

The Mediating Role of Employee Relations Climate in the Relationship Between Organizational Learning and Social Responsibility

Mahdi Aliyari¹

1. Management Department, Business Management major, Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Today, organizations face a rapidly changing environment, leading to numerous challenges that compel them to optimize their resources and assets. A crucial response to these changes is the heightened focus on human resources, which have become recognized as the most vital capital in gaining a competitive edge. By leveraging their greatest asset—human talent—organizations can significantly enhance productivity, with one effective strategy being the promotion of employee engagement. This research aims to explore the mediating role of the employee relations climate in the relationship between organizational learning and social responsibility. Utilizing a descriptive-correlational method, the study analyzed data through structural equation modeling. The findings suggest that increasing global interactions and deeper engagement with surrounding environments motivate organizations to undertake activities that foster competitive advantages, helping them adapt to complex and dynamic conditions. Many companies indicate that competitive pressures from globalization are intensifying, and an organization's capacity to manage these pressures hinges on its effective utilization of human resources. The ethical climate refers to the collective understanding among employees about appropriate behaviors and the management of ethical dilemmas within the organization. Concurrently, the employee relations climate emerges from shared beliefs about expected ethical conduct, influenced by the organization's policies and leadership. This climate plays a pivotal role in shaping employees' ethical decisions and behaviors, creating a significant challenge for human resources as industries and knowledge demands evolve.

1. Introduction

In today's markets, organizations need to manage their relationships with stakeholders to create value and mutual benefits (Horisch et al., 2014; Freudenreich et al., 2020). Freeman introduced the concept of stakeholder theory, which identifies various organizational interests and underscores the importance of not only profitability but also understanding and attending to the impact that corporate activities have on diverse audiences.

Stakeholder groups are influenced by the behavior and actions of organizations. However, it is important to recognize that these actions also affect the stability of companies (Silva et al., 2019). In fact, organizational sustainability is heavily reliant on the ability to meet stakeholder needs and understand their perceptions (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). Therefore, if companies want to be successful in the medium to long term, they must identify a comprehensive range of these needs and be able to build sustainable relationships with their stakeholder base (Dmytriyev et al., 2021).

Currently, stakeholder demands regarding the social impact of the organizations they interact with have intensified. These groups expect companies to respond to social needs that go beyond economic considerations (Carroll, 1999) and to avoid engaging with institutions that cannot meet their expectations for social behavior (Fatma & Rahman, 2014; Fatma et al., 2019; Maignan & Ferrell, 2004). Organizations need shareholder support for survival and success in the market. Accordingly, introducing corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies has become a critical element in responding to social demands.

Most existing research on CSR seeks to analyze how these policies affect the perceptions of external stakeholders—such as customers, governments, and markets in general (Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2021; Toussaint et al., 2021). However, internal management and the impacts of these actions remain relatively unexplored (Blanco-Gonzalez et al., 2020). Organizations can implement diverse CSR initiatives and, considering the critical role of employees in organizational performance and success, introduce socially responsible practices into their management that enhance corporate knowledge and culture (Barna-Martinez et al., 2019; Padrini & Fry, 2011). Implementing social responsibility initiatives, such as encouraging healthy relationships between employees and managers or considering employee interests, fosters trust within the company (Blanco-Gonzalez et al., 2020; Scherer et al., 2013).

Companies implement corporate social responsibility in various ways, but this effect is likely significant in their financial outcomes (Barnett & Salomon, 2006; Orlitzky, 2013; Wang et al., 2016). Socially responsible organizations will enhance their social capital and professional credibility (Del-Castillo et al., 2002), which are intangible assets critical for long-term survival in any sector. Researchers have demonstrated a relationship between CSR practices and better financial performance (Surroca et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2010). Furthermore, employees will feel a greater commitment to the organization, and they will be committed to organizations they perceive as socially responsible if these organizations adopt responsible actions (Barrena-Martinez et al., 2012; De & Delobbe, 2012; Kim et al., 2010).

