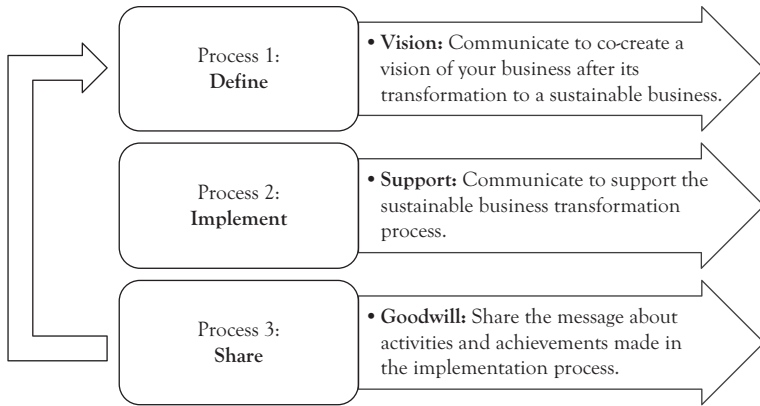


Figure 1.3. *Communication processes and their respective goals in sustainable business.*

relations exercise. Chapter 2 extensively illustrates how to counter such accusations if they are not justified. In some cases, criticism may be justified due to misunderstanding of the role of communication in responsible business. As Figure 1.3 illustrates, spreading the word about company achievements in the responsibility arena is just one of three functions of responsible business communication²⁰:

Responsible business communication helps to **define** what a sustainable business, a sustainable process, and specific stakeholder responsibilities ultimately should look like in an ideal situation. If a business is serious about achieving transformation of stakeholder responsibilities and sustainable business, then drafting a plan must first involve an extensive consultative communication process that includes a broad variety of internal and external stakeholders.

This first process is a crucial prerequisite for communication that helps to **implement** responsible business. During this second process, a company may need to convince key decision makers to support the implementation process and educate stakeholders important to the implementation process. For example, businesses in the implementation stage may use a social marketing campaign to change employees' behavior toward saving energy and water during the production process. Or a business may decide to use cause-marketing communication to create a market for a new sustainable innovation product line.

The third communication process that follows implementation involves *sharing* the message about the business's responsible activities and performance. During this final stage, businesses deploy formal responsibility reports, press releases, advertisements, or other communications to inform stakeholders about both achievements and issues.

Avoid an easy mistake!

The communication goals during these three processes are fundamentally different. During the define phase, the main goal is to co-create a vision of what the business should become, while implementation requires achievement of support for the implementation process. Spreading the word aims at creating goodwill among company stakeholders. Communicators often mix up those functions. A company that seeks to really understand what stakeholders claim and how they integrate into the company's sustainability vision (define) should by no means try to convince stakeholders of how good the company is (share). On the contrary, it may be helpful to involve stakeholders who can identify weaknesses and help co-develop solutions.

Some companies mistakenly start to communicate responsible businesses in reverse sequence from these three processes. Instead of first consciously defining responsible business, then deeply implementing and communicating the results, these companies may choose particular and isolated responsible management activities to actively raise company reputation in a public relations exercise. As illustrated by left-side graph in Figure 1.4, such a reversal may turn out to be a **responsible communication trap**, which at first seems to be an attractive public relations exercise. Stakeholders usually detect such superficial communication efforts. They dig deeper and often uncover outright scandals. In response the company reacts by defending. If stakeholder pressure continues, the company inevitably starts to admit they implemented superficial responsible business activities. In the next step, the company typically realizes the truth that only a long-run, transformative approach to responsible business will appease stakeholders. This chain of events parallels the pattern of events and reactions in the Nike case illustrated at the chapter beginning. Companies can also get trapped by imprudent reporting of

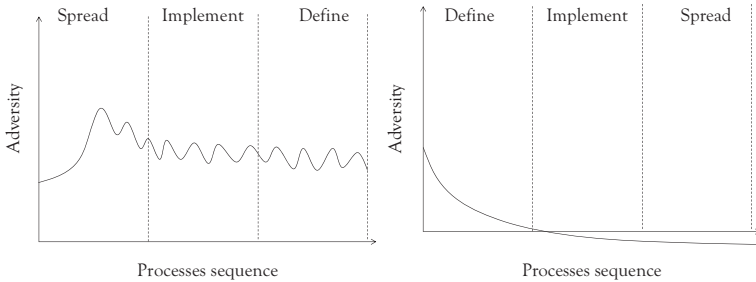


Figure 1.4. *Communication trap versus downhill strategy.*

communication activities and are forced to implement less than optimal responsible business activities during constant stakeholder adversity.

A positive contrasting mechanism may be called a **down-hill communication strategy** in responsible business (see right graph of Figure 1.4). The down-hill illustration refers to initial adversity that decreases over time. Businesses following the define-implement-share strategy will receive a reputational benefit from stakeholders at a future point in time. When Mycoskie voiced his idea of selling two shoes for the price of one, stakeholders reacted skeptically (define). Skepticism continued when Mycoskie communicated his idea of competing with established US brands. This adversity quickly shifted to positive, active advocacy by stakeholders. Mycoskie received media coverage and speaking events related to the responsible business, which proved to be a main revenue driver at virtually no cost. Active endorsement by customers fascinated by the business also proved to be a revenue driver.²¹ The point where adversity becomes advocacy depends on the impression a responsible business makes on stakeholders. This point might not even be reached. Nevertheless, trading a troubled implementation process that has mediocre results for a smooth transformation to responsible business seems to be an attractive deal either way.

Summary

In this chapter we have examined how effective stakeholder communication makes money-sense for business. We have described where responsible business originated and distinguished the different background

traditions such as sustainability and ethics. We have also considered how centrally important communication is for responsible business. The next steps depend on you. However, you began your responsible business journey, the key is to see it as exactly this, a journey. The following example used by the NGO, Accountability, in its stakeholder engagement standard, provides a description of this journey:

Stakeholder engagement is a journey. The starting point is often pain alleviation. Something bad has happened and there is significant external pressure that needs to be addressed urgently. The organization finds that it needs to engage, to be more transparent, and to respond directly to stakeholder concerns. Organization that find stakeholder engagement has helped resolve a problem, then look for ways to use engagement as a preventive rather than a reactionary mechanism. They begin to use it systematically as part of risk identification and management. They discover that a better understanding of their stakeholders results in an easier and more receptive operating environment. Performance improves. They then discover that it can contribute just as much to strategic as to operational improvement. Engagement can be a tremendous source of innovation and new partnerships. Leading companies are discovering that a growing percentage of innovation is coming from outside the organization and not from within. They realize that stakeholders are a resource and not simply an irritant to be 'managed'. At this level, stakeholder engagement drives strategic direction as well as operational excellence.²²

The next chapter provides insight into the topic of greenwashing, a situation where stakeholders perceive that the company is not “walking the talk.” This ambiguity evokes a misleading impression of the firm’s social and environmental business performance. Greenwashing is probably the most dangerous pitfall for communicators of responsible business.

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Stakeholders today want to know about your company's social and environmental performance. Effectively communicating these topics has become critical to economic success. This book offers an extensive toolbox of the most effective instruments that can help you, and each chapter provides specific examples of how to communicate social and cause-related marketing, sustainability reporting, issues and crisis communication, vision, mission statements and codes, and web-based stakeholder communication. You will find hands-on concepts and actual illustrations. Chapter cases provide rich practical coverage and translate concepts into solutions for day-to-day business realities.

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