



Corporate Social Responsibility: A Paradigm Shift towards Organizational Care for Employees' Wellbeing

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Abstract: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has gained significant attention in recent years, with organizations increasingly focusing on their impact on society and the environment. However, while many organizations prioritize external stakeholders, the well-being of internal stakeholders, particularly employees, is often overlooked. This article contends that an authentic socially responsible organization should care for the well-being of both external and internal stakeholders equally. Through a literature review, this study examined the concept of CSR in the context of employees' well-being. It developed a conceptual framework to theorize how deliberate organizational initiatives can improve employees' overall well-being, ultimately contributing to their quality of work life and life satisfaction. The study highlights the importance of responsible organizations demonstrating a strong sense of responsibility towards their employees through organizational care and implementing sound workplace practices and policies. This study emphasizes the need for increased attention to the internal dimensions of CSR and greater transparency in reporting structured practices that support employees' well-being.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility; employees; well-being; workplace; care; stakeholders.

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Introduction

Interest in sustainability, stakeholder relations and corporate social responsibility (CSR) has increased significantly in recent years (Carroll & Brown, 2023; Du et al., 2023; Hiswåls et al., 2020). This experience has created unique opportunities for organizations to impact society positively. Consequently, corporate leaders have shown an increasing interest in CSR— a company's discretionary actions and policies that appear to advance societal well-being beyond the firm's immediate financial interests and legal requirements (Glavas et al., 2017). CSR is perceived as an official business response to the call for sustainable development (Brooks & Dunn, 2021). Businesses are expected to prioritize social and environmental responsibility, sustainability and ethics in their operations (Blowfield & Murray, 2019; Haski-Leventhal, 2022). Consequently, corporate responsibility has become integral to corporate

strategies, including CSR reporting (García-Rivas et al., 2023; Stobierski, 2021). Every year, organizations appeal to their stakeholders by donating billions of dollars to society. For instance, Fortune 500 companies in the United States spend approximately \$15 to \$20 billion annually on CSR activities (Meier & Cassar, 2018).

Corporate social responsibility activities typically focus on the environment and local communities (Ashurov et al., 2024). While it is good to care for the environment and society, some organizations have focused on external stakeholders and neglected the well-being of key internal stakeholders, the employees (Mory et al., 2016; Ramdhan et al., 2022). Organizations often claim that employees are the most important assets and stakeholders. For instance, Lussier and Hendon (2022) argue that employees are the primary means of creating organizational competitive advantage

and sustaining performance. Similarly, Ulrich et al. (2008) described employees as repositories of organizational experience and knowledge. However, in practice, some management initiatives have overlooked the importance of employees as key stakeholders. Such organizations often demonstrate insufficient concern for the well-being of their employees, particularly during economic crises, when downsizing becomes a prevalent strategy (Frone & Blais, 2020; Kwamboka & Nassiuma, 2017). In this regard, internal CSR refers to actions organizations choose to ensure the total well-being of employees (Jia et al., 2019). A responsible organization not only takes care of the external environment and communities but also regards employees as valuable stakeholders who deserve care and attention.

One of the key areas where employers can demonstrate internal corporate social responsibility is the work environment. The work environment can potentially affect employees' overall well-being. For example, Leiter and Cooper (2017) reported that many workers contend with equipment and workstations that fall short of ergonomic ideals. Moreover, excessive sitting highlights flaws in many work environments and affects employee wellness (Singh & Kholi, 2021). When companies concentrate only on external stakeholders and ignore employees' well-being, their CSR activities may be perceived as incomplete and hypocritical.

