10. MNEs, institutional environment, corporate social responsibility and sustainable development

Interactive Session

Managing crisis in times of corporate social responsibility: a proposition of five mechanisms through examples in the French and Brazilian oil industries

ABSTRACT

During events of crisis, ethical and critical elements often place the enterprise as guilty and its stakeholders as victims. Such approach may be exceeded, since decisions made by organizations during crisis may reveal their social commitments. Considering this, this paper explores organizational crisis as a motivation for the development of CSR within enterprises. To do so, two oil companies are analyzed: the French group Total and the Brazilian company Petrobras. This paper analyzes the tactical choices used by both companies to react to crises through CSR practices, bearing in mind their political, cultural and temporal contexts as well as their stakeholders. As a result, five mechanisms to respond to stakeholders' pressure in times of crisis emerge.

KEYWORDS: Crisis management, corporate social responsibility (CSR), stakeholders, oil industry, Total SA, Petrobras SA

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PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The study of crises as unexpected events and the numerous aspects that concern such critical situations have been a subject of interest in the literature for decades (Acquier et al., 2008; Bryson, 1981; Coldwell et al., 2012; Pearson and Clair, 1998; Pollard and Hotho, 2006). Lately, the emergence of certain theoretical and practical aspects such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) allow and, why not, *demand* a new perspective of analysis of crisis management so that it can cope with the expectations of these new ways of being a corporation (Kim, 2014). Therefore, this paper proposes to highlight CSR as a form of organizational response to unexpected events and a process of preparation for crises, being both ways for organizations to cope with current challenges in society while trying to cause positive impact.

As much as crises, corporate social responsibility (CSR) concerns complex fields, such as environmental protection, human resources management, safety at work and the relationship with local communities. At a moment of crisis, ethical and critical elements often place the enterprise as guilty and its stakeholders as victims. Such an approach may be exceeded, since organizations' decisions and actions to manage crisis could show their commitment to social concerns (Campbell, 2007), having therefore an important impact on the resolution of the critical situation. Considering these challenges, this paper aims to explore organizational crisis as a motivation for the development of CSR within companies. Its purpose is to observe how CSR practices can be employed during critical times, taking into account the pressure stakeholders exert on organizations. In order to reach this goal, two oil companies are analyzed: Total and Petrobras, the former being a French group and the latter a Brazilian

company. Through a qualitative approach, a database was built using information from the press. This database, allied with a conceptual framework, allowed analyzing the tactical choices used by Total and Petrobras to react to certain crises based on their concerns in terms of CSR practices. Such decisions were examined through a political, cultural and temporal context bearing in mind the role of stakeholders. As a result, five mechanisms to act in response to stakeholders' pressure in times of crisis were identified.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Crisis of conscience, economic crisis... The word "crisis" is often used to describe ordinary people's lives, problems within organizational contexts as well as economic and political affairs when critical and exceptional circumstances threaten previously known and established frameworks. In the organizational context, Hermann (1963) defines crisis as an unexpected or unanticipated event that threatens the most important values of the organization and requires a rapid response in a small space of time. Such delicate moment has a high potential of impacting the organization's reputation (Bland, 1998). Moreover, no matter on which level a crisis happens (international, local, organizational), it often expresses a certain inability of stakeholders to understand or manage such situations, even though it can be seen as something that is part of a process, a chaotic environment where actions and individuals interact (Thiétart and Forgues, 1997).

Stakeholders have a central role in such critical events, since they undergo the effects from it. In fact, crises can radically change these actors' level of importance from managers' point of view and, consequently, the priority given to their requests (Alpaslan et al., 2009). For that reason, as part of their responses to a crisis, companies need to recognize that customers, competitors and other members of their environment may be affected (Steffens et al., 2005).