Several authors support the positive and significant relationship between the proper implementation of CSR policies and a company's legitimacy (Bansal & Clelland, 2004; Campbell, 2007; Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2019; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Legitimacy is defined as the perceived fit of an organization within a social system in terms of rules, values, and beliefs (Durkheim, 2017). These entities are accepted by the systems in which they operate because their actions align with societal values and norms, and therefore create value for every stakeholder (De Martino, Blanco-Gonzalez, & Prado-Roman, 2010; Miotto et al., 2020). Organizations with a high level of legitimacy tend to be more successful and sustainable over the long term due to the social support they receive within their sector compared to organizations with a lower level of legitimacy (Glozer et al., 2019; Zamparini & Lourati, 2017). Legally compliant companies have better access to vital resources and develop relatively unrestricted, as they avoid continuous scrutiny (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Suchman, 1995). Therefore, the proper implementation and maintenance of this intangible asset is a vital step towards improving organizational performance.

Organizations can actively manage their perceived level of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) and thus must identify their stakeholders' expectations to continue receiving social support (De Martino et al., 2021).

Given current sustainability concerns and social impact, companies must adhere to socially responsible behavioral principles to be considered legitimate entities and justify their right to exist (Kim et al., 2014). Therefore, the implementation of CSR initiatives enhances organizational legitimacy (Banerjee & Van der Waal, 2018; Khan et al., 2015).

In this context, the primary aim of the present research is to understand the importance of CSR practices in employee management and to assess the positive and significant impact of these initiatives on organizational legitimacy (measured through pragmatic, ethical, and cognitive dimensions). Thus, we expect to answer the following questions: (1) Are companies that implement socially responsible human resource management more legitimate? (2) Which types of legitimacy (pragmatic, ethical, cognitive) are most affected by sustainable human resource practices? and (3) Which human resource policies have the most significant impact on legitimacy?

The aim of this research is to provide contributions related to the literature as the internal management perspective on CSR has not been sufficiently explored. In fact, most existing research in the field of CSR has focused on initiatives developed for the benefit of external stakeholders or the impact that these policies have on the perceptions of external groups. This study specifically covers socially responsible internal management practices. Furthermore, the method used here to measure the impact of socially responsible human resource management on three types of legitimacy is innovative. Most researchers have empirically analyzed legitimacy as a unidimensional construct (e.g., Schu et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2012), while this research incorporates the three dimensions of legitimacy proposed by Suchman (1995)—pragmatic, moral, and cognitive. Since each of these dimensions is achieved through various elements, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the impact of CSR on legitimacy.

Learning constitutes a core foundation of today's society, with two very important and vital factors being management—which is considered the most crucial element for the survival, growth, prosperity, or demise of an organization—and people, who are the primary operators of any organization. There is no doubt that the success of any organization or group largely depends on the competence of its leader. On the other hand, the survival and growth of organizations in today's rapidly changing world require the ability to respond timely and appropriately to ongoing environmental changes. Among these, only organizations that focus on and emphasize organizational learning can anticipate the necessities and environmental changes in a timely manner and continue their survival. Given the aforementioned points, organizational learning can enhance individual performance, job satisfaction, and teamwork within the organization. Organizational learning is an important aspect of an organization that influences organizational performance; it is not merely about the need to adapt to current selections but is also the best factor for accelerating organizations in today's unpredictable world. The enjoyment of significant advancements in knowledge and technology and the expansion of business domains have led not only to leadership influencing organizational learning but also to its impact on organizational performance.

Effective communication between various components of an organization is a key element of successful management, and establishing a communication system is one of the three main executive functions essential for the survival of an organization. Benis and Nanus (2000) stated that providing meaning through communication is one of the four important leadership strategies. Effective communication with individuals and understanding their motivations enables successful management in fulfilling leadership duties. Proper communication is the only way for different individuals to achieve mutual understanding. Every manager in an organization must be able to present ideas clearly and accurately through their writing, speech, and presentations in order to succeed in establishing effective communication. Communication enables managers to achieve understanding with their organization's members. It is a mechanism through which human relationships are generated; all forms of thought and the means of transmitting and preserving them over time and space are developed on this basis. If communication is not conducted properly, it can lead to disorder within the organization. Therefore, the roots of individual, organizational, and social problems can be traced back to a lack of effective communication and the misinterpretations and miscommunications that arise. Thus, it can be said that establishing proper communication is essential for managers for various reasons, including coordinating and managing their time, performing planning, organizing, directing, leading, and effectively controlling the organization. An organization is essentially a model of a

communication network, as it establishes cohesion and links among its different and dispersed components through communication. In other words, in the absence of a communication system, an organization is viewed as a collection of disparate and individual elements with no cohesion or linkage toward achieving specific goals (Dorrani & Saberi, 2011).