One of key resolutions for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. However, peace and prosperity can only flourish when people are happy, comfortable, healthy, safe and secure (Mitchell, 2018). Accordingly, Bammens (2016) recommended that deliberate organizational care that captures the organization's policies, practices, and actions with the ultimate goal of promoting its employees' best interest and overall well-being is essential for sustainable development.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2016) defined well-being as creating an environment that promotes a state of employees' contentment, allowing them to flourish and achieve their full potential for the benefit of themselves and their organizations. Well-being also refers to an employee's overall experience of the safety and health of work, good leadership, competence, adequate job resources, support of the work community and meaningful work (Utraiainen et

al., 2015). Black (2008) described the workplace as not just a place to work; it is "a key determinant of self-worth, family esteem, identity and standing with the community . . . and a means of social participation and fulfillment for most people" (p. 4). Organizations are, therefore, expected to show a strong sense of responsibility towards their employees through multiple means, such as care and compassion, listening and connecting sound workplace practices and policies to enhance employees' well-being (Daft, 2023). Such efforts create conditions that lead employees to find their work more meaningful.

Despite the recognition of employees as key stakeholders in the CSR efforts, there is a significant gap in understanding and implementing CSR strategies that prioritize employees' well-being. Therefore, through a desk literature review, this study bridged the gap by developing a conceptual framework that integrates CSR with employees' well-being, focusing on how CSR initiatives can be tailored to promote the organizational care and well-being in addition to pursuing the corporate interests (Farooq et al., 2017; Jia et al., 2019).

The Concept of Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility has become an important concept in the business world because of the notion that organizations should be responsible not only for their shareholders but also for society (Brooks & Dunn, 2021). Generally, CSR implies conducting business in a responsible manner to ensure society's well-being. This implies looking beyond the basic economic and legal obligations of a business entity. Carroll's (1979) seminal work offers a popular definition of CSR, arguing that CSR encompasses organizations' economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic societal expectations. Hence, corporate social responsibility simultaneously fulfills economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic duties (Carroll, 1991; Carroll & Buchholtz, 2015; Gulema & Roba, 2021). While a firm's economic and legal responsibilities are obligatory, the highest demonstration of social responsibility occurs when the organization voluntarily and proactively engages in unrestricted activities that advance the well-being of employees, communities and society. Investing in and ensuring the total well-being of organizational members is a typical illustration of discretionary duties. Accordingly, CSR concerns corporate philosophies and practices that go beyond what is expected.

Glavas et al. (2017) described CSR as a company's discretionary actions and policies that advance societal well-being beyond the firm's immediate financial interests and legal requirements. To this end, Wirba (2023) described CSR as a framework for managing the costs and benefits of business activities to internal and external stakeholders, ranging from employees, shareholders, and investors to customers, suppliers, civil society and community groups. This is contrary to Milton Friedman's 1962 famous claim, which argued that "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, engaging in open and free competition without deception or fraud" (p. 133).

Corporate social responsibility is also perceived as an opportunity to 'give back to society. This notion presents a narrow view of the CSR. In other words, organizations are expected to 'give back' to society when there is an overflow of wealth or gain. It also implies seeking only the welfare of those outside the organization—society. However, as a corporate philosophy, CSR must also be 'good' to those within organizations. The World Business Council on Sustainable Development (WBCSD) presents a more extensive description of CSR. They describe CSR as 'continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce, their families as well as of the local community and society at large' (WBCSD, 2000). Therefore, CSR involves considering the well-being of others to benefit both the business and the society.

Companies engage in CSR activities for various reasons (Gomez, 2014; Haski-Leventhal, 2022; Melubo et al., 2019). Some feel obligated whereas others think that this is a moral duty. Additionally, some organizations use CSR as a marketing tool to improve their relationships with key stakeholders and to protect their reputations. Therefore, an authentic measure of CSR is when organizations proactively show tender care and compassion even when no one is watching.

Interestingly, although CSR has grown in importance and acceptance, there is little consensus on what it represents (Wirba, 2023). CSR activities are often unspecified at the discretion of individual organizations. Thus, CSR appears to be a loose term with different meanings for different people. CSR

refers to legal accountability, social responsibility, causal responsibility, charitable contributions, legitimacy and a form of fiduciary duty (Rizk et al., 2008; Zenisek, 1979). Today, sustainability is often used to encompass social responsibility issues (Carroll & Brown, 2023).

