

Social Responsibility and ethics in organizational management

La responsabilità sociale ed etica nel management

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Social Responsibility (SR) in the field of health care can learn a lot from the evolution of the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The R for Responsibility was originally an ethical concept that, when looking at the past, addresses actions' consequences and, when looking at the future, addresses the responsibility for what is going to be done or must be done; it is, therefore, a good guide for understanding SR. The S for Social also started out as a moral concept in interpersonal relationships; it later attributed an active role to society, whose demands identify situations that give rise to rights that create responsibilities. However, the recent evolution of CSR shows the risk of turning what should be an avenue for cooperation between organizations and society into an escalation of claims with an adversarial, consequentialist, results-driven intent, which does not take into account people's possible moral learning, that is, it does not make a positive contribution to good management. Starting from the basic ideas about what is involved in managing an organization, this paper identifies what can motivate an organization to act in a socially responsible manner: SR, understood as an ethical responsibility, grounded on virtue ethics, leads to management excellence.

Key words: Ethics, firm, management, responsibility, social responsibility, society, social responsibility and corporate governance

La responsabilità sociale in ambito sanitario può apprendere molto dall'evoluzione del concetto di responsabilità sociale delle imprese (RSI). La R di "responsabilità" era in origine un concetto etico che, guardando al passato, affrontava le conseguenze delle azioni mentre invece, guardando al futuro, doveva affrontare la responsabilità di ciò che stava per essere fatto o doveva essere fatto. Essa pertanto è, una buona guida per comprendere la responsabilità sociale. La S di "sociale" era considerata inizialmente come un concetto morale all'interno dei rapporti interpersonali; in seguito le venne attribuito un ruolo attivo nella società, le cui richieste identificano le situazioni che danno luogo a diritti che creano le responsabilità. Tuttavia, la recente evoluzione della RSI mostra che esiste il rischio che ciò che dovrebbe essere una via per la cooperazione tra le organizzazioni e la società, si trasformi in un incremento delle rivendicazioni con intenti contraddittori, consequenzialisti, orientati ai risultati, che non tengono conto della possibilità di apprendimento morale delle persone, vale a dire, non apportano un contributo positivo alla buona gestione. Partendo dalle idee basilari richieste nella gestione di un'organizzazione, il presente articolo identifica ciò che può motivare un'organizzazione ad agire in modo socialmente responsabile: la SR, intesa come una responsabilità etica, fondata sull'etica delle virtù, porta a un modello di gestione di eccellenza.

Parole chiave: Etica, azienda, gestione, responsabilità, responsabilità sociale, società, responsabilità sociale e governance

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Introduction

Health care organizations usually enjoy a high level of social recognition, derived from the importance of the needs they satisfy, their contribution to the community's welfare and their professionals' technical and human caliber. The studies that have been undertaken on these health organizations' Social Responsibility (SR) highlight medical care, which includes both technical and human aspects; services to the community, with disease prevention and health education actions, and a corporate culture driven by quality, responsibility, accountability and confidentiality, among other variables.

All of this gave rise to distinctive SR models that followed a different path from the SR practiced by firms, or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): it was assumed that organizations that had such an elevated social function should automatically qualify as socially responsible, without performing any further scrutiny.

However, this outlook has been reexamined. Technological developments, demographics and an awareness that health is a basic right for everyone have fueled an explosion in the demand for health services, at a time when growing costs, the technification of professions, the presence of private players and fierce competition, the constraints on public financial resources, management complexity, the growing concern for environmental issues and the proliferation of regulations, among other factors, have significantly challenged the management quality of health care organizations and the coverage provided by a broad SR.

One of the outcomes of all this has been a growing interest in SR in the health industry (Abreu et al., 2005; Brandão et al., 2013; Jamali et al., 2010; Kakabadse and Rozuel, 2006; Rohini and Mahadevappa, 2010; Wilmot, 2000), which we see as an opportunity for a fruitful exchange of ideas between all stakeholders – academics and practitioners, public and private sector.

