Pedagogical Brief: Corporate Partner Projects, Action Learning and Corporate Social Responsibility in the Online MBA

Alison Watkins and Carol Fisher
University of South Florida St Petersburg, St Petersburg, FL

Abstract

Civic Engagement, Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are learning objectives for many MBA programs but implementing real world projects in an online environment takes careful consideration. This paper describes the process of creating and delivering a consulting project for a completely online MBA class from initial data gathering, to project outline and final results. We share what worked in this process and its success from the faculty, industry partner and student perspectives. The bottom line, don't miss out on this type of opportunity even though it can involve a lot more work, the results are rewarding.

1. Introduction

Civic Engagement, Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are learning objectives for many MBA programs but finding real life industry projects that encompass these areas can be difficult (Roome, 2005). Consulting or 'Action Learning' can improve the effectiveness of the learning from many levels because students must quickly gain an understanding of group dynamics as well as provide useful results to a real customer rather than a faculty member (Smith, 1992). Can this type of project be incorporated into a completely online MBA course? This paper discusses the development and delivery of a live 'distance' consulting project to develop a Corporate Social Responsibility policy for a large wholesale IT distributor (referred to here as firm, ITD[1]).

The course, Leadership and Corporate Accountability is suited to project based learning because an objective for the course is:

> Students will be able to identify and assess a company's efforts toward social responsibility and address complex issues and present options for solutions.

In action learning students work with problems that have no correct answer (Pedler et al, 2005). However, consulting projects as action learning can be difficult because corporate partners want quick results regardless of semester structure. But on the academic side, scheduling and planning may require the project to be available six months to a year in advance. Fortunately, our project came together very quickly. At a meet and greet with ITD, the conversation turned to CSR which is an area of specialization in our MBA Program. ITD were just beginning to think about developing their own CSR Policy because many of their suppliers and customers were now requiring a policy to be in place in order to do business. ITD wasn't sure where to begin with their policy, this would be a perfect MBA Project, but would it be perfect for our online MBA class?

---

[1] The firm wishes to remain anonymous

The University of South Florida St Petersburg MBA Program can be completed online, on campus or a combination. The bulk of our students live within 40 miles of campus, but there are a few who live out of the region, state and even country, but for everyone, hectic hours at work and/or family commitments have made the online option extremely popular. The wide distribution of the MBA students means that students need to become proficient in remote team projects not just for schoolwork but because this mimics the real-world environment in which we all live and work (Fischer et al, 2013). Online collaboration has been identified as a key skill for modern business practice by the Business School at Oxford Brookes University.

2. In-class Consultancy Projects

Standard practice in an in-class consultancy project is for the firm to send an advocate or champion to meet with the students, present the project and answer questions. Then at the end of the term they usually return for final reports. The nature of this project made it more difficult. ITD did not have a CSR policy and still weren't sure they needed one and what few CSR type initiatives they had were the responsibility of a limited number of key executive team members, the rest had no clear understanding what CSR meant. There was no common knowledge background or common goal from the department or company perspective. From ITD's perspective, the project's purpose was two-fold: the student groups were supposed to help in the development of the strategy, but also our project development process, measuring current CSR engagement and interest level, would help them to broaden the executive team's understanding of CSR. The students developed initial plans for ITD to implement in phases. Another valuable aspect of having MBA students make CSR recommendations was the objectivity of a consultant and the currency of the information.

As we debated how best to present the perspectives of the 15 members of the executive team to the student, ITD decided that video and on-site interviews would not be a viable option, and we settled for recorded telephone interviews. This methodology had certain benefits: as stated some of the executive team were very knowledgeable on the subject while others were less so, the telephone allowed the executives to use notes while they spoke which would not have worked as well on camera. Research also shows that telephone interviews were shorter than in person interviews which would make the data collection process faster and be a benefit for the class who would have to listen to the recordings (Irvine et al, 2013). Individual interviews also provided executive team members the opportunity to ask questions and express department goals freely. ITD asked us to provide in advance a list of questions (see Appendix A) which they assigned to executive team members, some questions were answered by all while some were assigned to specific executives, for example, the Senior Vice President for Real Estate and Corporate Services had more insight on operational sustainability measures throughout their enterprise while the Chief Financial Officer was well versed in corporate giving and the CEO was able to speak about the long term direction of the industry. Each executive had the opportunity to use their expertise to suggest financially viable options and projects that their team members had the time and resources to complete. In the end, after 15 interviews, we had about ten hours of unedited audio, unedited so that the student groups could get an accurate picture of the environment. The recordings were available to review as often as necessary, providing another advantage over live interviews. (Sharp, et al,2006)

The student groups were assigned randomly. Random assignment does have its drawbacks; (1) group members may not have enough discipline variety making the project results one dimensional or (2) groups include those of differing abilities in teamwork or different motivation levels. As Petru et al,

2013, point out in their research, students unfamiliar with teamwork can seriously impact the final project. However at first glance, where students don't know each other, it appeared the best policy. However, post project feedback from students suggested that assignments completed earlier in the term, such as those using the discussion board, were good indicators of work approach and style and would make student-led group formation quite easy. For this project there were 42 students divided into 11 groups.