Irrespective of the various understandings of CSR, its key attributes include employees' well-being, good governance, responsible behavior, managing social and environmental impacts, dialogue and communication with key stakeholders (Gomez, 2014). CSR is underpinned by the assumption that a business entity is accountable to multiple stakeholders beyond profit and shareholders. In 1984, Edward Freeman popularized the stakeholder theory, arguing that companies are not only accountable to their shareholders but also to a broader set of stakeholders. Freeman defined stakeholders as individuals, groups or institutions that are positively or negatively affected by the achievement of an organization's purpose. However, this study focused mainly on employees. Employees are a major stakeholder group and a key asset in any organization. Understanding employees' strategic importance provides an important context for understanding internal corporate social activities. Therefore, nurturing a culture of care in organizational settings provides a model to demonstrate internal CSR, ensuring that employees thrive in the workplace and beyond.

The Art of Caring

Care is generally conceptualized as an individual's attribute of showing concern and interest in others. It assures worth and involves taking an interest in another (Arnold & Ross, 2023). In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of care and compassion in the workplace. The concept of care is consistent with the stakeholder theory and ethics of care (Arnold & Ross, 2023; Burton & Dunn, 2005). Slote (2007) describes the art of caring as a 'displacement' of ordinary self-interest into unselfish concern for another person. Mayeroff (1971) stated that caring is a process of fostering another's growth and self-actualization. "It is not an isolated feeling or momentary relationship" (p. 1). By extension, corporate entities demonstrate genuine care when they create policies that promote the growth and well-being of employees, leading them towards self-actualization. Although caring is not as common in the general work environment as it is in the healthcare sector, promoting employees' general

development, welfare and well-being is an essential responsibility of organizations.

In an organizational context, McAllister and Bigley (2002) defined care as “a deep structure of values and organizing principles centered on fulfilling employees’ needs, promoting employees’ best interests and valuing employees’ contributions” (p. 895). Managerial caring behaviors include being accessible, inquiring, paying attention, validating, supporting, showing compassion, and maintaining consistency (Kahn, 1993; Stiehl et al., 2018). Similarly, Swanson (1993) suggested five dimensions of care: knowing, being with, doing for, enabling and maintaining beliefs. Hence, managerial care requires organizational leaders to show a genuine interest in their employees. Gabriel (2015) used the Good Shepherd parable from the Bible (Luke 15:3-7; John 10:11-18) to illustrate a caring organization. Such organizations go beyond self-interest, showing responsibility, affection and concern for their members’ well-being, ensuring that they thrive, much like the lost sheep in the parable. In line with the principles of CSR, caring organizations go beyond the call of duty to improve their employees’ lives. Organizational policies and practices are important ways for organizations to set standards to spell out how employees are treated and cared for.

Organizational Care and Employees’ Wellbeing

During a typical day, most employed people spend time working and sleeping (Budnick & Barber, 2017). Consequently, the work environment has significant implications for employee’s well-being. Leiter and Cooper (2017, p. 1) defined workplace wellbeing as “encompassing the physical health and comfort, mental health, a preponderance of positive over negative affect and positive attitudes towards work.” This means that well-being is a broad construct that embodies an entire person. Well-being at work, therefore, is not only about managing the physical environment with a limited aim of preventing harm to employees. Organizations must actively assist employees to maximize their physical, mental and social health. Pruyne (2011) provides a more focused description of well-being in relation to employees. According to the author, “employee well-being is a positive state in which the individual is able to function at or near their optimal level, whether defined and measured in terms of the physical, mental, emotional and/or social functions, with significant implications for the individual, their family and community, the organization and society at large” (p. 7).

The workplace has many factors that can affect employees’ overall well-being and produce negative effects. Unhealthy work climate, unethical institutional inconsistencies, bullying, lack of democracy and transparency, poor leadership, inadequate job resources, sexual harassment, consistent negative feedback, injustice and relationship challenges can affect the overall well-being. This can create a hostile work environment for employees and lead to anxiety and stress. A responsible and caring organization includes effective policies and programs that ensure adequate job resources, meaningful work, work-life balance, good relationships and wellness.