SR is not a univocal concept: it means something, but not always the same for everyone. But this lack of consensus should not surprise us. The reality of human organizations is so varied and so changing that it is obvious that there must be more than one way to be responsible toward society (Argandoña and von Weltzien-Hoivik, 2009). But it is equally obvious that all have some type of SR. The purpose of this article is to reflect on what SR is and why it must be practiced by those who manage these organizations. The next section explains SR from the viewpoint of the organizations' management; the section after that discusses what moral, legal and SR is; then we will see why SR is necessary for the manager, and we will close with the conclusions.

Social Responsibility and management

In this section, we will use three simple concepts to frame our analysis:

1. an organization (a business, a non-profit hospital, a sports club, a political party) is "a group of people who coordinate their actions to achieve certain goals that are to everyone's interest, even though that interest may have very different reasons" (Pérez López, 1993);
2. managing an organization entails coordinating all these people's actions to achieve these common goals;
3. SR is "the responsibility of enterprises [in general terms, organizations] for their impact in society" (Commission of the European Communities, 2011).

A responsible organization will try to achieve these common goals that are to everyone's interest while taking into account their impacts on society – the positive ones, to foster them, and the negative ones, to avoid and offset them. This idea is expressed in most definitions of SR, which talk of "integrating social or ethical dimensions in economic activities", or "achieving economic goals while at the same time addressing society's expectations" or "engaging in open, transparent business practices that respect their employees, the community and the environment", or "integrating the needs of people, planet and profit in their operations" etc.². A socially responsible organization can also be defined as one that puts people – the stakeholders – at the center (Freeman, 1984): the organization must take into account the needs of both its internal (owners, managers, employees) and external stakeholders (customers, suppliers, community).

Any organization, whether public or private, with purely economic or social objectives, designs strategies, builds structures, develops policies and undertakes actions that affect many people and institutions. All of this goes to define its SR from its impacts in society.

As is logical, all this needs managers to guide, coordinate and control it. Within the organization, SR consists of a series of instruments or technical resources: management systems (Argandoña, 2004), incentives, indicators, reports, audits, codes of conduct, training programs ... that are necessary if SR is to move beyond good intentions or a series of disorganized and ineffective actions. This is the instrumental dimension of SR.

On a level above the instruments there is the organizational dimension, the people and structures who accept responsibilities and implement them: management and governing bodies, specialized bodies (SR committee, SR or sustainability manager), middle managers and employees, and also suppliers and distributors, partners, agents, etc. SR is a series of personal and collective responsibilities that are shared, mutually supporting and reciprocal.

¹ We will use the term Social Responsibility (SR) throughout this paper, referring to organizations in general, whether public or private, for profit or non-profit.

² For some definitions, and their critical analysis, see Dahlsrud (2008).

This takes us to the managerial dimension, where it is decided what must be done, how it must be done and who has to do it. Normally, SR starts with a commitment by the senior management, based on the mission, vision and values; that commitment then percolates through the structure and materializes in the strategy and in day-to-day policies and actions, involving people in dialogue, participation, communication, training and implementation processes. SR is a way of managing the organization, an ongoing practice that is more or less integrated in the mission, the strategy, the policies and the daily decisions³.

Viewed from outside, SR is part of the organization's contribution to a prosperous, sustainable society. There are many ways to make this contribution, from performing the firm's traditional functions (satisfying needs through the production of goods and services, creating value and jobs) to managing its positive (innovation and development) and negative externalities (on the environment or climate change), and the moral and cultural transformations of the societies it interacts with. Its impact is measured mainly by its results (outcomes), for example, on the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1998), although it is more than these outcomes.

SR seeks to make the organization efficient, ethical and responsible, both internally and externally. It is a series of processes that manifest above all in the internal changes (knowledge, capabilities, attitudes, values and virtues) that take place within the organization and within people; the external outcomes are only consequences of these changes, and probably not the most important ones either.