3. Project Description
The project was described to the students as follows:

> ITD Stakeholders recognize they need to develop a comprehensive Corporate Social Responsibility policy. You have been asked to provide a CSR strategy for the domestic headquarters with accompanying timeline and recommendations on resources and associated costs. You should approach this project as if you were hired as a consultant to the company. Your strategy should keep in mind at all times the strategic direction of the firm and the information provided by the company.

> You should seek a broad assortment of information to use as the basis of your reports that might include: financial statements or other reports issued by the firm, site visits, discussions with company employees, press reports about the company, or analyst reports on the company. The more data and viewpoints you can collect, the easier your reports will be to write. The final deliverable included a report and a presentation. The report required the following topics:

- The case for CSR
- Strategic Plan and Resource Allocation Necessary to Sustain Strategy, ranked
- Implementation Timeline and Commitment Level
- Summary and Conclusions

Additional resources included an ITD provided list of similar types of companies' current CSR practices and positions on various topics, identifying those companies the client felt demonstrated best practices. Examples of CSR best practices included a Corporate Citizenship Report, an Annual Sustainability Report and a Social Responsibility Report. The list also indicated whether there was a message from the CEO .

The students were also provided with some helpful resource links:
1. Just Good Business: The Strategic Guide to Aligning Corporate Responsibility and Brand, Kellie A McElhaney, http://admin.csrwire.com/system/book_excerpt_pdfs/311/original/book_info.pdf
2. Why Every Company Needs a CSR Strategy and How to Build It, Kash Rangan, Lisa A. Chase, and Sohel Karim HBS Working Paper http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6871.html
3. Strategic CSR, Kellie McElhaney, Sustainable Enterprise Quarterly, Volume 4, Number 1, September 2007
4. CSR An Implementation Guide for Business, Paul Hohnen and Jason Potts http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2007/csr_guide.pdf

4. Project Results
The students had only three weeks to complete the project because the course was run during a shortened six week summer session and we were delayed starting by the telephone interview schedule. Groups had the opportunity to ask follow up questions to the executives and while only a few questions were asked, these were happily addressed by ITD. The length of the final project was unlimited but most papers were between 15 and 25 pages. Each group also submitted a group presentation using BlackBoard Elluminate® . The best groups were invited to present to the ITD executive team in person, providing

another active learning experience and feedback from evaluators outside of their project group. The presentations also provided ITD an opportunity to ask questions of the consultant groups.

Their project submissions were all good as expected of MBA students, but of course some were better than others. Many tried to present the results as a research project as opposed to a consulting project regardless of the instructions. We discovered that the students need to be given more guidance beforehand on developing a concrete action plan. However some groups showed some outside the box thinking and detailed strategies that would provide ITD with a good starting position. Some of the reports included a timeline for CSR strategy assessment, an integration strategy, audits and reporting, and more specific topics such as the Electronic Industry Citizen Code of Conduct, Greenhouse Gas Protocol and Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. All of the reports included a stakeholder analysis and the estimated cost of adopting or not adopting the recommended strategies from the financial and public relations perspectives. The most important takeaway for ITD was that CSR is not about just one thing, for example electricity usage or support for non-profits, but that the company can implement strategies in many areas all under the CSR umbrella and that there are many external resources (some standards within their own industry) available to them to help them in their policy development.

Highlights of the students' recommendations include:

- Corporate governance, workplace diversity and fairness, philanthropy, and sustainability with measurement and tracking
- Stakeholder awareness of social responsibility initiatives, reporting CSR efforts to the public, waste reduction, conservation efforts
- Formalize its CSR strategy, publicize its activities, improve and measure current activities, align with international and industry standards
- CSR committee to lead initiatives and manage public relations, establish goals, verify and report, company-wide campaign
- Track waste, carbon emissions and use of recyclable materials, seek LEED certification for facilities

Two years later ITD has updated its website to expand the categories of CSR reporting to include:

- Independent third party to handle reported Ethics concerns
- An audit committee responsible for the integrity of financial reporting
- Additional oversight of the Board of Directors selection and salary

5. Conclusion

Would we do this type of project again? It required a lot of pre-work to set up and if we had not been lucky to find ITD at just the right time, it would have been impossible to implement. One lesson is that if a project like this becomes avaialble, do everything possible to change your syllabus to embrace it, and provide resources to guide students on the protocol so they may focus on the large volume of content available in analyzing CSR positions and options. Comments from the students about the real world project made all the organizational time worthwhile. Each student wrote a reflective essay on the experience, and most commented on the group dynamics of these types of project, one especially useful comment was:

> Since it is a growing trend in the business world, more remote presentations would be good. Some members who had only taken face to face classes were apprehensive over strictly online meetings. With practice these concerns will dissipate and people will be prepared for the changes brought by technology to the business world.