From such perspective, the management of organizational crisis is a systematic attempt by the members of the organization, along with external stakeholders, to avoid crises or to succeed in effectively managing them (Pearson and Clair, 1998). Considering the importance of stakeholders in such events, another field in which those actors have a main role could be mobilized regarding crisis management: corporate social responsibility. In recent years, the concept of CSR has emerged as a global and inclusive concept which aims to embrace responsibility, responsiveness, and a full range of socially beneficial activities of companies (Carroll, 1991). It is also a multidimensional concept, whose originality lies in the combination of three different systems: the market, social control and compliance values (Pasquero, 2005). For Carroll (1979), CSR encompasses the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations of the Society regarding organizations' activities at a given time. In this definition, the author distinguishes four types of corporate social responsibility: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic (Carroll, 1991).

In this paper, social responsibility is seen as the compromise of an organization to contribute to the development of a sustainable economy by acting with employees, their families, local communities and the Society to globally improve the quality of life (Holme and Watts, 2000). It results in actions that are considered socially responsible insofar as the company allocates resources to these initiatives (such as money or labor), to improve the social well-being (Bhattacharya et al., 2009). CSR is thus, in general, a concept closely linked to the ethical and moral issues of the organization within its decision making process, as well as its behavior in terms of economic growth, environmental protection and social equity (Branco and Rodrigues, 2006).

Taking such aspects in consideration, businesses can be classified by the strategic behavior they adopt according to their motivations to be socially responsible (Capron and Quairel-Lanoizelée, 2010). These factors were divided into two groups: extrinsic ones, due to external

pressures, such as stakeholders' requirements, regulations or media visibility (Muller and Kolk, 2010); or intrinsic ones, related to managerial motivations (Heugens et al., 2008), to the organization's ethical values (Muller and Kolk, 2010) or to its economic and managerial interests (Capron and Quairel-Lanoizelée, 2010).

In such contexts, stakeholders demand organizations to be economically viable while assuming the consequences of their actions: thus, they are constantly facing difficult choices which economic, social and environmental consequences are constantly judged by the public opinion (Mercier, 2004). For that reason, companies must adapt to such requirements, which can be varied: some stakeholders will ask for profits while others will emphasize transparency, social issues or the environment (Clarkson, 1995; Svensson et al., 2010). To meet the expectations of their stakeholders, companies seek to develop socially responsible strategies for those individuals or groups of individuals who can influence or be influenced by the achievement of their goals (Freeman, 1984). In such a context, any lower performance than that expected may place the future of the company in a fragile situation (Svensson et al., 2010).

Considering such conceptual elements, this paper focuses on organizational crisis as motivation for the development of socially responsible actions by companies, which would have an important role on the management of critical situations. This paper aims to observe the links crisis may have with socially responsible practices given the pressure made by stakeholders within the organizational context of two oil companies.

THE RESEARCH GAP THAT IS ADDRESSED

What motivates the development of this paper is an interest on the increasing demand for responsible behavior from organizations nowadays, especially those with high-risks activities such as oil extraction. More specifically, it is interested in how such companies deal with

these socially responsible requests from their stakeholders in times of crisis, considering that such events (ruptures, accidents, etc…) are part of their risky business.

Moreover, this paper tries to contribute to the present literature on the relation between crisis and CSR. Despite the strong relation between these two fields within organizations (Pollard and Hotho, 2008), research about the direct relations existing between them are scarce (Kim, 2014; Kolk and Pinkse, 2006; Lagadec, 1981; Vanhamme and Grobben, 2009). Therefore, such literature should be given more attention since it concerns two major organizational issues nowadays: critical moments and responsible behavior. Therefore, crisis is an underexplored factor of the development of socially responsible actions, and this paper seeks to bring new elements to such discussion.

