5 Corporate Social Responsibility Trends to Watch in 2019

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2018 proved to be an active year in Corporate Social Responsibility with issues related to sustainability, globalization, advocacy on social issues and multiple natural disasters in the forefront. Some of these issues and trends will continue into 2019, but leaders should expect to see the following noteworthy changes:

- **Fewer stands, more dialogue.** Faced with the prospect of a divided government in Washington, a looming presidential election in 2020 (the Iowa caucuses are just one year away), and the fact that some businesses are seeking more federal oversight of their work in areas like data security, companies will tone down their public advocacy in favor of more dialogue on the issues. Getting any new regulations, or changes in regulations, through a divided government will require bi-partisan support, so expect to see fewer companies taking stands on issues of public policy despite research that continues to show that most consumers feel that businesses should take an active role in driving social and environmental changes.

- **Back to school.** With the workplace becoming more complex with issues such as combating sexual harassment, promising pay equity, promoting sustainability and ensuring corporate ethics taking on more importance, many corporate leaders and corporate social responsibility professionals will find themselves in training classes, peer-to-peer dialogues and formal classroom settings in order to keep abreast of changes and best practices in governance and accountability. Expect to see more formal classes in corporate social responsibility and sustainability like executive education courses at Harvard Business School and the Wharton School of Business as well as increased offerings for emerging professionals like the Institute for Corporate Social Responsibility at Johns Hopkins University, which is co-sponsored by the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (I'm a member of the Institute’s faculty).

- **More disaster prevention, less relief.** With the growing number of natural disasters impacting many parts of the world, corporations are re-thinking their approach to disaster relief and recovery efforts. While many companies will continue to provide relief to victims of natural disasters through cash grants and product donations (American Express has been making disaster relief grants since 1872), expect to see more companies move away from a reactive approach to more of a proactive approach of helping communities be more resilient in the future. While most natural disasters cannot be prevented from occurring, the impact on people can be mitigated or even largely eliminated through better urban and rural planning, and more restrictions on building and development.

- **Equity joins diversity and inclusion.** Companies have focused a lot of attention on diversity and inclusion efforts the past few years, but they’re now faced with increasing pressure to ensure equity in the treatment of employees and customers rather than simply recognizing and celebrating their diversity. Expect to see DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) replace D&I (diversity and inclusion) as a priority in corporate social responsibility. While issues of pay equity have dominated the headlines in 2018, there are many other aspects of marketing, philanthropy, human resources and governance that deserve special attention in the coming year.

- **Generation Z-ers are here.** While a huge portion of the media’s attention has been on Millennials that past few years, Generation Z-ers (those born after the mid-1990s) are now entering the workforce and consumer marketplace in droves (accounting for 40 percent of all consumers globally by 2020), and they will be driving Millennials to fulfill the expectations that have been set for that generation. Expect Generation Z-ers, who are the real early adopters and digital natives, to demand better and easier-to-use technology, more flexibility in the workplace, more freedom of choice, and greater degrees of acceptance and transparency in the workplace and marketplace. They are particularly interested in seeing companies address issues of global poverty and hunger, the environment and climate change, and human rights.

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