A Role for Ombuds in Embedded Corporate Social Responsibility Processes?

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My purpose here is to suggest that the often-overlooked organizational ombudsman (OO) role can and should become an influential component of embedded corporate social responsibility (CSR) processes as defined by Aguinis and Glavas (2013). An OO is an employee who works with individuals and groups to help resolve conflicts inside or outside of an organization and who brings systemic concerns to the attention of organizational leadership (Howard, 2010). An OO does this while maintaining the confidentiality of office visitors, operating from a stance of neutrality and impartiality, remaining independent of formal organizational structures, and not adjudicating disputes or otherwise making policy recommendations regarding conflicts (International Ombudsman Association, 2013; Ziegenfuss & O’Rourke, 2011).

Erbe (2008) first highlighted how the OO role can serve as an effective element of CSR processes both internal and external to organizations. This commentary seeks to add to that literature. In particular, I posit that because of the OO role’s effects on improvement of consumer and employee value congruence, the OO can and should serve as a central function in the Aguinis and Glavas conception of embedded CSR processes. Further, I briefly explore how the case example of the General Electric Co. (GE) and its “Ecomagination” campaign suggests a role for the OO function in embedded CSR initiatives, and in-part provide relevant reflections from my exposure to the Ecomagination campaign as a former GE employee (Aguinis & Glavas).
**Consumer and Employee Value Congruence**

The improvement of consumer and employee value congruence is a fundamental attribute of the embedded CSR process description detailed by Aguinis and Glavas. Several studies and analyses point to value incongruence as a primary, driving factor in the amount of conflict individuals experience relative to organizations (e.g., Adkins, Ravlin, & Meglino, 1996; Fitzpatrick, 2007; Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997; Kehoe & Pointing, 2003). This causal relationship between value incongruence and organizational conflict suggests that as organizational ombudsmen act to address organizational conflict, one functional outcome of their efforts is that they must also address value incongruence. This point is further bolstered when one examines the regular activities of the OO role—activities which include providing for the open communication of perceived value incongruencies and mistreatment between employees, as well as facilitating external complaints from customers regarding mismatches between expected and actual organizational behavior (Howard, 2010; Ziegenfuss & O’Rourke, 2011).

Moreover, OO offices address organizational conflict both on a daily basis, through interventions such as mediation and facilitated dialogs, and strategically, as part of larger systemic efforts to align organizational values with those of individual stakeholders (Howard, 2010; Rowe, 1995). Taken together, both of these roles meet the criteria laid out by Aguinis and Glavas as being elements of an embedded CSR process. Although one might claim that an OO office’s primary goal is to combat internal and external conflicts, and not to improve value congruence, the effects of the OO office extend well beyond this ostensible purview and act as CSR functions regardless of their original intent. As such, when considering the OO role, it seems clear that the organizational goals of conflict mitigation and value congruence are inextricably linked and indeed that to create an OO office is in many ways to address value incongruence directly.

**Insights From the GE Example**

The example of GE used by Aguinis and Glavas illustrates well other ways in which the OO role and function contribute to embedded CSR processes. As a former employee of a GE industrial unit, and in particular after having directly worked for the executive first responsible for designing and implementing the Ecomagination campaign, I was personally exposed to the psychological effects of what Aguinis and Glavas classify as GE’s embedded CSR initiative. Although this particular commentary is obviously limited to my own experience at GE, it is worth noting that the Ecomagination campaign did indeed influence my perception of GE’s corporate values and, as Aguinis and Glavas phrase it, did raise my sense of meaningfulness at work by signaling to me that my efforts contributed to an organization concerned about the well-being of its employees and of society at large. OO offices act in similar ways—that is, the creation of an OO function is often a signal to employees that they are part of an organization concerned about both their well-being and the well-being of the organization’s customers, suppliers, business partners, and the public (Rowe, 2010). Aguinis and Glavas also discuss how the Ecomagination campaign aligns employees’ self-concept with a larger organizational identity that includes values congruent to their own, and how the campaign drives employees “toward a higher purpose.” I personally found this to be the case. And, in much the same way, OO offices work to align organizational stakeholders’ self-concepts with larger organizational identities by addressing the underlying value incongruencies that often lead to organizational conflicts in the first place (Rowe, 2010; Ziegenfuss & O’Rourke, 2011). If the goals of an embedded CSR process include increasing meaningfulness at work...
and aligning employee and organizational identities, then an OO office seems an efficient function through which to further those goals.

**Conclusion**

The Aguinis and Glavas categorization of embedded CSR processes affords conjecture regarding various organizational functions that may contribute to CSR mechanisms but that may not have previously been directly considered as such—in particular, the function of the OO. A broader point is that the authors’ definition of embedded CSR processes allows for multidisciplinary approaches to CSR process analyses, such as this commentary’s review of CSR-processes’ psychological effects on stakeholders through the lens of organizational conflict management theory and practice. It seems, then, that Aguinis and Glavas signal a need for further research exploring not only OO functions but other organizational conflict resolution mechanisms as well (e.g., open-door policies, mediation, peer-review panels, early case assessment, and others) regarding their efficacy in contributing to improved consumer and employee value congruence, to meaningfulness in and at work, and to other psychological dynamics of embedded CSR processes. Overall, there are strong, causal connections between embedded CSR process outcomes, instances of organizational conflict, and the psychological effects of those conflicts, all of which might be readily explored using the structure Aguinis and Glavas lay forth.

**References**


