

Are Middle Managers an Obstacle to Corporate Social Policy Implementation?

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The demand upon U. S. corporations to provide both money and manpower in the correction of social ills has gained considerable momentum in the last five years. While some corporations have been conspicuous leaders in devising corporate social responsibility programs, many more have experienced extreme difficulty not only in stating appropriate social responsibility policies, but more particularly in translating those policies into manageable programs. Even formulation of the statement of appropriate corporate social responsibility policies is not an easy task, given the conflicting standards under which corporate executives are supposed to operate. For example, local community leaders in many metropolitan areas have attempted to place considerable public pressure on corporations to engage in community improvement programs, equal opportunity hiring and retraining, and procurement from minority-owned enterprises. At the same time, corporate executives are beginning to face pressure from the financial community and from stockholders who question the extent to which corporate management has the legal or moral right to divert funds to corporate social responsibility programs which have little, demonstrated, long-term posi-

tive profit impact.

The frequently quoted rationale of top management for investing in corporate social responsibility programs has been that, in the long run, such programs will have a material benefit on the future earnings of the corporation. To a large extent, this claim has been a mere statement of faith—not fact. Society in total seems to have reached a consensus in feeling that corporations can no longer pursue financial goals exclusively, but must also engage in corporate social responsibility programs. According to the *ORC Public Opinion Index* seven out of ten Americans “believe that business has an obligation to help society, even if it means making less profit.”¹ That proportion of Americans endorsing corporate help for society has grown significantly since 1967. Indeed, even among stockholder households, the prevailing attitude is that “corporate social responsibility should take precedence over maximization of profits.”² Thus, it would seem that the extreme polar positions in the debate that raged a few years ago over the propriety of corporations addressing social ills has become moot. Moreover, federal and state governments have been active in passing legislation which has prescribed appropriate standards for corporate performance in areas such as pollution control, equal opportunity hiring

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and promotion, and employee safety, such that the primary philosophical debates about these matters are now irrelevant.

The significant remaining issues facing U. S. corporate executives concern policy implementation rather than policy formulation. The manner and the speed of such implementation can cause severe demands on operating (middle) management. The task for top management in gaining compliance among operating managers in implementing corporate social responsibility policies can be a major one. For example, two authors, Ackerman (1973) and Collins (1974) have argued that implementation of corporate social responsibility policies can be effected only after the policies have been institutionalized in the form of specific budget and performance controls for operating management. A study by Collins and Ganotis (1972) for a company with annual sales of roughly a billion dollars found that top-level executives were generally more likely than operating executives to believe that corporate commitment is necessary to solve our social problems. In two specific areas, namely pollution control and minority hiring, operating executives displayed less enthusiasm than top executives for making significant corporate commitments. Indeed, Collins and Ganotis tended to characterize operating managers as potential saboteurs of corporate social responsibility programs. They concluded that, "not only may there be a lack of incentive for such managers (successful social programs are rarely rewarded as straightforwardly as successful profit-oriented activities), but middle-level managers may not share their chiefs' attitudes toward the corporation's responsibility."³

The findings of the Collins and Ganotis study, conducted in 1972, could of course be unique to the single company they studied. But even if the results ob-

tained by Collins and Ganotis were representative of all U. S. corporations, it could be that with the passage of a few years, the enactment of legislation, and the considerable public debate over corporate social responsibility which has ensued, any variance in attitudes between top management and operating management has disappeared.

With these thoughts in mind, this study was planned as a pre-test of a larger survey of Fortune 500 corporations. The pre-test study also served to partially replicate the study by Collins and Ganotis plus examine implementation problems in additional areas of corporate social responsibility that have taken on importance since their study. The chemical company selected for study is roughly the same size as that studied by Collins and Ganotis. The respondent sample size in the Collins and Ganotis study was considerably larger than that reported here. However, the response variances for the two management groups studied were not great, thus larger sample sizes would not have affected the conclusions reported here.

So as to insure confidentiality, a return envelope accompanied each questionnaire distributed to operating and top executives. Top executives participating in the study numbered thirty-one (virtually a complete census), and included not only corporate-level executives, but division-level managers having profit-center responsibilities. A stratified sample of thirty-three operating managers provided an appropriate cross section of functional specializations and geographic locations.

The questionnaire included two paragraphs of instructions plus questions composed in two basic formats to assure efficient completion. Most of the questions used a Likert-type five-point scale with polar points labelled agree/disagree or very important/very unimportant. The second question format allowed

executives to simply check those items which applied to their company.