Furthermore, communication of various CSR initiatives is essential for achieving suitable organizational learning and effective communication. These findings may provide relevant guidance for managers, as they equip them with the tools to identify the most relevant practices of socially responsible human resource management to achieve high legitimacy. This information expands the knowledge base concerning sustainable internal management and legitimacy. Therefore, the aim of the present research is to investigate the mediating role of the climate of employee relations in the relationship between organizational learning and social responsibility.

2. Research Method

The research method of this study is applied in terms of purpose and descriptive-correlational in terms of type, conducted using a field approach. The statistical population of the study consists of all employees of ... totaling 500 individuals. According to Morgan's table, the sample size is 217, and to ensure the return of the questionnaires, 200 questionnaires were randomly distributed among them. The data collection in this research combines library and field methods. The researcher used Persian and Latin sources from libraries, articles, necessary books, and the World Wide Web to gather literature and background on the subject.

- There is a significant relationship between organizational learning and social responsibility.
- There is a significant relationship between the climate of employee relations and social responsibility.
- The climate of employee relations has a significant mediating role in the relationship between organizational learning and social responsibility.

For the analysis of the research data, the questionnaire data was first entered into SPSS software. Then descriptive analyses were conducted to describe the sample and research variables, and the necessary tables and charts were created, with indicators of central tendency and measures of dispersion calculated. To determine normality, the skewness-kurtosis test was used; if parametric conditions were met, Pearson correlation coefficient tests and multivariate regression analyses were employed to test the research hypotheses. The structural equation modeling method using LISREL 8.80 software was used to evaluate the effect of the mediating variable.

3. Findings

In this section, the findings of the research are reported. The findings must include tables, charts, figures, and present statistics and figures in Persian, as well as descriptions and analyses of the data.

