

# **Virtue signalling: how individual actions can drive a newer, kinder form of capitalism**

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## **If you find yourself accused of virtue signalling, take it as a compliment**

Do you remember the Ice Bucket Challenge to raise awareness and money for motor neurone disease that went viral on social media in the summer of 2014? Maybe you support the Fairtrade movement, choose ethically sourced ingredients, shun "fast fashion" produced in poor working conditions and favour the companies that pay their workers a fair wage. Or perhaps you're one of the UK's 600,000 vegans because you worry about animal welfare and the effects of eating meat on our health and the environment.

These are just a few examples of causes that people decide to champion in order to change an issue they regard as a social problem. They also address one or more aspects of sustainability, whether health and wellbeing, community, climate change or some other. But not everyone will agree on what is a worthy cause and may also

think one person's action is futile.

This has led to the popularity of the term "virtue signalling", defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as ["an attempt to show other people that you are a good person, for example by expressing opinions that will be acceptable to them, especially on social media"](#). Trying to change the world is not always well received and "do-gooders" risk accusations of being sanctimonious sometimes attracting abuse, or even persecution. Can individuals really make a difference?

## **Corporate social entrepreneurs**

A [2017 article](#) in *Harvard Business Review* described how small group protests can become successful social movements and how the ability of ordinary individuals can create the groundwork for transformational change. For example, Rosa Parks and Greta Thunberg were not formally appointed leaders, but individuals whose actions inspired others to change, demonstrating an informal leadership. Social change was the starting point for my own study into notions of employee social responsibility and the possibility of activism in the workplace, driven by personal values.

The multinational company selected for my study had a reputation among its peers for its efforts in sustainability, despite not having any formally appointed ethics or corporate social responsibility (CSR) managers at that time. The findings revealed the majority of employees involved with one or more area of sustainability either participated because it was part of their job description or because they believed it would be a good career move. A small minority were engaged in progressing a social and/or environmental agenda either overtly or covertly, i.e. sometimes acting under the radar.

I called these people the "corporate social entrepreneurs". They championed all manner of initiatives, ranging from a company-wide environment project, to serial charity fundraising, to speaking up against racism on the factory floor.

These findings complement a growing stream of research in business and management on "identity work", developing earlier research that was published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1987. However, is the discovery of corporate social entrepreneurs entirely explained as social symbolic work? Or might these activities indicate the possibility of human character and agency, where character is enacted in a nexus of behaviours, relationships and structures?

## **Existential experiences**

Character was a key finding of the corporate social entrepreneurs who spontaneously recounted personal, transformational moments in their lives. These events amounted to momentous turning points that may have been triggered by studying CSR as part of an executive education programme, a serious family illness or bereavement, or a self-transcendent religious experience.

These existential experiences led to a seismic shift in the personal values systems of these individuals; one that had inspired their leadership in specific sustainability issues. Such actions underpin the responsible business model. They also form a basis from which to build stakeholder capitalism.

Many of the choices we make are a question of what we value, which can sometimes be political and contentious – as is the subject of CSR

Imperial Business School is a world-leading authority on business, not least because it embraces and encourages businesses to adapt to social change. We also recognise that the global sustainability movement indicates a growing demand for responsible business that is the way forward for the benefit of everyone. Many of the choices we make are a question of what we value, which can sometimes be political and contentious – as is the subject of CSR.

It is very easy to criticise and question the motives of individuals, organisations or institutions that are investing their resources in social responsibility and sustainability. But isn't it better that a social and/or environmental problem is actually being tackled, rather than worrying about self-interested motives? Human beings are complex individuals and real-life saints are very thin on the ground. Imperial is committed to transforming organisations to sustainability, despite their complexity and the tremendous political, economic, societal and technological constraints within which they operate.

The Leonardo Centre, underpinned by the Business School's strategy, aims to work with all our internal and external partners to co-create solutions to the global challenges facing society and our planet. So, the image of business that was personified by Gordon Gekko in the film *Wall Street* is way out of date. Keep up the good work, the world needs more virtue signallers.

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Her research focuses on the personal motivations and values that can drive corporate social responsibility and sustainability.