The Results

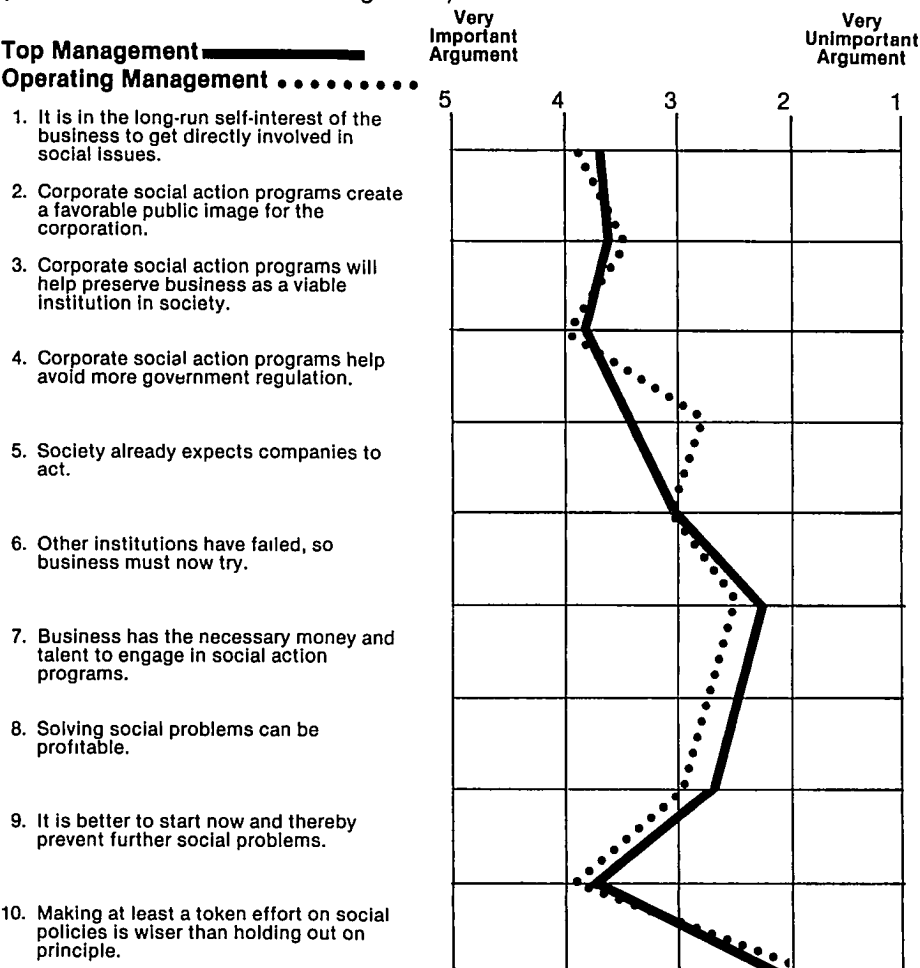
The principal areas of inquiry in this study had to do with (1) arguments for

and against corporate social responsibility involvement; (2) attitudes toward specific implementation problems; (3) the current corporate priority given to selected social responsibility areas; (4) the extent of perceived difficulty in im-

TABLE 1

RESPONSES FROM EXECUTIVES CONCERNING ARGUMENTS FOR CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Various spokesmen have set forth several arguments for and against corporate social action for responsibility policies and programs. *In your opinion, how important are the following arguments in favor of corporate social responsibility?* (Circle a number beside each argument)



*Statistically significant difference in mean scores at .05 Level.

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plementation experienced by the corporation within those same areas of social responsibility; and (5) specific obstacles confronted by managers in attempting to implement corporate social responsibility objectives.

Arguments For and Against Corporate Social Responsibility Involvement

Managers were asked to indicate the extent of importance they attach to ten common arguments for involvement in corporate social responsibility programs and ten common arguments in opposition to such involvement.

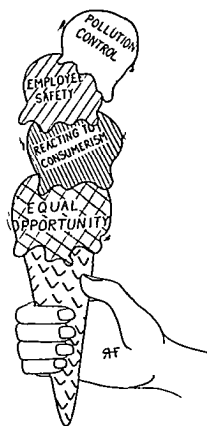
It can be seen from Table 1 that for only the fourth of ten arguments in support of corporate social responsibility does there exist a material difference in attitudes between the two management groups as to the importance of the arguments. The same consensus is found when examining reactions of the two groups toward the ten arguments against corporate social responsibility (Table 2). Moreover, looking at both Tables 1 and 2 it can be seen that neither management group is systematically more sympathetic to corporate social responsibility arguments. The scalar differences in the averages for the two management groups are very small. Thus, the mere use of larger sample sizes would not change the basic conclusion that the two management groups see eye-to-eye regarding commonly recited arguments for and against corporate social responsibility.

Priorities Attached by Managers to Corporate Social Responsibility Areas

Before examining the attitudes that managers express toward specific areas of corporate social responsibility, it is instructive to examine the extent to which they perceive high priority being attached by their corporation to solutions of problems in each respective area. Managers were asked to indicate those few areas where they thought their corporation was placing highest priority.

Where a manager saw more than one area receiving high priority, the questionnaire instructions allowed him to check more than one area.

It can be seen from Table 3 that top management sees equal opportunity hiring and promotion as receiving highest priority, as do the operating managers. In general, there is relatively close agreement concerning priorities for the remaining areas as well. However, the percentages of operating managers seeing high priority attached to consumerism, natural resource conservation measures, employee safety, and community improvement programs are distinctly lower than among top managers. Nevertheless one would seem to be justified in concluding that remarkably high consensus does exist between the two manager groups as to corporate priorities.



