**Understanding COVID-19: A Behavioral Corporate Social Responsibility Perspective**

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In this short essay, I would like to explain why a behavioral perspective on corporate social responsibility (CSR) is useful in helping us understand and possibly also offer solutions for some of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and, more generally, other natural environmental disasters and stressors.

Our research over the past 15+ years has focused on behavioral CSR, which involves investigating CSR at the individual level of analysis in addition to the firm and institutional levels. In other words, it draws on the micro literature (e.g., organizational behavior, human resource management, industrial and organizational psychology) to examine the psychological foundations of CSR. This is not a typical perspective given that in our review or the CSR literature we discovered that only 4% of the articles in the 17 journals included in our content analysis focused on the individual level of analysis (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012).

Our research focuses on a behavioral perspective on CSR because it is useful in that it allows us to understand *why, when, and how individuals perceive and react* to CSR—and choose to lead or engage in CSR initiatives—in particular ways (Aguinis, 2011). In turn, these individual-level perceptions and reactions have effects that permeate throughout the entire organization and beyond (e.g., customers, suppliers, society at large). Let me offer an illustration.

Consider the following reactions to COVID-19 by two different firms—both engaging in CSR activities. Firm A does not integrate CSR into its strategy, routines, and operations, but Firm B does. For example, Firm A engages in some form of philanthropy to address the crisis, which is certainly a laudable and noble effort. On the other hand, Firm B integrates CSR into all activities and CSR permeates accounting, finance, human resources, marketing, operations, sales, and strategy. CSR is not something Firm B does, it is who they are. A behavioral perspective to CSR allows us to understand that these two approaches, which we label peripheral CSR and embedded CSR (Aguinis & Glavas, 2013), lead to very different outcomes. Embedded CSR enhances perceptions of organizational justice, employees’ positive selves (e.g., improved self-concept), and allows individuals to present more of their whole selves. So, it leads to improved employee engagement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviors. A behavioral CSR lens allows us to understand that not all CSR-related reactions and interventions in response to COVID-19 will necessarily lead to similarly positive outcomes. Positive outcomes are more likely to take place if CSR is embedded rather than peripheral. A behavioral perspective to CSR allows us to understand why.

Our more recent research also adopting a behavioral perspective on CSR is also useful for understanding why employees *need* their firms to react in certain ways as a consequence of COVID-19. For example, in our recent *Journal of Management* article (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019), we described the general process through which individuals give meaning to ongoing experiences , what is called sensemaking. The actions that firms and governments take in reaction to COVID-19 are what we call “sensemaking factors.” During a time of crisis, individuals scan the environment and the way in which they perceive these sensemaking factors determine not just their attitudes toward their firms, but also their behavior such as whether they will choose to leave the firm or stay (Ng, Yam, & Aguinis, 2019).

I close this essay with the following questions based on a behavioral perspective to CSR that I hope will be fruitful in moving the conversation forward:

1. How are leadership characteristics related to firms’ reactions to COVID-19?
2. What theories in human resource management and organizational behavior can be used to improve our understanding of the relation between CSR and COVID-19 (and other pandemics natural environmental disasters)?
3. What are the effects of programs in reaction to COVID-19 whereby employees engage in community service activities while receiving compensation from their firms?
4. Is there a relationship between diversity and inclusion and responses to COVID-19?
5. How does the behavior of individual employees promote or prevent the successful implementation of CSR interventions in relation to COVID-19?
6. What organizational systems and process prevent the successful implementation of CSR initiatives related to COVID-19?

I look forward to your reactions and comments!

**References**

[available at <http://www.hermanaguinis.com/pubs.html>]

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