The CIPD (2024) has classified well-being into seven domains: health, work, values, collective growth, personal growth, good life choices and financial well-being. The health dimension of employees’ well-being involves physical and mental health and physical safety. These include health promotion and wellness programs, relaxation techniques, and safe working practices. Work can play a significant role in employees’ well-being. Factors such as equipment layout, light, noise, color, general work environment and conditions, workload and demands, good management, level of work autonomy and reward systems can influence employees’ mood. These values are equally important for the employees’ well-being. This component includes ethical leadership, standards, culture, diversity and inclusion. Another well-being domain involves enabling employees’ voice and creating positive relationships in the workplace through collective social support mechanisms. Providing a work climate and building positive working relationships where employees feel comfortable, inclusive, relaxed and have fun tend to improve their social wellbeing. Hence, a key aspect of well-being is a network of quality relationships and connections with other employees.

Moreover, advancing personal growth in the workplace, such as career development and advancement opportunities, can affect the employees’ overall well-being. Organizations can help employees achieve their professional goals while enhancing their skills and competencies. Mitchell (2018) suggested that negative experiences, such as a lack of security and limited opportunities for career development, can create feelings of insecurity, anxiety or frustration. Organizations can certainly be proactive in their approach to well-being by providing a work

environment that reflects intentional care and responsibility. In addition, good lifestyle choices such as physical activity, healthy eating and financial well-being, including fair compensation packages and financial planning resources, play crucial roles in the employee's overall sense of well-being.

The seven domains of employees' well-being, as identified by the CIPD, provide a comprehensive framework for organizations to support their workforce and foster an environment that enhances the overall well-being of their employees. This holistic approach benefits employees and contributes to an organization's long-term success and sustainability. Investing in employees' well-being is not just a moral imperative but also a strategic advantage in today's competitive business landscape. It positions the organization as an employer of choice.

A Conceptual Model

Based on the above discussion and the extant literature, this study posits that organizational policies and actions depicted through organizational care and internal CSR initiatives enhance the overall quality of employees' workplace experience. Thus, organizational policies and programs, such as job resources, health and wellness programs, organizational culture and leadership can significantly impact employees' well-being, ultimately affecting their quality of work life and general life satisfaction.

Figure 1 shows a graphical representation of the logic presented in the preceding sections. The model shows the important sources of organizational care in relation to employees' well-being and subsequent outcomes. Thus, well-being is a means of achieving a positive quality of work life and general life satisfaction.