Attitudes Regarding Specific Social Problem Areas

With relatively few exceptions, the consensus between top management and operating management that was found to exist as to corporate priorities among certain social responsibility problem areas is also reflected in the attitudes that the two management groups have toward those same specific social responsibility problem areas. In particular, it can be noted from Table 4 where the

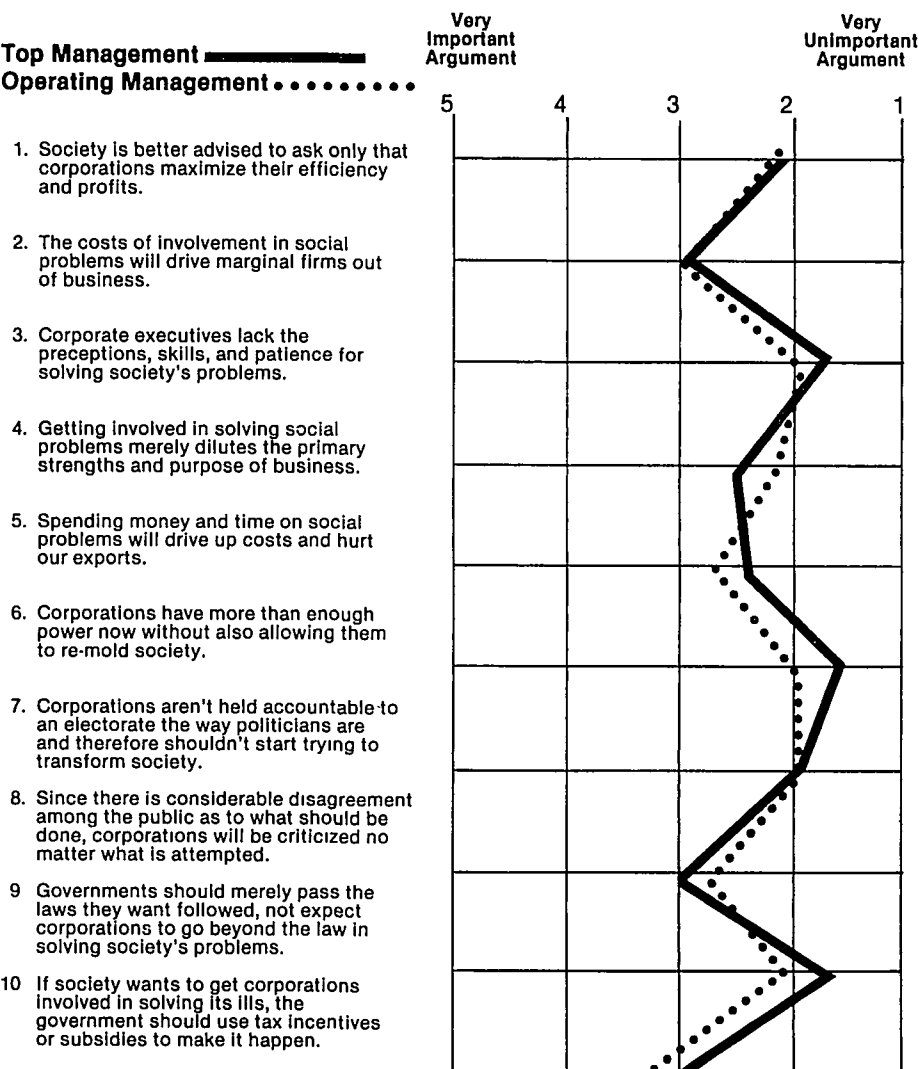
social responsibility areas are listed in the same order priority as emerged in Table 3, that the degree of consensus

between operating managers and top managers is very close in the areas where highest priority is being given,

TABLE 2

**RESPONSES FROM EXECUTIVES CONCERNING
ARGUMENTS AGAINST CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

In your opinion how important are the following arguments against corporate social action or responsibility policies and programs? (Circle a number beside each argument)



*Statistically significant difference in mean scores at .05 Level.

namely equal-opportunity hiring and promotion, employee safety, pollution control, consumerism, and natural resource conservation measures. Indeed, it is only in the area of corporate "law and order" where two statements seem to draw contrary attitudes. The first of those statements has to do with whether or not the socially responsible corporation has an obligation to follow both the letter and the spirit of laws, regulations and executive orders, even if the corporation will be damaged in the process. It is interesting to note that operating managers are somewhat less inclined than top managers to hold the corporation to adherence of the letter and spirit of the law where the corporation might be damaged. The other area of difference in opinion concerns the extent to which managerial jobs require a person to compromise his ethics or morals to some degree. While both manager groups take exception to that statement, the extent of disagreement with it among operating

managers is somewhat less.

There is a decided tendency for managers of both groups to report a "middle of the road" attitude toward the statements within each problem area. Indeed, there are only three such statements for which the response pattern of the two management groups breaks outside the scale points two to four on the five-point scale. The first such statement is "Businesses have an obligation to society to adopt effective anti-pollution equipment, even when not legally required to do so." Both management groups express strong agreement with that statement which would seem to be highly supportive of anti-pollution efforts generally. But note, however, that both groups also agree with the statement, "Corporations don't bring about pollution. Ever increasing consumer demand does." Thus, the two management groups seem to be saying that although corporations do not actually bring about pollution, that is no excuse for failing to combat it. The

TABLE 3
CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AREAS OF GREATEST
PRIORITY AS PERCEIVED BY MANAGERS
(Percent of Respondent Managers*)

	Top Management	Operating Management
Equal Opportunity Hiring/Promotion	83.9%	87.9%
Employee Safety	83.9	69.7
Pollution Control/Environmental Impact	80.7	78.8
Reacting to Consumerism	51.6	36.4
Resource Conservation Measures	48.4	33.3
Responding to Voluntary Governmental Guidelines	29.0	39.4
Community Improvement Programs	25.8	6.1
Foreign Investments	9.7	6.1
Minority Procurement	3.2	12.1
Average	46.2	41.1

