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Title:

Stakeholder Relationships in Engaging with Climate Change

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Abstract

Climate change has become one of the most topical issues of the 21st century for the civil society. However, as climate change is a relatively new phenomenon, companies might not yet have necessary resources to engage with it. Thus, a starting point of this paper is that companies need to engage with their stakeholders in order to develop innovative responses to global warming. The focus of this paper is on stakeholder relationships of Finnish companies proactively engaging with climate change. The objective is to analyse the roles of these stakeholders in the process of developing new services. As a result, two themes describing the stakeholder relationships are presented: (1) *Knowledge sharing* and (2) *Joint operations.*

Keywords: Climate change, stakeholder, collaboration, relationships

Introduction

Climate change has become one of the most topical issues for companies, governments, and the civil society in the 21st century. Climate change drives companies to consider the ecological sustainability of their operations, products and services, as the constraints of the environment and customer demands become increasingly pressing. Customers expect companies to offer ecological products and services, and governments pass regulations that compel both consumers and companies to look for environmentally sustainable solutions. As a result, companies are increasingly interested in developing simultaneously economically and environmentally sustainable services and products. However, as climate change is a relatively new phenomenon, and companies might not yet have concrete operations models, knowledge, or other required resources at hand in order to develop responses to climate change. Thus, a starting point of this study is that companies need to cooperate with other companies, individuals and organisations in order to gain necessary resources for creating and producing innovative responses to climate change.

This study draws on stakeholder perspective, which is used to understand the relationships companies utilise in order to develop innovative responses. Recent studies on stakeholder relationships suggest that related to complex issues, such as climate change, the stakeholders' interests are not directly linked to the focal company, but instead to the issue at hand (Roloff, 2008).

This paper is based on my ongoing PhD project. The study aims to contribute to our understanding of how companies engage with climate change in the Finnish context. The empirical focus is on a three-year low-carbon economy project 'Peloton'. The project aims to encourage companies to create products and services that lower the energy need of the Finnish lifestyle. Within this project this paper focuses on two participating companies that proactively engage with climate change by developing economically and environmentally sustainable services and products. This paper presents some preliminary findings. The objective of this paper is to analyse the stakeholder relationships in the process of developing environmentally friendly services.

This paper is constructed as follows. After this introduction, I present the theoretical framework of this paper, which is based on literature on climate change-company relations and on stakeholder approach. Next, I present the 'Peloton' project and the two empirical cases included in this paper. Then, the research data and the process of data analysis are described, followed by findings. To conclude, I discuss the findings, future directions, and the limitations of this study.

Theoretical framework

Climate change and companies

The issue of climate change is much debated by scientists, practitioners and scholars. In management literature seems to be at least some kind of agreement that the effects of climate change on business are likely to be substantial. The issue has been widely discussed in management journals focusing on corporate responsibility, sustainability, environmental management and ethics issues but also in main stream journals and publications, such as Harvard Business Review, European Management Journal, and California Management Review, in the last decade. Climate change has been studied in management literature by analysing climate change disclosure (Stanny & Ely, 2008; Reid & Toffel, 2009; Dawkins & Fraas, 2011), climate change regulation and policies (Bradford & Fraser, 2008; Eberlein & Matten, 2009), and business responses to climate change and corporate climate strategy (Hoffman, 2005; Kolk & Pinkse, 2004; Jones & Levy, 2007; Kolk & Pinkse, 2005; Kolk & Pinkse, 2007a; Kolk & Pinkse, 2007b; Okereke & Russel, 2010).

Climate change has become strategically important issue for managers and companies are adopting a more proactive approach to the issue by starting to develop market-oriented strategies to deal with climate change (Kolk & Pinkse, 2004; Kolk & Pinkse, 2007b; Dangelico & Pujari, 2010), as the effects of it will be extensive, unpredictable and irreversible. Some industries and companies are directly affected by climate change as a result of weather extremes or other outcomes (Linnenluecke & Griffits, 2010), while others indirectly involved through their stakeholders (Kolk & Pinkse, 2007b). Additionally, the prospective increases in energy prices strive managers to develop energy efficient and sustainable production systems, products and services. Apart from conserving energy, these innovations can reduce or eliminate the use of toxic agents, pollution and waste (Ottman, Stafford & Hartman, 2006; Dangelico & Pujari, 2010) and therefore serve as responses to stakeholder demands and legislation. Location-specific, industry-specific and company-specific factors affect corporate responses to climate change (Kolk & Levy, 2004) and motivations to develop sustainability include compliance with regulations, competitiveness and ecological responsibility (Dangelico & Pujari, 2010).