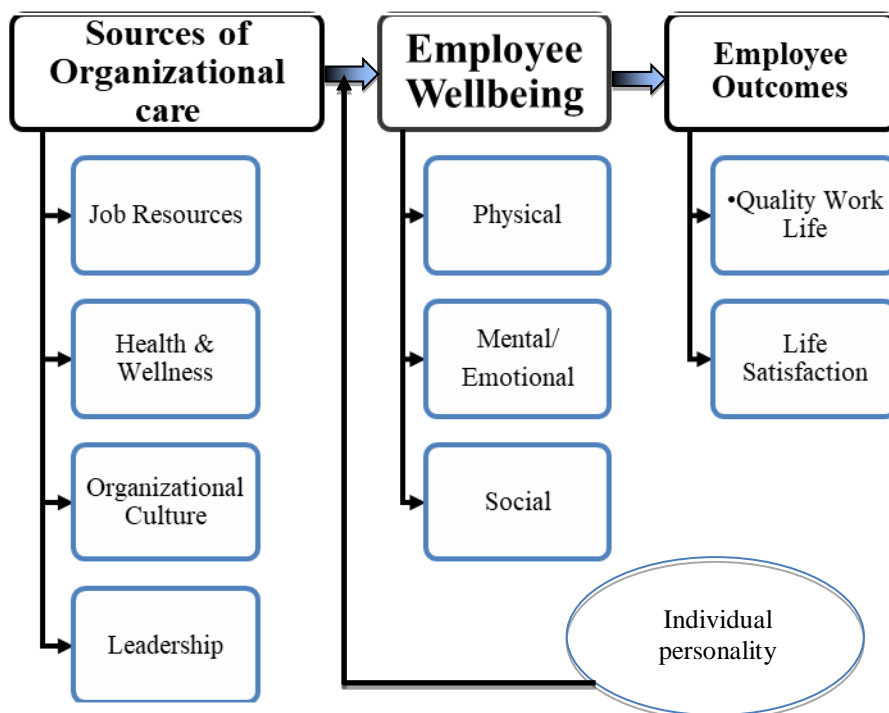


Figure 1: Hypothesized conceptual model of antecedents and consequences of employee well-being

Job Resources

Job resources refer to “the physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job that (1) are functional in achieving work goals, (2) reduce job demands and associated physiological and psychological costs, and/or (3) stimulate personal growth, learning and development” (Demerouti et al., 2017, p. 269). This umbrella term includes the deliberate creation of an employee-centric work environment. It seems natural that employees

flourish physically, mentally and socially when provided with adequate job resources.

Therefore, investing in job resources that stimulate work settings, limit hindrances and support a positive social climate can become potent internal CSR activities. Organizational policies such as flextime, job-sharing teleworking and work-life balance are possible ways to commit organizations to ensuring that their employees' leisure time and family life do not conflict with work; thus, a good

balance is assured for everyone. Consequently, organizational policies that offer opportunities for growth and advancement, meaningful jobs, favorable interpersonal relationships, empowerment, timely performance feedback and rewards are examples of the right thing to do.

Health and Wellness

Employees' health and wellness, including safety, are core components of CSR. Although individual employees ultimately make choices about lifestyle, work environmental factors such as job demands and workload can cause stress (Kelly et al., 2021). Organizational programs and policies aimed at improving employees' health and wellness ensure their physical and mental well-being. Organizations can implement diverse health and safety programs for employees that go beyond regulatory compliance. This includes regular health screenings, fitness programs, mental health support and ergonomic workplace designs. For instance, offering access to mental health resources, such as counseling services and stress management workshops, can significantly improve the overall well-being of employees.

Recent studies have provided clear evidence that certain workplace features pose a danger to employees' health. One study examined workplace stressors, such as lack of health insurance, exposure to shift work, long working hours, high job demands, low social support at work and low organizational justice, and found that these factors caused more than 120,000 unnecessary deaths per year and an excess annual healthcare cost of 5%–8% of the total spending on healthcare in the United States (Goh et al., 2016). Another study (Burdorf, 2015) examined the impact of five working conditions (physically demanding job, high time pressure, low job control, low rewards and a lack of physical activity) on working life expectancy (at what age one is likely to leave employment because of illness or injury) and working years lost (due to premature exits from the labor force). Both outcomes had significant negative effects, contributing collectively to an almost four-year difference. Such evidence serves as a wake-up call to create interventions and programs to enhance employees' health and well-being. This includes both minimizing and eliminating negative effects and promoting positive effects.

Organization Culture

The social setting in which people work provides support but can also constitute a major source of

stress. Organizational culture describes how an organization functions. Culture embodies the fundamental values, assumptions, understanding and norms organizational members share (Daft, 2023). Culture sets the tone for an organization; if that culture is negative, it can undermine the effectiveness of the best programs, policies and services intended to support the workforce. On the other hand, a positive organizational culture ensures a work environment characterized by trust, honesty, fairness, a sense of belonging and community among employees. An unhealthy culture creates more stress in the workplace, which lowers employees' well-being (Marens et al., 2022). For example, if an organization's culture is 'profit at all costs, it can create undue pressure and subsequent burnout.

Corporate value is central to any culture. This suggests that caring organizations deliberately incorporate the values of care and employee-centeredness into their culture. Such organizations consider relationships, communication, trust, cooperation and responsibility in their operations (Burton & Dunn, 2005). Ethical culture also promotes responsible behaviors in all aspects of business transactions.