All Differences are Statistically Significant

*Multiple Mentions Allowed

second statement for which both management groups express strong agreement is, "Industry has long exhibited restraint by conserving the world's natural resources for the benefit of future generations." That attitude on the part

of this corporation's management would undoubtedly draw strong fire from conservation proponents. However, since the corporation in this study is not in an extractive industry, its management may well have a somewhat detached view of

TABLE 4
ATTITUDES REGARDING SPECIFIC SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY PROBLEM AREAS

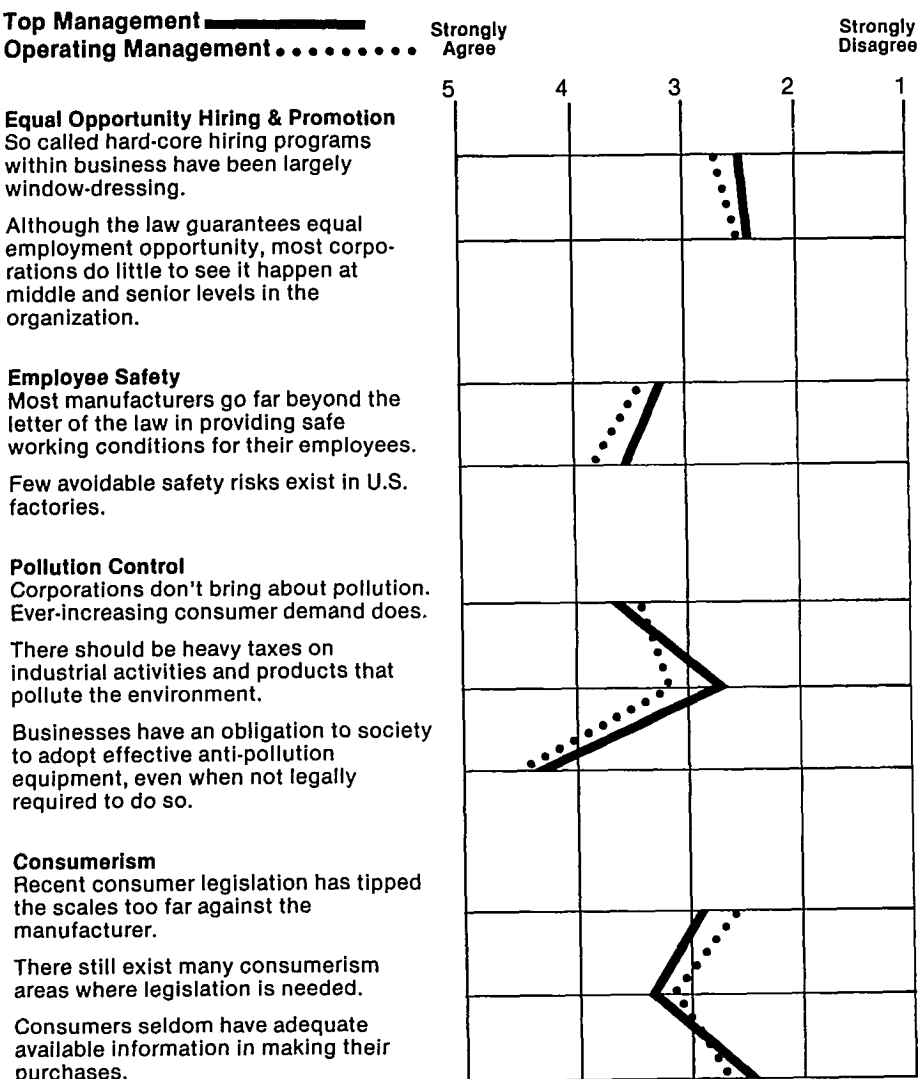


TABLE 4 (Cont'd)