Group dynamics, work ethic and time management were all very important and caused the most issues. However students do recognize the importance of these skills in the workplace so their experience in class is very useful. As to satisfying the learning objective that we had set out, mission accomplished.

References

Roome, N., Teaching Sustainability in a Global MBA: Insights from the OneMBA, Business Strategy and the Environment, Bus. Strat. Env. 14, 160–171 (2005)

Smith, A. (1992), *Training and Development in Australia*, Butterworths, Sydney , .

Pedler, M., John Burgoyne & Cheryl Brook (2005) What has action learning learned to become?, Action Learning: Research and Practice, 2:1, 49-68.

Fischer, U., K. Mosier, J. Orasanu, , D. Morrow, C. Miller, B. Veinott, Exploring Communication in Remote Teams: Issues and Methods, Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting 2013 57: 309

Irvine, A., P. Drew and R. Sainsbury, 'Am I not answering your questions properly?' Clarification, adequacy and responsiveness in semi-structured telephone and face-to-face interviews, Qualitative Research 2013 13: 87

Andrade, H. G. (2000). Using rubrics to promote thinking and learning. *Educational Leadership*, *57*(5), 13-19.

Petru L. C., and H. Pluut Student groups as learning entities: The effect of group diversity and teamwork quality on groups' cognitive complexity, Studies in Higher Education, Vol. 38, Iss. 1, 2013

Sharpe, R., Benfield, G., Roberts, G., & Francis, R. The undergraduate experience of blended e-learning: a review of UK literature and practice.

Appendix A

Corporate Social Responsibility Phone Interview Questions

General Questions

What is your role in the organization?
How would you define corporate social responsibility (CSR)?
Where does your role in the organization intersect with the concept of corporate social responsibility?
Who do you consider to be stakeholders in your organization? Why do you believe CSR is important to these stakeholders?
Do you have current resources on staff to track and maintain this aspect of CSR?
How would you describe the culture at ITD?
Why is CSR important to ITD's business?

Environmental

Is there any information available to customers when they choose a shipping or fulfillment method, which provides any visibility of your organization's environmental efforts? If not, can this information be found on the corporate website?
Do you encourage your suppliers and customers to implement e-waste recycling programs?

Business Practice

What incentives do you employ to promote products or services that are more sustainable?
Is information regarding the sustainability of your products available to employees and customers?
Do you consider the sustainability of products when coordinating sales promotions?
How do you evaluate new vendors to ensure their practices are consistent with your organization's CSR policies?
How important is it to resellers that ITD has a solid CSR strategy?

Human Capital

How does your organization support ongoing development of the employees?
How critical is employee engagement to your organization? What methods to you use to gauge levels of engagement?
What systems do you employ to help maintain the wellness of your workforce?
How has your organization addressed the need for work-life balance?

Plant/Operations

What waste reduction strategies do you employ?
How do you communicate the waste reduction strategies to your employees?

External/Community

How do you define your community?
What community efforts do you currently support, and how were they selected?
How are funds allocated? (Discretionary funds or budget items?)
Do you support employee efforts within the community through programs such as an employer match and designated paid 'volunteer days'?

Diversity and Inclusion

Does your organization have a strategic diversity and inclusion initiative (D&I)? If so, how do you view the correlation between the CSR and D&I initiatives?
How important is having a D&I strategy to your key stakeholders?
Is there a direct correlation between the success of the D&I strategy to increased market share?
Does your organization support Supplier Diversity? If so, do you have a formal program in place and dedicated resources for the program?
What role does your organization's D&I strategy plan with respect to attraction and retention of employees?

Governance

Does your organization have currently in place a formal governance model, as it relates to CSR? IF so, can you share what that model is today?
How critical is governance to the success of the CSR initiative?
How important is governance to the key stakeholders of your organization?

Compliance

Does your organization currently have a formal compliance program in place?
If so, can you share how the organization enforces and creates awareness of the compliance program?
How critical is the compliance program to the CSR initiative?
How important is compliance/risk management to the key stakeholders of your organization?