Promo Version

Negative Data and the Ethical Considerations of Burying a Project to Hide the Data From Stakeholders: "When Courage Fails Us"[1]

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Abstract: A significant theory of corporate social responsibility is the Stakeholder Model. Within this model, entities make decisions that impact all stakeholders. Occasionally, the decision that is made ultimately impacts one stakeholder differently than another. Negative data by its very definition is seen as problematic for any organization as it pertains to its stakeholders. When confronted with the data or the potential of the data being negative to desired outcomes or directions of programs, an organization's leadership may be faced with an ethical conundrum. Should the data be included and shown to all stakeholders? Or should the data be buried and avoided even to the point of engaging in questionable conduct in the management of paperwork and record keeping?

Keywords: business ethics, organizational management, ethical research, corporate social responsibility, stakeholder model.

1. Introduction

Organizations that avoid the discovery of, hide or avoid negative data may not be doing themselves any favors and further organizations that are in the educational and business realm may bear a responsibility to report all facts to the stakeholders which could include students, investors and ancillary beneficiaries. This should be a founding reality for every organization and in fact according to a recent article on collecting scientific data the authors would like to emphasize the following quotation: "the responsibility lies with…the scientific community, to recognize the importance of negative data and to make sure it is made public".[2] From an

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1. The following case is based on real events at a learning institution. The names of the individuals and the indicated institutions in question have been changed and in some cases for simplicity sake, a couple of the actors have been merged into one individual.
2. Nimpf, S. & Keays, D. A., (2019), *Why (and How) We Should Publish Negative Data*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, https://www.embopress.org/doi/epdf/10.15252/embr.201949775. Accessed March 16, 2023.

organizational standpoint, the courage not only to recognize the negative data is necessary but the willingness to pursue and allow discovery of the negative data should also ensue and not be suppressed or changed. From an ethical standpoint, the suppression of review can be seen as being no different than the doctoring or altering of data to maintain a pre-supposed viewpoint.[3] With regards to teaching business ethics in the classroom, it is also significant to allow students to be sensitized to various ethical dilemmas so that they become more attuned to developing a matrix of considering all issues in making an ethical decision and avoiding "moral quicksand" when it occurs.[4] A perspective on Corporate Social Responsibility known as the "stakeholder model" indicates that business decisions have a number of intertwined considerations including social, ethical and balancing concerns regarding the various stakeholders in the business. Furthermore, stakeholder theory implies that every decision creates a "cost" on stakeholders.[5] The following case study, based on events that occurred at a for-profit educational institution in the MENA region explores the failure of institutional management to support projects that might yield critical data about its operations and programs. Furthermore, the case study looks at the ethical considerations of putting the brand's reputation and name above the truth of the product. In the end, stakeholders are to benefit from a superior product and if negative data yield indications of area of improvements, then it is the responsibility of the organization's management to at a bare minimum collect, study and reveal the data to responsible stakeholders. From the instruction of business ethics stand point, this case study serves an example of organizational conduct that would need to take into account balancing stakeholder concerns as well as presenting an area where a conversation about best practices and ethical decision-making practice can come into play.

2. Case Scenario for Student Discussion

Rene McDaniel was an independent researcher seeking to gauge the efficacy of teaching computer science methods to undergraduate learners. The purpose of the survey was also to help complete McDaniel's work in a Master's program for Lodono Universidad-Colegio (LUC). McDaniel created a survey as part of an overall research project. The project was designed to collect the essential data and, based on that data, extrapolate findings with the goal of improving organizations that were in the market of teaching computer science to their

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3. McCann Ramirez, N. (2023), "DeSantis' Surgeon General Doctored Covid Vaccine Study. Rolling Stone". https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/desantis-surgeon-general-doctored-covid-194053655.html. Accessed April 26, 2023.
4. Pretince, R. (2004), "Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases", *Journal of Business Ethics Education*. Vol. 1 Issue 1.
5. Hartman, P., DesJardins, J., & MacDonald, C. (2024), *Business Ethics: Decision Making for Personal Integrity and Social Responsibility*, 6th Ed. McGraw Hill. p. 51.