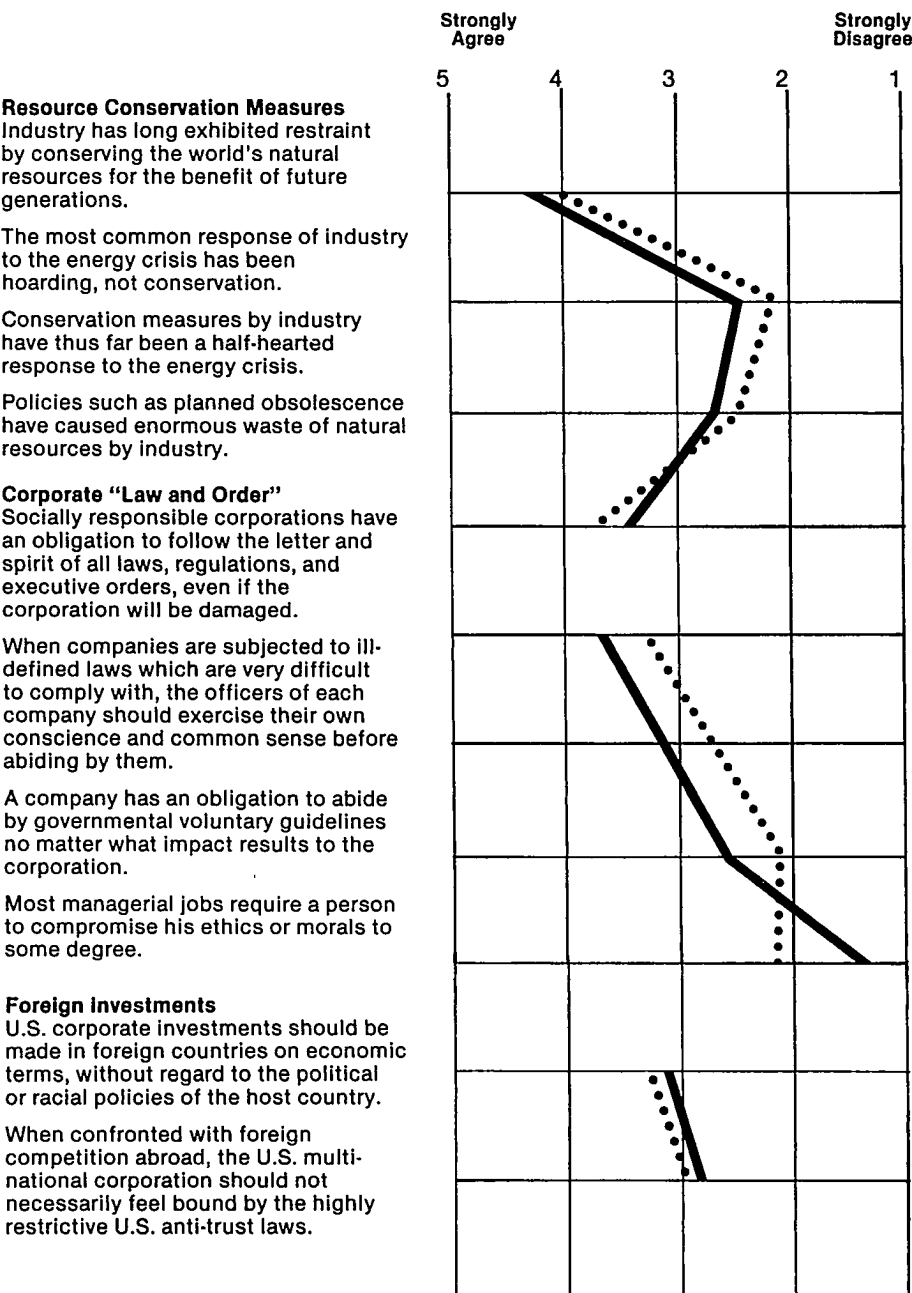
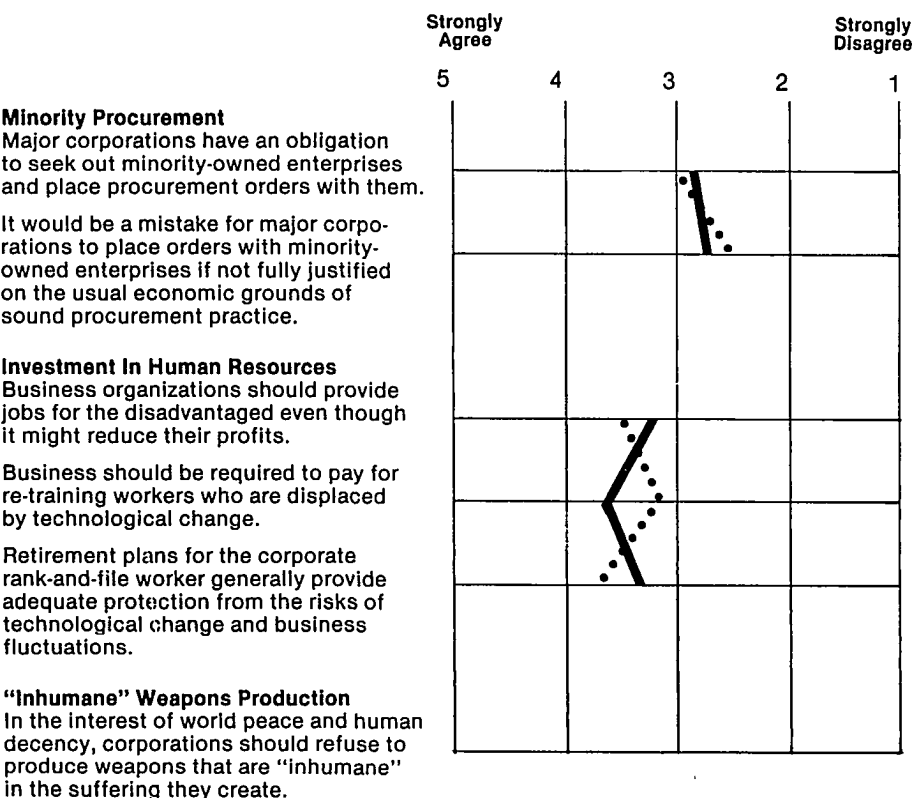


TABLE 4 (Cont'd)



*Statistically significant difference (.05 level)

the extent to which American industry has indeed depleted America's once abundant natural resources. However, it could be that managers are essentially saying something similar to what was stated under pollution control. Namely that it is consumers who place demands on the world's natural resources, failing to exhibit restraint, not industry. Whatever the case, the two management groups are in general agreement that policies of planned obsolescence have caused enormous waste of natural resources by industry and therefore the managers apparently are not blind to the role that U. S. industry has played

in the consumption of the world's resources. The third statement where strong opinions were found has already been discussed, namely that statement concerning the extent to which managerial jobs require a person to compromise his ethics or morals to some degree. Thus with the exception of these three statements, the "middle of the road" attitude of managers seems to pervade all ten corporate social responsibility problem areas.

