Examining the Link Between Social Responsibility and Decision Styles

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Abstract

The paper examines the factors that influence socially responsible decision making by individuals. The study found four social responsibility styles: "Playing it Safe," "Weather The Storm," "Problem to Solve," and "Hope it Goes Away." These styles describe individuals on the basis of decision style, propensity for risk, and coping style. The styles explain why people with different values might come to the same decision in the same circumstances.

The managers and owners of today's business firms are expected by society to be accountable for their actions, and even inaction, in the social arena. This relationship of a business to the society in which it operates is a manifestation of business's social responsibility. However, even though it is common for those studying social responsibility to examine the business entity, a business has no social responsibility in and of itself. Only individuals, such as business decision makers, can have a sense of social responsibility in their organizational decisions. This does not mean that the organizational culture has no impact on social responsibility but that it is the individual, starting with top management, who determines the organizational culture and who decides whether or not to implement socially responsible programs that will determine the extent to which the business will be socially responsible.

As Wood, Chonko, and Hunt (1986) suggest, individuals should be the "unit of analysis and a focus of studies dealing with corporate social responsibility" (194). It is, therefore, the objective of this paper to examine more closely the individual decision maker and the factors that influence the decision maker in terms of making socially responsible decisions. It would be helpful for researchers to understand the factors that might contribute to the development of greater social responsibility so that this knowledge could be used by managers to help them in directing their operations.
towards more socially responsible actions. For example, if managers are aware that the strict enforcement of a code of ethics can lead to a more ethical organizational culture, then they can use this knowledge to attempt to enhance the organizational culture of their company.

While there is not a consensus as to what business social responsibility really is, the definition used by Bock (1980) is appropriate for this study. Bock defines the social responsibility of business as:

the moral and ethical content of managerial and corporate decisions, that is, the values used in business decision making over and above the pragmatic requirements imposed by legal principle and market economy. (7)

Social responsibility is one indication of an individual’s ethical and moral commitment to society. Therefore, a discussion of business social responsibility is in part a discussion of the individual and personal ethics of organizational decision makers. The study of business social responsibility cannot be divorced from the study of managerial ethics; the two are inevitably linked.

The present study examines the major question: To what extent and in what manner does the individual’s preferred decision style determine how socially responsible one is?

While the sample used in this study is from an undergraduate population whose ethical perspective might differ somewhat from that of business decision makers, the study is not concerned with what the respondents’ ethical perspective is but rather with how they make decisions in situations involving ethical (and hence social responsibility) issues. It is concerned with the process leading to a decision in ethical situations rather than with the actual decision. The study examines the extent to which preferred decision style impacts on one’s sense of social responsibility.

**Characteristics of the Sample**

The sample used for the present study consists of business administration and accountancy undergraduate students at a major southern university. The set of instruments measuring all of the variables in this study were administered to the members of a single class of 425 students. The students completed part of the instrument in class and then completed the remainder outside of class. They were then returned at the next session of the class. A total of 370 questionnaires were completed with respondents being predominantly male (58%), juniors (77%), and white (89%). These students were pursuing a wide variety of majors: General Business, 31%; Marketing, 16%; Accountancy, 14%; Finance, 10%; Management, 9%; plus various nonbusiness majors.

**Decision Styles and Social Responsibility**

The link between decision styles and business ethics was postulated by Fleming (1985). However, there has not yet been any empirical research to support this linkage. Indeed, Fleming calls for empirical research as the next step in supporting this hypothesized relationship.