

Preface

The main argument of this book is that we can increase our understanding of the concept of CSR (corporate social responsibility) considerably by treating it as something we already know a fair amount about in organizational literature: ‘the popular management idea’. As will be demonstrated, this generalization not only provides insights about generic similarities between CSR and other popular management ideas such as just-in-time (JIT), total quality management (TQM) and lean production, it also opens up the questions of how far the similarities between CSR and other popular management ideas go, and where the differences start. In so doing, the book takes an explorative stance. It focuses on business ethics and the concept of CSR with the purpose of bringing up new perspectives, results and questions on this ever-relevant topic.

A central delimitation of the book is that we focus on the ‘operationalization’ of CSR. By this we mean attempts to turn general ideas about business ethics into something that companies and other organizations use in their daily operations. Such attempts occur both within and outside business firms – at the time of writing, these attempts are being made on a large scale around the world. Vague ideas about business ethics are defined in a host of different standards under the labels of ‘corporate social responsibility’ (CSR), ‘sustainability’ and the like. The ideas are diffused by consultants and others wanting to help reform companies. In companies, as in other organizations, attempts to operationalize often lead to structural changes at the management level, problems with implementation and unanticipated dilemmas in day-to-day business activities. In short, attempts to operationalize involve a great many organizational initiatives and challenges, an underlying reason for the book’s focus on organization theory.

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