Manager Involvement in Policy Formulation

The corporate social responsibility

areas listed in Table 5 are ordered in the same sequence as the priority attached to them by top management as shown in Table 3. Note, however, that even while top managers single out equal opportunity hiring and promotion as having highest priority, the involvement of top management in policy formulation in areas such as pollution control, employee safety, consumerism, and responding to voluntary government guidelines is actually greater. As one would expect, a smaller proportion of operating managers than top managers reports involvement in establishing policy within

the social responsibility areas studied. The only two exceptions seem to be equal-opportunity hiring and promotion and employee safety.

Manager Involvement in Implementing Policy

In comparing responses of top management concerning involvement in policy formulation with responses concerning involvement in implementation of policy, (Table 5), we find a curious pattern for equal opportunity hiring and promotion. Namely, twenty-nine percent of top managers expressed involvement

TABLE 5
INVOLVEMENT BY MANAGERS IN VARIOUS
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AREAS
(Percent of Managers Claiming Involvement by Area)

	Establishing Policy		Implementing Policy	
	Top Management	Operating Management	Top Management	Operating Management
Equal Opportunity Hiring/Promotion	29.0%	30.3%	80.7%	84.9% *
Employee Safety	41.9	45.5	58.1	75.8 *
Pollution Control/ Environmental Impact	41.9	12.1 *	54.8	51.5 *
Consumerism	41.9	12.1 *	51.5	42.4 *
Resource Conservation Measures	29.0	15.2 *	38.7	45.5 *
Responding to Voluntary Governmental Guidelines	41.9	21.2 *	54.8	45.5 *
Community Improvement Programs	29.0	12.1 *	32.2	60.6 *
Foreign Investments	9.7	3.0 *	35.5	9.1 *
Minority Procurement	9.7	3.0 *	35.5	30.3 *
Average	30.4	17.1 *	44.2	49.5 *

*Statistically Significant Differences

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in establishing policy governing the area while eighty-one percent claimed to be involved in policy implementation. In general, the same difference seems to hold true for all the other areas as well, namely that a larger proportion of top management expressed involvement in implementing policy than in establishing policy. This finding may suggest that the top executives of the corporation studied have passed beyond the policy formulation stage and are now devoting considerable energies to securing implementation. Such involvement by top management in implementation would seem to bode well for securing genuine progress toward achieving goals already established.

As one would expect, Table 5 demonstrates that a larger percentage of operating management is involved in the implementation of policy than in the establishment of policy. One notes further that the extent of involvement among operating management relative to top management in the implementation of policy differs by a statistically significant level for each and every area. The differences, in most cases however, are not large in a practical sense. Perhaps only for foreign investments (in countries with objectionable racial or political orientations) and community improvement programs are the differences major, and for what would seem to be obvious reasons. One would not anticipate that domestic operating management would have much involvement in the implementation of corporate policy governing investments in nations with objectionable racial or political orientations. Thus, it is not surprising that only nine percent of them report such involvement, compared to thirty-six percent of top management. The second area where major differences exist in the proportions of the two manager groups expressing personal involvement, namely community improvement pro-

grams, can also readily be interpreted. The complexity of control and direction governing implementation of policy in an area such as community improvement programs does not ordinarily constitute a major burden for top management. Most corporations handle such programs routinely, with easily prescribed donations of personnel time or merely monetary donations. Thus, the burden of implementation falls disproportionately upon operating management, as opposed to top management, in most corporations.

In general, one would conclude that the involvement of top management in the implementation of policy within the corporation studied is high and generally follows the same rank ordering as was expressed for the priority devoted to the area in Table 3. However, for operating management, the same consistency does not emerge. While operating managers do report high implementation involvement in top priority areas such as equal opportunity hiring and promotion, employee safety, and pollution control, their involvement in community programs is disproportionately high relative to the low corporate priority established for such programs. While that incongruity may be inescapable, it should suggest to top management that there is a need to at least reassess the extent of operating manager involvement in community programs, given top management's concurrent need to secure implementation in social responsibility areas of higher priority.

The Relationship Between Manager Involvement and Attitudes Toward the Corporate Social Responsibility Area

One might predict that the extent of involvement by a manager in formulating or implementing policy in an area of corporate social responsibility would be reflected in his attitudes toward that area. That is, to have had experience in policy formulation or implementation

may cause a manager to have greater positive or negative attitudes toward that particular problem area. While it is not possible from this study to examine attitudes toward corporate social responsibility before and after manager involvement with the area, rank order correlation coefficients were calculated between responses to attitudinal questions and extent of manager corporate social responsibility involvement by area.

Very few significant correlation coefficients emerged involving either the establishment or implementation of policy in the two managerial groups. Out of 84 correlation coefficients calculated, only nine were statistically significant at the .05 level. By mere chance, one would anticipate obtaining four significant coefficients. Of those attaining statistical significance none was higher than —.3967 and most were in the vicinity of .3 or just slightly above the cut-off for statistical significance. Thus it does not

seem reasonable to conclude that managerial attitudes toward corporate social responsibilities are significantly a function of their extent of personal involvement in implementation or establishment of policy. Nevertheless it is curious to note that of the nine significant correlation coefficients, all but one are negative. Meaning that manager involvement in establishing or implementing corporate social responsibility policies does not seem to create a positive attitude toward the area, although conceivably an existing negative attitude could have been ameliorated.