However, this ideal will probably never be attained, for many reasons. SR has a very limited capacity to impact positively on society and, in any case, it is unlikely to have any real significance: "There is little if any logical or empirical evidence that more social activities on the part of the corporations are likely to be socially enhancing, and that in fact they can be socially harmful" (Devinney, 2009). That is why Visser (2010) says that "CSR, as a business, governance and ethics system, has failed" when "success or failure is measured in terms of the net impact (positive or negative) of business in society and the environment".

SR's capacity to transform companies from within also faces difficulties but it is at least a reminder that organizations have responsibilities that can change management processes if managers identify and take on these responsibilities: the virtuous or responsible firm "will be one which has a corporate character that acknowledges that it 'houses' a practice, that encourages the pursuit of excellence in that practice, aware that this is an entirely moral pursuit, that pursues the external goods in so far (and only in so far) as they are necessary to sustain and support the development of excellence in

the practice" (Moore 2003). A socially responsible organization is one that is managed by applying excellence criteria. And this leads us to the ethical dimension of SR.

Responsibility

What do we mean when we say that a person or an organization is responsible?⁴ Here, we consider three forms of responsibility: moral, legal and social⁵.

Moral responsibility

Responsibility is a moral category, which always arises from the relationship with another person: "To say that a person is responsible (...) for a given action is only to say that it is appropriate to take it as a basis of moral appraisal of that person" (Scanlon, 1998)⁶. There can be different types:

1. retrospective or a posteriori, as an attribution. In the past, the agent acted (or did not act) and is attributed the responsibility for the action and its consequences, and also for its objectives and motives;
2. prospective or a priori, as a duty. The subject has decided to act or has the duty to act, and is prepared to accept his present and future responsibilities (Jonas, 1984), including its purposes and the necessary or appropriate means to do that duty. It is often linked to the agent's role or function (Vincent, 2011);
3. responsiveness, as an attitude. When the agent acts with prospective responsibility, he is showing an attitude or willingness to respond to the needs or demands of others, which is what makes up his responsiveness, also called virtue responsibility (de Ruyter, 2002; Williams, 2008). Its rationale arises from the agent's capability to make genuine moral decisions for himself, in such a manner that others trust that he will perform his obligations and accept the consequences of his acts;
4. as accountability. The attribution of responsibilities requires that the agent be able to account for his actions, his or her motivations, the strategy in which they are embedded, the means used and their consequences (Oshana, 1997). Moral responsibility is owed to another person or to a community and, therefore, is subject to the normative standards governing interpersonal relationships in that community and their scrutiny, appraisal and sanc-

⁴ For discussions of the subject, see Eshleman (2014), Hart (1968), Nicoletti (2004) and Williams (2006); cf. also Argandoña (2008).

⁵ There is another responsibility, causal responsibility, which is attributed to someone when that person is the direct or indirect cause of an action or its effects. We will not discuss it here because it is always present in the other responsibilities.

⁶ Responsibility is always personal. Danley (1980), French (1979), and Goodpaster and Matthews (1982) opened the debate about whether a corporate responsibility is possible.

³ SR is often identified with philanthropy or social action, without being part of the business's core or identifying with its management. This does not seem to be the right way to define it.

tion. It is a way of including the community in defining the responsibilities we have listed above.

Societal demands by themselves do not create moral responsibilities, which arise from duties of justice. However, these demands serve to draw attention to these responsibilities' content and give them form for a specific place and time; for example, the duty not to discriminate against an employee on the grounds of race, gender or religion will be specified differently in different communities, but the moral norm will be generally and morally binding.

Legal responsibility

It is founded on abidance by the law. It may or may not be a moral obligation, because ethics and the law do not share the same origin nor the same scope: 1) legal responsibility is based on criteria of social necessity or efficacy, not necessarily on moral principles; 2) the law is concerned mainly with the outcomes, not with intentions, which in some ethical theories occupy an important place in moral responsibility; 3) the law does not encompass all moral obligations, nor should it, as to do so would be detrimental to freedom; 4) the spheres to which the two responsibilities are applied are different, and 5) legal responsibility tends to be reactive and cannot easily adapt to new circumstances and problems. Responsible organizations must obey the law but SR is not a legal responsibility; it does not owe its bindingness to the law.

