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CSR for HR

Solitaire Townsend 11 Jan 2011 0 comments

Title: CSR for HR: A Necessary Partnership For Advancing Responsible Business Practices

Author: Elaine Cohen

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Elaine Cohen has been a powerful voice in the corporate social responsibility and sustainability movement for many years. Turns out she also has a secret aptitude for fiction.

That could be a rather sarcastic start to a review of her new book, *CSR for HR*. Except that this is an overt work of fiction, and a rather jolly one at that. We follow the story of Sharon, a fictional HR director who sets out on a journey of CSR discovery. This is a fantastic ploy to entertain the knowledgeable, while filling in the gaps for the new entrants to CSR.

Sharon delves into the definitions of CSR, learns from the real-life achievements of Body Shop, Gap, Nike, Microsoft, Ben and Jerry's, Google and energy company Vattenfall. The book is stuffed with mini-articles, models, a road map to get started and interviews between Sharon and real leaders in CSR.

Recruitment, compensation, training, employee communications, employee well-being, health and safety, employee rights, community involvement and environmental impact are all covered. The HR discipline doesn't trip up Cohen's argument and she seems as competent in the issues (and frustrations) of HR professionals as I've known her to be in CSR.

My favourite chapter is set during a conference that Sharon attends early in her journey. The facilitator (who I suspect is a barely disguised avatar of the author) opens with some provocative questions, such as: "There is no such thing as work-life balance" and "Would you die to work?" The session is a watershed for Sharon as she begins to realise the huge implications of CSR for age-old HR issues.

One of the conclusions from the conference is that "human resources managers have a responsibility to change the system". I agree wholeheartedly, but this does highlight my one criticism of this story. Sharon the HR director does all the learning, and not much HR wisdom passes the other way to CSR. Perhaps the next story could be HR for CSR, following the journey of a CSR director learning what the HR discipline can teach on sustainability.

Nevertheless, this is a must-read for HR professionals, students and those interested in holistic management. It's rare to find a business book where you learn as much from the protagonist's chats with her daughter as from the case studies. Enjoy.

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