Stakeholder approach

Stakeholder approach has emerged since the 1980's as a new way to understand how value is created and traded, how ethics and capitalism are connected, and how managers can think about management so that these questions are addressed (Parmar *et al.*, 2010). Stakeholder approach has been presented to offer an alternative to the neoclassical theory of the firm, which states that the only duties the firm has to external others are financial (Key, 1999). On a general level, stakeholder approach can be seen on one hand as a theoretical framework and on the other hand as a practical way of thinking (Lovio, 2004). The concepts of stakeholder theory, stakeholder approach, stakeholder thinking and stakeholder management are commonly recognised and often used interchangeably in the literature.

Stakeholder theory concerns the nature of the relationships between organisations and their respective stakeholders and the processes and outcomes of these relationships for organisations and their stakeholders (Jones & Wicks, 1999). The principal idea of stakeholder theory is that a company's success depends on the management of its main stakeholder relationships (Freeman, 1984; Clarkson, 1995). Donaldson & Preston (1995) have presented three aspects of stakeholder theory: descriptive, normative, and instrumental. The stakeholder theory is descriptive, as it describes companies as constellations of cooperative and conflicting interests. The instrumental aspect means that it is a framework for examining the connections between the practise of stakeholder management and the achievement of company's goals. The fundamental core of stakeholder theory is normative, stating that stakeholders are identified by their interests to the company and that these interests are of intrinsic value. (Donaldson & Preston, 1995).

Stakeholder identification, analysis, and management

Stakeholder analysis was developed as a model to identify and assess company's stakeholders thereby providing tools for effective strategic management (Freeman, 1984). Consequently, much of the stakeholder literature, especially published in the 1980's and 1990's, focuses on defining the stakeholder concept and on identifying and categorising stakeholders. Stakeholder identification was founded on the recognition of stakeholders' stakes to the focal company (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003), and the stakes were seen as combinations of stakeholders' interests, values, expectations and claims (Näsi, 1995).

The stakeholder literature presents a number of valid models for stakeholder classification and for identifying important stakeholders. Typically stakeholders are categorised as internal or external stakeholders (Freeman, 1984; Näsi, 1995) or as primary and secondary stakeholders (Clarkson, 1995). Without primary stakeholders' support, such as that of management, investors, employees and customers, the company would cease to exist. Secondary stakeholders do not have a direct influence on the company, but they can exert indirect influence on the company (Frooman, 1999). Other classes include voluntary and involuntary stakeholders (Clarkson, 1994), and strategic and moral stakeholders (Goodpaster, 1991). The identification of key stakeholders has been paid special attention (Freeman, 1984; Savage *et al.*, 1991), as they are those individuals and groups exerting a direct influence over a company's actions and success. Savage et al. (1991) have claimed that stakeholders' significance depends upon the situation and that by assessing stakeholders' potential to threaten or to co-operate with the company, managers could identify supportive, mixed blessing, non-supportive, and marginal stakeholders.

The status of nature as a stakeholder seems to be vague. By definition, as a non-human actor who does not have voiced claims or expectations, nature and the natural environment are usually not granted a stakeholder status in the traditional models. Often, the natural environment is advocated by other stakeholders, mostly NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and activist groups. Driscoll and Starik (2004) have argued that the natural environment should be recognised as the primary and primordial stakeholder of the firm, as it has mutually dependent, exchange-based relationships with companies. The companies depend on local and global ecosystems for resources, and the authors have proposed that companies exchange more with the natural environment than with any other stakeholder. (Driscoll & Starik, 2004.) However, climate change can be defined as a case where the changes in the natural environment have a potential to affect business (Kolk & Pinkse, 2007b). Thus, company-nature relationship might become increasingly critical and direct.

Stakeholder analysis is used to facilitate stakeholder management. The traditional view of stakeholder management perceives company-stakeholder relationships as something that the company can and should manage (Freeman, 1984; Savage *et al.*, 1991). Effective stakeholder management requires that all stakeholder interests are catered for simultaneously, and therefore it is the task of management to balance out even the contradictory stakeholder claims with the company's interests (Freeman & Evan, 1990; Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Thus, the term stakeholder management typically refers to a company or a manager centred effort to govern stakeholder relationships (Roloff, 2008). As a result of the organisation-centric point of view most of the stakeholder literature has concerned companies' tactics and strategies for stakeholder management. Stakeholders in general are therefore pictured as individuals and groups that will either be harmful to the company (and thus should be governed) or as a resource for knowledge and other inputs that the company can use as it wishes for its own benefit. The underlying assumption is that companies and managers have the best knowledge and a right to exercise power over its stakeholders for the benefit of the company, as an effective and productive company will benefit the whole society (Banerjee, 2000). In addition, within the stakeholder management discourse it is often assumed that stakeholders' behaviour is based on rational aims to protect their interests, even though action can also be motivated by issues related to group's identity (Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003).