THE APPROACH TAKEN

In order to develop such research gap by employing the theoretical background exposed above, the following research question was formulated: *"How crisis can influence the practice of socially responsible actions in the organizational field of oil extraction?"*. To try to answer to it, two case studies were elaborated about two multinational oil firms: the French group Total and the Brazilian company Petrobras. The three most important cases of crisis for each one of these companies were identified based on the analysis of more than 6600 press articles, which allowed the elaboration of a database (Cohen et al., 2010; Earl et al., 2004). Such data was completed by internal and public documents concerning both groups, as well as interviews. From the analysis of such information, it was possible to observe the emergence of five mechanisms of crisis management through CSR.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH FIELD

This work is characterized by an empirical research on a qualitative approach (Baumard and Ibert, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The data collection has been conducted as follows:

- a review of literature which defined the theoretical basis of this paper concerning the concepts of crisis and corporate social responsibility. This part of the work was carried out by using literature in French, Portuguese and English in order to try to have the most complete view of these subjects under different cultural contexts as well as different theoretical perspectives;
- the elaboration of two case studies (Total and Petrobras) as well as three "sub-cases" for each one of these companies regarding the most cited (by the international press) critical events in their backgrounds. Those were carried out by having as basis a documental research, the analysis of articles mainly from Brazilian, French and North-American media as well as thirteen interviews conducted in French, English and Portuguese with crisis managers, crisis communication experts, employees and CSR managers coming from both companies as well as other stakeholders from the oil industry. Such material has been organized under a temporal perspective considering the date of creation of the companies, in order to try to better understand their trajectory and their main practices in terms of CSR and crisis management
- the elaboration of a database using articles from the international press through Factiva database (Earl et al., 2004; Mayrhofer, 2002) allowed the identification of the main critical events of both companies as well as their actions in terms of CSR to respond to them. Such procedure resulted in the collect of more than 2.700 press articles about Total and more than 3.800 press articles about Petrobras, taking in consideration a period going from the creation of those companies until 2010, which means more than 70 years.

This study can be characterized by a *longitudinal a posteriori* research (Forgues and Vandangeon-Derumez, 2007). The theoretical review, along with the documents collected and the interviews made during this study allowed establishing a data triangulation (Yin, 2013) to improve the measure and description precision. Also, it made possible to take into consideration our research question under two complementary angles (Baumard and Ibert, 2003) and therefore better analyze and interpret certain results.

Both case studies were conducted following an exploratory research parameter by the transcription and analysis of the interviews; the organization and analysis of the collected data according to a chronological order; and the identification and analysis of certain particularities of Total and Petrobras in the French and Brazilian contexts (Richardson, 1999). During the development of this paper, the analysis of the crisis events and the CSR strategies employed by these companies resulted in the emergence of five mechanisms of crisis management through CSR. Such type of analysis is inspired by the work of Weick (1993).

Following their identification, the socially responsible actions as well as the crisis management practices for each company were analyzed by a procedure in two steps (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010): 1) a data codification based on different CSR typologies from literature (e.g.: Clarkson, 1995; Martinet and Payaud, 2008; Muller and Kolk, 2010) and crisis typologies (e.g. Mitroff et al., 1987 ; Mitroff et al., 1988) in order to classify the socially responsible and the crisis management actions found in each company's background. In this first part of the analysis, crisis management practices and companies' motivations to practice CSR were considered and created the basis for the following; 2) if the objective in the first step was to analyze and classify the data ("what"), this second one focused on understanding the reason why these oil companies engage in different types of socially responsible actions in times of crisis ("why"). During such procedure, companies' motivations to adopt a socially

responsible posture and aspects that may influence this choice (e.g. temporal, political, and cultural) were taken into consideration.

MAIN FINDINGS

The main results of this research reinforce the relations between events of crisis and socially responsible practices. It was possible to identify a relation of interdependence between crisis and CSR activities, in which crisis management would depend on the socially responsible posture of the company, its actions and the good image resulting from them to improve the organization's image in critical times. In turn, the company's socially responsible posture would depend on crises (or rather, on their "non-occurrence") so that its efforts could be positively perceived by stakeholders, since each crisis event may represent new challenges to the image and reputation of the company.