Social Responsibility

The adjective social has a number of meanings. The moral responsibilities we have alluded to earlier are social insofar as they arise from relationships between people. For example, sale of a faulty product that may cause harm to consumers gives rise to the obligation to compensate for this harm. But SR has acquired a broader meaning; in the example given above, it establishes a generic consumer entitlement to safe products and a responsibility that applies to all companies, beyond the specific relationship between a buyer and a seller. It is responsibility toward all of society (although on occasions it is limited to a group of stakeholders), and this is reflected in many definitions of SR, with phrases such as: "integrate social and environmental concerns", "contribute to a better society", "respect people, communities and the environment", "treat the stakeholders in a socially responsible manner" etc.

Therefore, it is assumed that when society voices its requirements, demands, claims or expectations, it is formulating potential or effective rights that deserve public recognition (even those that are only recognized for certain groups have the support of the community). These demands' strength arises from various sources: coercion (by society or by the State), ethics (either because the recognized right implies a moral duty or because a normative value is bestowed on what society proposes), convenience (the organization agrees to negotiate its responsibilities) etc. Society also demands that organizations be accountable for their commit-

ments, the means they have used or will use to meet them, and their results, which enables a certain degree of control to be kept.

This modern conception of SR has its roots in profound changes, in society, ideas or ideologies (Devinney, 2009), with major consequences:

1. in postmodern society, rights have proliferated, which have become changing and relative, and which often try to turn mere preferences into formal rights (Argandoña, 2016). This inflation of rights translates into a proliferation of SR demands;
2. the wording of these rights is often ambiguous, for example, when it is said that the firm needs a "social license" to operate (without knowing who grants it, under what terms and what its effects are) or that it must "give back" to society what it has received (without specifying how this is to be calculated) or that, as a "good citizen", it must contribute to improving society, or that it must make good use of its power etc.;
3. society is an abstract body that encompasses many groups (politicians, government officials, academics, companies, the media, civil society organizations) with different interests that compete for the attention of the State (to validate their demand) and that of firms (to get them to accept their responsibilities). In practice, we run the risk of leaving the task of proposing society's demands in the hands of a stakeholder group, without discussing their validation;
4. the lobbying capacity of the stakeholder groups is strengthened by State structures, judges, lobbies and the media, which may put at risk the voluntary nature of SR;
5. SR often becomes a vehicle for funding social actions that were traditionally the responsibility of the State but which it can no longer perform due to demand growth and budget constraints. On occasions, SR has been presented as transferring to firms the responsibility for solving the world's major problems – for instance, hunger, disease, education, preserving the environment or preventing climate change;
6. the ethical rationale of this SR is usually consequentialist: what matters is that certain results are attained that are considered socially desirable, without giving due attention to the means, which may be unjust because of what is being asked for, or because of the burden placed on firms, which is then passed on to their customers and employees, not just their owners, perhaps without taking into account distributive justice criteria, or because they further personal interests, sometimes of the rich and powerful etc.;
7. firms react to these demands sometimes by ignoring them; other times by undertaking cosmetic actions; and other times by participating actively in the process of negotiating social demands, by supporting them, manipulating them or blocking them, or using them as entry

barriers to possible competitors etc. Often, the attention paid to these demands by firms is for consequentialist reasons, based, for example, on a cost-benefit analysis. In consequentialist ethics, there is no moral learning: SR does not improve management quality;

8. the firm's and the community's interests are not necessarily aligned, because this way of conceiving SR excludes the existence of a shared interest, or any notion of common good. These relationships are often adversarial and are resolved by power games that produce equilibriums that become unstable when external changes happen (an economic recession, for example), or when the relationship has detrimental effects for one of the parties, or when it has changed its power to impose new conditions etc.;
9. SR can become a generic framework which does not take into account the needs and possibilities of specific players; it will become a regulation that will not elicit allegiances and loyalties, because "without developing a specific 'customized' meaning leading towards dedicated and useful actions for the people involved, CSR as an overarching notion does not make sense" (Cramer et al., 2004).

