

Corporate social responsibility can backfire if employees don't think it's genuine

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A new study looks at what happens when a company's employees view its efforts related to corporate social responsibility as substantive (perceived to be other-serving and genuinely aimed at supporting the common good) or symbolic (perceived as self-serving and performed primarily for reputation and to enhance profits).

Provided by Wiley

Using three samples aggregating more than 1000 working adults, researchers developed and tested a measure of substantive and symbolic [corporate social responsibility](#). The measure indicated that when [employees](#) attribute corporate [social responsibility](#) as substantive, benefits accrue to the individual and to the organization as a whole; however, when viewed as engaging in greenwashing, self-serving engagement in corporate social responsibility backfires: employee reactions are negative, and they may do less for the organization and label it as a "taker" rather than a "giver."

"We already knew that a company's corporate social responsibility engagement produces positive outcomes. Now however, we see that a company jumping on the corporate social responsibility bandwagon just for show or greenwashing doesn't fool its employees," said Dr. Magda Donia, Assistant Professor at the University of Ottawa's Telfer School of Management and lead author of the *Applied Psychology: An International Review* study. "A company perceived as disingenuous undermines its own effort. When it comes to corporate social responsibility, the focus should be on the giving, not the getting. The best way to win is to truly give and let visibility and marketability follow."

More information: Magda B.L. Donia et al, Employee Attributions of Corporate Social Responsibility as Substantive or Symbolic: Validation of a Measure, *Applied Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/apps.12081](https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12081)

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