Stakeholder relations

Literature on stakeholder relations has mostly been dominated by research about relationships in conflict situations. As a result, in management discourse stakeholders are often regarded as groups that pressure companies to engage with environmental and/or social issues. Knudsen and Eriksen (1998) have suggested that the natural environment has been one of the most important reasons for company-stakeholder interaction during the last twenty years. In this paper, the focus is on collaborative company-stakeholder relationships.

Additionally, mostly the dyadic company-stakeholder relationship have been addressed (Rowley, 1997), even though Freeman and Evan already noted in 1990 that stakeholders do not only have relationships with the focal company, but also with each other. In 1997, Rowley presented a network theory of stakeholder influences examining between-stakeholder relationships and their consequences for the focal company. Rowley (1997) argued that a company does not respond to individual stakeholder demands, but rather to the simultaneous demands of multiple stakeholders.

Roloff (2008) has suggested that related to complex issues, such as climate change, the stakeholders' interests might not be directly linked to the focal company, but instead to the issue at hand. In these situations the stakeholder set can be more inclusive than the traditional models indicate, and these stakeholders under "normal" circumstances classified as marginal or non-stakeholders, may prove to be the key to solving the issue at hand.

In recent literature stakeholder relations, and stakeholder engagement, are depicted as creative and innovation producing, and as a potential source for transformative corporate change (Sloan, 2009). Stakeholder engagement is important to understand expectations and interests of stakeholders, to gain acceptance and build trust among stakeholder, and to gain "stakeholder capital" (Sloan, 2009).

Peloton project and empirical cases

Peloton

Related to climate change, the empirical focus of this study is on a Finnish low-carbon economy project 'Peloton'. Peloton is a three-year joint project of the think tank Demos Helsinki and the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, and it was launched in 2009. The objective of the project is to encourage companies and consumers into all-around, everyday energy consciousness. Peloton helps companies to create products, services and social innovations that systematically lower the energy need of the Finnish lifestyle, and the aim is to empower professionals to respond to climate change. This paper focuses on the participating companies that actively engage with climate change by developing energy-efficient products or services.

The project proceeds in three phases. In the first phase, in 2009–2010, workshops were organised for the participating organisations and individuals. The workshops were organised as two-day intensive courses which consisted of lectures, group work and comparing notes. The objective of these workshops was that the participants would develop together radical and innovative ideas on how to lower the energy usage of their customers and peers. The main idea of the workshops is that by working together with other companies, organisations and individual companies can produce new ideas to fight against climate chance.

In the second phase (2010–2011) the ideas from the first workshops are processed into actions by the participants, and new workshops are organised for new groups. In the third phase (2011-2012), the objective is that the participating organisations would develop their ideas into new products and services. In this paper, I focus on two case companies that participated in the first round of workshops in 2009–2010; case Ironmongers and case Lunch Restaurant.

Case Ironmonger's

It was presented in the workshop, that according to the Finnish Council of State, currently buildings' use of energy creates over 30 % of Finland's carbon emissions. The target for 2050 is 1 %. Thus, renovations are expected to increase substantially over the next years. The workshop participants agreed that this will have a significant effect on ironmongers and create opportunities for new business innovations.

After the workshop, the case company Ironmongers decided to elaborate the ideas they got from the workshop and as a result, they are currently working on a new service to be launched within the next year. The service will consist of energy consulting, selling of construction materials, and installation services. In order to create this service, the case company has trained salespersons on energy issues related to construction and renovations, advanced relations to suppliers and subcontractors. In addition, they have consulted other companies within the industry and climate change specialists in order to map the best practises and to gain knowledge about the issue.

Case Lunch Restaurant

A workshop for lunch restaurants and catering companies was organised in the first phase of the project, as approximately one fifth of private Finnish carbon emissions is related to food, and especially to raw materials. After the workshop, the case company decided that they need to serve more climate friendly food, and they need to inspire the customers to choose climate friendly options. The company developed a climate friendly lunch menu to be served at the personnel and student restaurants, organised a theme week around the issue, and continuously develops these ideas and services.

The greatest challenge in developing the climate friendly lunch menu was the lack of information concerning how producing food and eating affects global warming. However, as soon as these issues were solved, the case company had the required knowledge in order to reorganise purchases and lunch menus.

Data and methods

The research data was generated by interviewing the participants. I have used a semi-structured interview guide, which has been updated from one interview to another as necessary. The themes have focused on interviewee's reflections on the workshop(s), on their low-carbon projects and on their experiences of the project and the process of creating new products or services. In addition, the participants' personal and professional views on climate change and on business-climate change relationship were discussed during the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 50–70 minutes and was fully recorded and transcribed. The data used in this study consists of 5 interviews conducted in October and November 2010. In addition, I have collected material from the projects website (www.peloton.me) and from the case companies websites.