Correlation Coefficients Between Manager Attitudes Toward Corporate Social Responsibility Areas and Corporate Priorities

A second correlation matrix was constructed concerning the extent to which the attitudes of top management and operating management toward each of

TABLE 6
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AREAS OF GREATEST DIFFICULTY
TO CORPORATIONS AS PERCEIVED BY MANAGERS
(Percent of Respondent Managers)

	Top Management	Operating Management
Equal Opportunity Hiring/Promotion	29.0%	39.4% *
Employee Safety	9.7	9.1
Pollution Control/Environmental Impact	41.9	33.3 *
Reacting to Consumerism	6.5	9.1 *
Resource Conservation Measures	16.1	15.2
Corporate "Law and Order"	22.6	12.1 *
Community Improvement Programs	9.7	18.2 *
Foreign Investments	19.4	0 *
Minority Procurement	12.9	21.2 *

*Statistically Significant Differences

the corporate social responsibility areas were related to the extent of corporate priority devoted to the area. That is, the attitudinal questions from Table 4 were related to the expressed priorities among areas of corporate social responsibility as indicated in Table 3. For top management, none of the twenty-one correlation coefficients calculated was statistically significant. The same result was obtained among data on operating management. Thus one is forced to conclude, instead, that there appears to be no necessary and meaningful relationship between attitudes by top management or operating management within the company studied toward corporate social responsibilities and the extent to which the managers see high corporate priority being attached to the corresponding social responsibility areas.

Perceived Difficulty in Addressing Corporate Social Responsibility Areas

Both executive groups were asked to indicate the extent to which they saw the corporation as having difficulty in appropriately addressing specific corporate social responsibility areas. As can be seen from Table 6, where the corporate social responsibility areas are listed in terms of priority (as in Table 3), the areas given highest priority are not necessarily those in which managers report greatest difficulty. For example, although top management sees pollution control as providing the greatest difficulty, the priority attached to it ranked at only number three. Employee safety, which was placed in second highest priority, is seen by top management as posing relatively little difficulty. Reacting to consumerism was given fourth highest priority, yet only about seven percent of top management see it as posing any great difficulty.

Looking at the responses from operating management in Table 6, it can be noted that, except for two of the nine

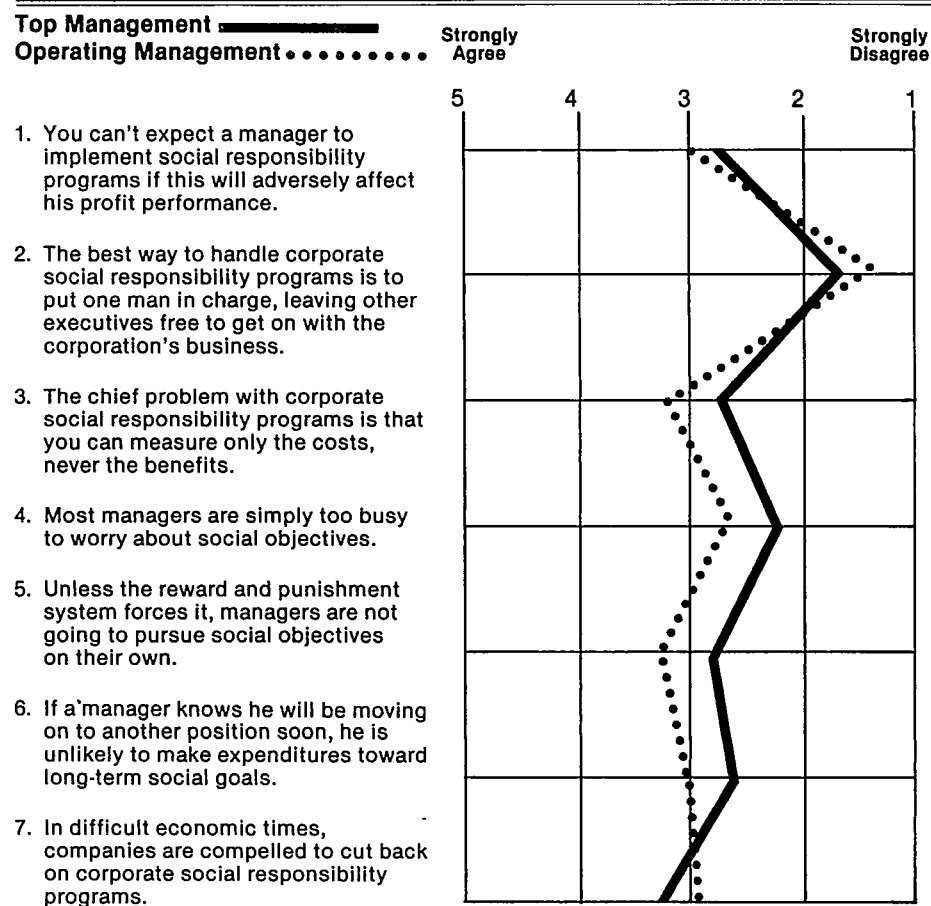
areas, operating managers do not perceive the extent of difficulty in addressing the respective corporate social responsibility areas the same way top managers do. Undoubtedly, this is partly due to a difference in responsibility mix, with operating managers having the more structured tasks to carry out. Nevertheless, one might anticipate that operating managers would carry a greater burden than top managers, since it was noted (from Table 5) that the corporation studied appears to have moved past the policy formulation stage to the policy implementation stage. The apparent inconsistency aside, there appears to be little association between perceived difficulty and the priority designated by the corporation to specific areas of corporate social responsibility.