In short, the SR we see today is the outcome of the co-existence of models in different stages of evolution. In some cases, SR addresses the ethical treatment of the relationships between stakeholders, accepted by organizations with a greater or lesser degree of conviction, in accordance with criteria dictated by justice, solidarity and prudence, sometimes with the intervention of the law but never limited by it.

At other times, SR is broadened to encompass a series of generic responsibilities that go beyond interpersonal relationships, and in which society takes on a more significant role: it formulates its demands and expectations, it identifies the rights that underpin these demands, supports them and establishes pressure mechanisms, which transfer to organizations the responsibility for fulfilling them, and subsequently demands that account be rendered for their actions. This model is a natural continuation of the previous model, insofar as society identifies needs and ethical rights, and adds a social dimension to what was, until then, an eminently private relationship.

But here ambiguities may emerge that change the nature of SR. In postmodern society, the list of rights and, with them, the list of SRs have lengthened considerably. SR's substrate ceases to be ethical and now includes mechanisms for negotiation and manipulation, both by stakeholder groups and by firms; this changes the rationale for SR's bindingness, and may generate instabilities in the relationships between firms and stakeholder groups. The objective of achieving a fair, efficient relationship, in which both parties find common ground, gives way to the possibility of a consequentialist confrontation in which stakeholders pursue the maximum possible rent from firms while the latter defend themselves and try to keep their advantages; sometimes, the goal is to turn SR into a series of regulations, not controlled by the

State but by stakeholder groups, for exploitation or control purposes.

All of these alternatives are currently the subject of academic debate and practitioner implementation or criticism. As we have already said, SR is not a univocal concept, applicable to all organizations in all settings and at all times, because there is not a single concept of firm or organization, because the problems that must be addressed are different in each case, because the anthropological, sociological, political and economic assumptions are different, and because it seems wise to leave space for agents' actions, in an issue such as this where no-one has all the necessary information nor can anyone predict all the consequences of their decisions, and in which freedom of initiative will always be necessary.

Managers' interest in Social Responsibility

What can induce a manager to act in a socially responsible manner? Perhaps his moral or religious preferences but this is not an argument that can be generalized, in a multicultural society such as ours. The "business case" argues that SR has a positive impact on the financial results but we are still a long way from proving this, and the results of empirical studies performed on this subject are unlike to motivate business owners. We have already explained that, for many companies, the "social case", the demands made by society, becomes reduced to an exercise in cost-benefit analysis that does not motivate business owners either, although they may find it helpful when negotiating with stakeholder groups. But we still have two reasons in favor of full implementation of SR within organizations.

The first, the "management case", is that SR is an exercise in management excellence (Argandoña, 2012). A socially responsible manager tries to take into account all the impacts of his decisions on society, on his internal and external stakeholders and also on himself, including his moral learning; he knows his stakeholders and tries to understand what their stakes are, what their interests are in the firm, and their short and long-term reactions; he takes a long-term view; he has good risk management skills; he develops a culture founded on dialogue; he acts ahead of problems; he creates an atmosphere of trust among his subordinates ... All of this is included in the definition of an excellent manager.

This proposition may seem utopian but it is not really, if we understand that SR is a journey, not a destination; thus, we learn every day and we travel in the company of others: it is a personal and collective responsibility, shared and reciprocal. Obviously, excellence can never be attained, and there will be setbacks and failures, but we can try again each new day. And as there is not a single definition of excellence, each organization must seek its own journey toward SR, through reflection on its mission, the role it wishes to play in society,

its objectives, the responsibilities it acknowledges and the means it has at its disposal⁷.