Facing such stakeholders' pressure, and the influence it can have on the organizations' socially responsible actions when facing crises, companies may search not only to manage the critical event itself, but also to put into practice some mechanisms aiming to achieve other goals. That means that companies may try to manage crises while trying to use socially responsible actions as mechanisms to respond to their stakeholders' demands. In the case of this paper, and taking into consideration the oil context, five mechanisms were identified in which an organization would consider:

1. *Preserving a good image in order to keep its competitive advantage*

   Nowadays, very few subjects attract the sympathy of public opinion as issues referring to sustainable development and socially responsible practices (e.g.: Vanhamme and Grobben, 2009). Therefore, creating a good image based on such concepts vis-à- vis their stakeholders may represent significant competitive advantages for organizations (Branco and Rodrigues, 2006; Mohtsham Saeed and Arshad , 2012).

2. *Demonstrating a socially responsible behavior as it is expected by stakeholders*

During periods of crises, companies may respond to stakeholders' pressure with CSR practices in order to show the ethical behavior expected by such public (Raiborn and Payne, 1990). By doing so, they could legitimate their socially responsible postures toward their stakeholders (Branco and Rodrigues, 2008).

3. *Enriching the relationship with stakeholders by recognizing its own responsibilities*

In times of crisis, companies could use CSR to respond to the pressure imposed by their stakeholders by recognizing their own responsibilities regarding these actors, while accepting their power over the organization when it comes to strategic decisions (Frooman, 1999; Kolk and Pinkse, 2006).

4. *Using the crisis as an opportunity to change posture and CSR as a lever for such change*

In a crises context, companies could reply to stakeholders' pressure through CSR practices in order to change or improve their posture. To do so, crises could trigger certain changes to which the company's actions and the company's socially responsible reputation could serve as a leverage (Husted, 2005; Schnietz and Epstein, 2005).

5. *Improving its image as oil company*

In what concerns the oil industry, the use of CSR as a tool for crisis management and to respond stakeholders' demands, could help breaking the bad image oil companies have. Such reputation is often highlighted by some of those stakeholders, like the media, despite the company's effort to improve their image (Konings, 1997; Biloslavo and Trnavcevic, 2009; Du and Vieira Jr., 2012). For instance, despite the criticism, being on CSR rankings and publishing CSR reports may help having a positive impact within the general public (Escobar and Vedrenburg, 2011).

Regarding the empirical object of this paper, results have also allowed to define specific features that characterize a socially responsible posture in the organizational context of the oil industry, in which a tendency of taking pro-active actions regarding socially responsible performance (Clarkson, 1995) could be identified.

CONTRIBUTIONS

In theoretical terms, this paper aims to contribute to the field of crisis management in general, especially in what concerns the management of these events through the mobilization of CSR practices. By doing so, it provides evidence to the literature that focuses on the links between those two conceptual fields (Arevalo and Aravind, 2010; Jucan, 2011; Sigurthorsson, 2012; Souto, 2009; Tombs and Smith, 1995), given the fact that they are both present within organizations and that they may depend on each other, as it was observed. Also, this work highlights the relationship between crises and CSR from the perspective of stakeholders and may contribute to the literature as an analytical grid for specific studies on the oil context.

Regarding managerial aspects, socially responsible actions emerge from this research as key elements of crisis management and their impact on the company and its stakeholders. Thus, this paper presents operational socially responsible reactions to crisis in the form of the five mechanisms presented above that organizations could use in critical times. Due to the different themes they cover (e.g. communication, learning, stakeholders), such mechanisms could provide a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between CSR and crisis under various perspectives.

Finally, this paper may contribute to different conceptual fields since it considers the use of several theoretical elements in the context of crisis management, such as image and reputation, organizational learning and stakeholder theory. Also, it highlights the role of crisis

communication and its impact on social responsible reputation not only in critical times, but also in peaceful ones.

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