Obstacles to Implementation

While attitudes toward corporate social responsibility may help or hinder progress toward appropriate formulation of policies and their implementation other factors may be at work as well. Such factors have to do with what many managers might characterize as the "realities" of spending money toward achieving rather nebulous goals. Thus, a series of statements were phrased (Table 7) to draw manager reactions to implementation obstacles. As can be seen in Table 7, the two management groups within the corporation studied seem to be in close agreement concerning the implementation obstacles listed. However, with the exception of the sixth statement, the opinions of both groups are very much "middle of the road." The second statement concerning appropriate organization for handling corporate social responsibility programs drew a reaction from the two management groups which makes clear that they regard corporate social responsibility programs as something that cannot be undertaken in isolation from the day-

TABLE 7

OBSTACLES TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY POLICIES



to-day operations of the business.

Given that the reactions of the two management groups to the obstacles of implementation commonly recited in the literature exhibit neither strong agreement or disagreement, perhaps the most correct interpretation of Table 7 is simply that managers do not see the statements as being particularly material to the real issues of gaining implementation of meaningful corporate social responsibility policies. That is, the management of the corporation studied may well have

progressed beyond the point where the classic obstacles or excuses as listed in Table 7 have any particular significance.

Conclusions

The results of this pre-test study suggest that the attitudes of top management and operating management within American industry concerning corporate social responsibility issues may not differ markedly. Naturally, a broader survey of corporations, such as that planned to follow this pretest, is needed before that

conclusion can be adequately supported.

Given the substantial efforts made within this pre-test to insure confidentiality of responses, there is little reason to suggest that respondents were not speaking their minds. On that basis, most of the attitudes expressed are supportive of corporate social responsibility arguments and counter to frequently cited implementation excuses or obstacles. Thus, for advocates of corporate social responsibility efforts, these preliminary results would seem to minimize any suggestion that the personal attitudes of managers are counter to the frequent officially proclaimed good intentions of most American corporations.

Since the results of this study stand in sharp contrast to those of earlier studies, particularly that by Collins and Ganotis (1972), some attempt toward interpretation of the major differences in results is in order. To repeat what was stated earlier, although the sample size in the study was considerably smaller than that used by Collins and Ganotis, that difference alone could not have brought about the close agreement in opinions between top management and operating management in the corporation studied. What other explanation can be offered? Certainly one explanation might be that the two corporations are somehow massively different as to their personnel makeup, organizational structure or industries served in such a way that for the corporation studied by Collins and Ganotis there existed a genuine separation in corporate social responsibility opinions between the two management levels while in the corporation reported in this study such a separation, for whatever reason, did not possibly exist. This, however, seems to be a rather implausible explanation in that the diversity of corporate social responsibility policies investigated in this study would seem to impact virtually any corporation in the

United States, regardless of the personnel the corporation attracts, the organizational structure, or the industries served. While it is naturally true that certain kinds of problems such as pollution control do not affect all companies equally, the top priority problem in the corporation studied here was equal opportunity hiring and promotion which has indeed affected all U. S. business enterprises in a very profound manner. Thus, it does not seem reasonable to suggest that the company studied by Collins and Ganotis could possibly differ in major ways from the corporation studied here, such that attitudes of operating and top level management should necessarily be different.

A more plausible explanation has to do with the mere passage of time. That is, since 1972 there has been no end of discussion in business periodicals and academic literature about corporate social responsibility policies, philosophical justifications for funds expenditures and the related measurement and control problems. Secondly there has been some significant legislation passed in areas such as equal opportunity hiring and promotion, employee safety, and pollution control. Thus, the open-ended character of debate concerning corporate social responsibility in earlier years such as 1972 has now been channeled toward rather standard answers to standard questions. In particular, corporate managers have found it necessary to establish policy in several areas of corporate social responsibility and have made such policies known to their operating managers and first level supervisors through operating directives or merely articles in corporation publications. For example the Ralston Purina Company publishes an annual review of the company's efforts in various areas of corporate social responsibility, along with providing statements of general policy. Other companies, such as IBM,

have gone so far as to build in corporate social responsibility budgeting and control standards as a part of the operating manager's general position responsibility.

The lively debate that once went on concerning corporate social responsibility may have been quieted as pragmatic-minded managers have tired of the debate and have been pushed by both governmental action and general public opinion into establishing corporate social responsibility policies which seem to be workable compromises between the necessary quest for profits and a newer emphasis on making the corporate sector a partner in the solution of social problems.

NOTES

1. Opinion Research Corporation, "Mounting Public Pressure for Corporate Social Responsibility," *ORC Public Opinion Index*, (Princeton, New Jersey, January, 1974), p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
3. John W. Collins and Chris G. Ganotis, "Is Corporate Responsibility Being Sabotaged by the Rank and File?" *Business and Society Review/Innovation*, (1973), p. 88.

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3. John W. Collins and Chris G. Ganotis, "Managerial Attitudes Toward Corporate Social Responsibility," presented at the NACBS Symposium on "Corporate Social Policy in the Dynamic Society," Graduate School of Business, University of California, Berkeley, California, (November 9-11, 1972).