The second reason is that excellence is an ethical issue (Solomon, 1992), and SR is too: “Social Responsibility should be understood as being part of what has traditionally been called moral obligations. These obligations cannot be imposed by others or by the State. The difference between legal and moral obligations does not imply that the latter are less important. It simply implies that there is no legal coercion to fulfill them. Nonetheless, the more significant the consequences for failure to conform to these norms, the greater the moral obligation to do so” (UNESCO, 2010).

And this takes us to another important issue: which ethics? It must be an ethical theory that is capable of autonomously generating self-enforceable norms, norms that “hinge on our concern with living a good human life, with models and ideals of human possibility”, that is, which do not depend on the existence of a law and the coercive power of the state, or “on social regulation and (...) to retributive and compensatory justice” (Watson, 1996) exercised through a game of rewards and punishments. This way, SR can be voluntary and, at the same time, normative, that is, enforceable for the agent.

There is an ethical theory that accounts for people’s moral learning and how this learning shapes their answers: virtue ethics, which addresses not only the decisions’ external outcomes (the firm that justifies its responsibility externally), but also improving people’s moral quality (management excellence from within).

In effect, the exercise of virtue has four dimensions (Alzola, 2015): 1) Cognitive: a virtuous person “perceives a situation rightly – that is, notices and takes appropriate account of the salient features of a situation” (Hartman, 2008); he grasps the problem’s ethical content, not on an abstract level through application of certain general principles, but on a concrete level, in the present setting and for the specific people affected by it; 2) Emotional: virtues are “dispositions not only to act in particular ways but also to feel in particular ways” (MacIntyre, 1984). This dimension reinforces the previous one: the problem does not leave the agent unmoved, his feelings drive him to act; 3) Motivational: virtues are dispositions that depend on the agent’s motivations, who feels committed to act resolutely in the specific situation in which he finds himself, even though the decision chosen may not appeal to him (Pérez López, 1993); 4) Behavioral: the virtuous person carries out the chosen action, because he has the necessary strength of will to overcome short-term pressures and the temptations that may turn him from his path (Alzola, 2012; Argandoña, 2011, 2014; Polo, 1996).

To summarize, an ethical manager has the possibility of becoming an excellent manager because he is developing the habits that enable him to make better decisions, both now and in the future, avoiding negative learning and, insofar as it is possible, facilitating positive learning, both in himself and in his organization and the people who depend on him⁸. And the main reason why a manager may try to always act ethically and responsibly is that it means that he is striving to be an excellent manager, and this will encompass moral and SR concepts, such as duty, professionalism, excellence, citizenship, ethical culture etc.

Conclusions

The concept of SR was developed first in the firm and later took root in non-profit organizations and in health care, with distinctive social objectives. SR is at the interface between organization and society: when viewed from outside, it is concerned with the organization’s impacts in society; when viewed from inside, it explains how reflection on the firm and its role in society and acceptance of the resulting responsibilities influence how the firm is managed.

The R for Responsibility is an ethical, retrospective, prospective, and attitudinal concept that links with the role of SR in management. The S for Social originally referred to the duties created by interpersonal relationships but, since then, has evolved towards a more active involvement of the society in identifying problems and proposing solutions. In this process, it runs the risk of becoming an interventionist, consequentialist, confrontational approach which, furthermore, does not offer useful ideas for excellence in organizational management. In this function, we find two mutually enhancing keys to SR: as a means for managing organizations excellently, and as an ethical responsibility, founded on virtues.

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⁷ This is not accepted by those who prefer an instrumental SR, both in the firm (SR is just another department that does not influence how the others work, or a cost that it is hoped will be offset by profits and reputation) and in society (SR is an instrument for solving collective problems, not for the people’s improvement).

⁸ The technical, economic and legal knowledge and abilities of a competent manager will also be necessary and acquiring them is also a moral duty for a management professional. In any case, ethics cannot be built on virtues alone; it also needs goods (seeking good in all actions) and norms (which limit the possibilities of error) (Polo, 1996).

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