I chose qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Krippendorff, 2004; Elo & Kyngäs, 2007) as an analysis method for this paper. Qualitative content analysis is based on a systematic and objective examination of the empirical data, and is a widely applicable tool for organising and arranging various types of written documents. The aim is to attain a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon by organising and classifying the data by condensing words, phrases and the like into fewer content-related categories and, further, by focusing on themes and patterns (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007; Krippendorff, 2004).

I started the data analysis by reading through the data twice in order to become acquainted with it. While reading through the data, I wrote down the main topics present in the data. After that, I marked passages related to stakeholders involved in the process. Based on these, I identified the involved stakeholders and wrote down initial themes that reflected the relationships. Finally, I read through the text files again and reorganised the initial themes to better reflect the elements presented in the data. As a result, I have identified two themes that describe the role of stakeholder collaboration in the process of creating new services.

Findings

In this section I discuss the stakeholder relationships in the process of responding to climate change. I have identified two themes that describe the role of stakeholder relationships: (1) *Knowledge sharing* and (2) *Joint operations.* These themes were identified based on the common activities of the company and the stakeholder.

The first theme, *Knowledge sharing,* refers to collaboration with stakeholders that have essential information about engaging with climate change. In these situations, the stakeholders have real time information and knowledge, for example, about climate change in general, best and prevailing climate practises within the industry, or legislation. The participants stated that the knowledge and legal provisions related to climate change evolve continuously and, therefore, the companies need to rely on various sources in order to stay up to date. Within this theme, the participants discussed of such stakeholders as NGOs, public organisations, consultancies, and other specialists. These stakeholders were collaborated with in order to prepare training material, to ensure the quality of the new processes, and to find motivation and someone to back up their ideas.

These stakeholders had an interest in climate change, and were thus contacted and collaborated with in the process of creating new services. For both case companies, the think thank Demos was an important stakeholder that could provide accurate information about climate change and its effects on the industry also after the workshops. In addition, in the planning phase Demos had a role as inspirational consultants.

The second theme, *Joint operations*, refers to stakeholder relationships with stakeholders that act as partners in implementing the climate friendly activities. The participants discussed of such stakeholders as other companies within the industry, subcontractors, and public organisations. In this type of collaboration, the aim is to operate with subcontractors or other companies in order to carry out the operations in a cost-effective way. In addition, the aim can be to collaborate with neutral stakeholders to increase the credibility of the service or product. Neutrality refers to the absence of market interests. Within this theme, the participants stated that credibility in climate friendly operations is hard to achieve, as the issue of climate change and how companies can respond to it, is still very vague and no certain measures have been introduced in their industries. Thus, having neutral stakeholders with climate interest involved in the project is considered to bring credibility to the company and its products or services. The participants stated that the challenges of collaboration are related to finding suitable partners, to managing the stakeholder network and to brand management. Brand management refers to collaboration with partners that have a good image and that can be trusted to as partners. Interestingly, the participants expressed that it is for the benefit of the less-known stakeholders with climate interests to collaborate with the large companies. They stated that in doing so, the stakeholders will gain public recognition for their work, which in turn affects the credibility of their joint operations. These stakeholders had an interest in the business operations of the company, and not so much on the issue of climate change itself.

All in all, these two aspects of stakeholder relationships – knowledge and operational abilities – are not separate issues. Ensuring the availability of know-how – related to either knowledge or operational implementation, or both – is essential in creating and implementing climate friendly services or products.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyse the stakeholder relationships in the process of developing new climate friendly services. The analysis focused on companies that proactively address the issue of climate change. As a result, two themes describing the stakeholder relationships were presented: (1) *Knowledge sharing* and (2) *Joint operations.*

Related to stakeholder collaboration, the stakeholders that have knowledge and information about climate change and about how to respond to it, have an interest to climate change as an issue. Operational stakeholders may share this interest as well, but it is not necessary. However, as the collaboration is based on the objective to respond to climate change, those stakeholders become indirectly involved in the issue as well. As a result, the stakeholder networks and the interests of these stakeholder become varied and wide-ranging. In future studies, it would be of interest to analyse how companies respond to climate change from an issue-based network perspective.

This research is not without limitations. First of all, the results presented in this paper are based on preliminary findings and are still very incomplete. Secondly, the data used in this paper is still limited as I am currently in the process of data generation. Thus, this paper should be considered as a work-in-progress. To continue my project, I will generate more data and continue the analysis.

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