Leadership

Leadership is a relationship that is based on influence and trust. The supervisor-subordinate relationship is one of the most common sources of stress in organizations (Do et al., 2021; Richard et al., 2022). Leadership behavior can affect employees' feelings about their work. Behaviors characterized by trust, confidence, recognition and feedback can enhance subordinates' well-being. Effective leadership stems from genuine concerns about the organization and its employees. Showing respect and trust allows employees to feel emotionally connected with their work, enriching their lives and well-being. Poor subordinate relationships characterized by low supervisor supportiveness, low quality of communication and lack of feedback can affect employees' well-being and substantially contribute to feelings of stress (Cartwright & Cooper, 1994).

Gabriel (2015) described a caring leader as accessible and visible, who provides quality time, advice, recognition and validation to his/her followers. Such leaders treat their followers with consideration and respect, rather than using them as a means to an end. They also show genuine

concern for the overall well-being of organizational members through active listening, empathy, compassion and support. The analogy of the good shepherd (Gabriel, 2015) and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) in the Bible encapsulates the qualities of the caring leader. Such leaders have deep empathetic concerns regarding the interests and well-being of their followers. For instance, “good leaders get out of their offices and mingle with others, ask questions, set up listening forums where people can say whatever is on their minds, and provide feedback to let people know they have been heard” (Daft, 2023, p. 334).

Personality

While organizations play a major role in improving the well-being of their employees, they may not have full control over certain conditions. Hence, the link between employees’ personalities and overall well-being is important. Personality refers to the underlying unseen structures and processes that explain unique characteristics and behavior (Daft, 2023).

Although there are several models of personality, the Big Five Model, including extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience (John & Srivastava, 1999), provides a useful scheme to describe what employees are like. Given that employees’ well-being can be influenced by both organizational and personal factors, it is important to mention that an individual’s personality can impact the overall well-being of employees irrespective of the love and care shown by the organization. In particular, extraversion and emotional stability are mostly associated with life satisfaction (Müller, 2014). For instance, emotionally unstable people are usually nervous, moody, emotional, insecure and less happy with their lives (Colquitt et al., 2022). Conversely, extroverted people tend to experience pleasant, engaging moods, such as enthusiasm, excitement, and elation.

Research Propositions

Based on the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1, the study presents the following research propositions:

P1: Organizational care focused on providing relevant job resources for employees will positively affect their overall well-being.

P2: Organizational care focused on employees’ health and wellness will positively affect the overall well-being of employees.

P3: Organizational care focused on creating an employee-centered culture will positively influence employees’ overall well-being.

P4: Leadership behaviors will positively influence the overall well-being of employees.

P5: Individual personality moderates the relationship between sources of organizational care and the overall well-being of employees.

P6: Employees’ overall well-being mediates the relationship between sources of organizational care and employee outcomes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This conceptual paper emphasizes the importance of internal corporate social responsibility through organizational care. Organizations that prioritize employees’ well-being recognize that the workforce is their most valuable asset and stakeholder. While work-related factors may not be the only ones that determine well-being, they play a meaningful role in employees’ overall quality of work life and life satisfaction. It is crucial for organizations to demonstrate accountability not only to external stakeholders and the environment, but also to focus on fostering a positive work environment that enables employees to thrive. By integrating employees’ well-being into CSR practices, companies also show their commitment to social responsibility and ethical business practices. Therefore, initiatives to improve the well-being of the workforce will have positive societal implications.

This study proposed a conceptual model based on the existing literature. However, it is important to note that this model has not yet been tested empirically. Future research could focus on validating the model through quantitative and qualitative approaches across various organizational settings. In addition, this study focused primarily on CSR initiatives directly related to employees’ well-being, potentially overlooking other CSR dimensions that indirectly contribute to well-being. Expanding the scope of CSR activities can provide a holistic understanding.

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