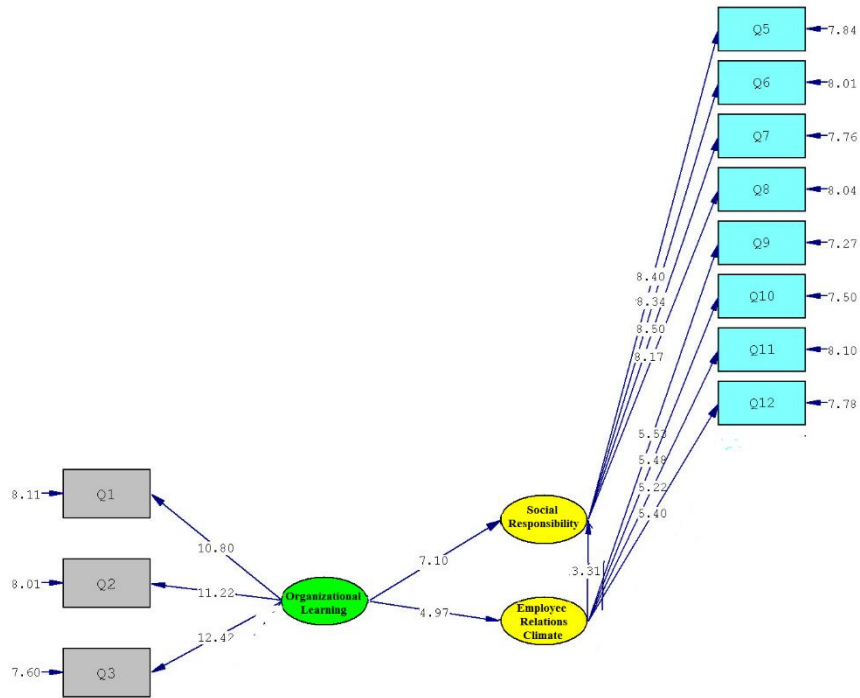
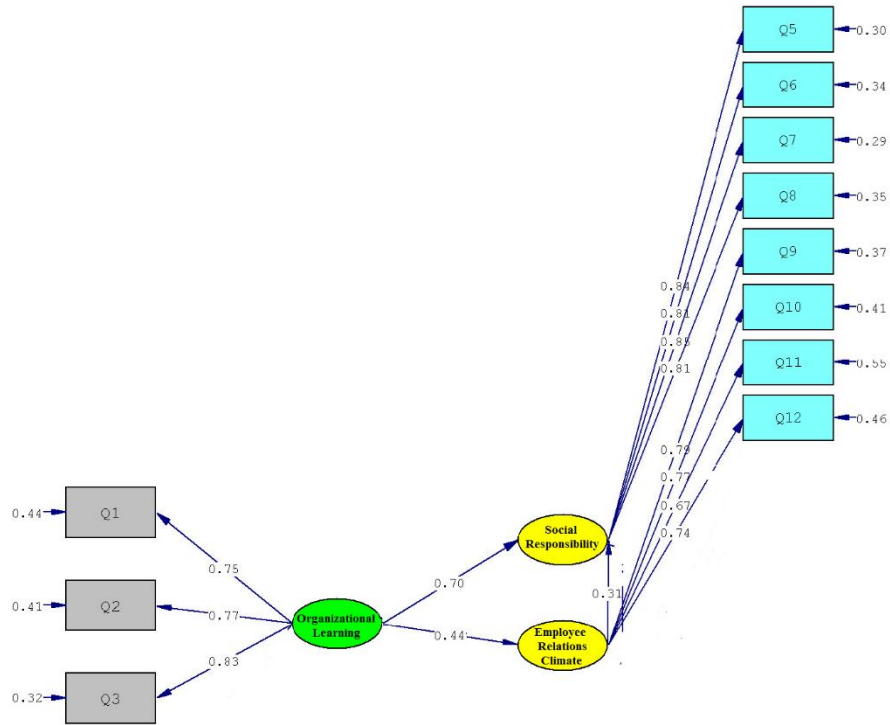


Table 1: Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Research Variables Based on Standardized Weights (Outer Loadings)

Path analysis in PLS between latent variables	Organizational Learning	Social Responsibility	Employee Relations Climate
Organizational Learning	1	0.70	-
Social Responsibility	-	1	0.44
Employee Relations Climate	-	-	1

To understand the degree of fit between empirical data and the model, fit indices and criteria known as goodness-of-fit indices are utilized. In structural equation modeling, different indices are employed to ensure the goodness of fit of the model. The table below presents the goodness-of-fit indices for the structural equation modeling of the research:

Table 2- Goodness-of-Fit Indices of the Research Model

Absolute Fit Indices	Root Mean Square Residual (RMR)	Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)
	0.000	1.000
Adaptive Fit of the Research Model	Softened Fit Index (NFI)	Comparative Fit Index (CFI)
	1.000	1.000

As observed, the Root Mean Square Residual (RMR), which represents the difference between the elements of the observed matrix in the sample group and the elements of the estimated or predicted matrices, is calculated under the assumption that the proposed model is correct. The closer the RMR for the tested model is to zero, the better the fit of the model. For this research, this index is equal to zero, indicating that the model is an appropriate fit. On the other hand, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) is calculated based on the correlations derived from path analysis between the variables in the model. The higher the path-based correlation coefficients among the variables in the model, the higher this index will be. For the research model, this index equals one, indicating that the path-based correlation among the variables in the proposed model is very significant.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The increasing need for socially responsible behavior has defined the implementation of CSR activities as a source of legitimacy (Bansal and Clelland, 2004; Campbell et al., 2019; Feito and Scherer, 2006). Therefore, institutions must identify how to integrate these policies to improve their legitimacy. Moreover, much of the existing research has focused on the external impact of policy implementation (Toussaint et al., 2002), while the internal perspective related to the introduction of CSR principles in HR management, and the effects these policies can have both internally and externally, remains relatively unexplored.

Given the described scenario, the primary aim of this research is to analyze the significance of implementing socially responsible HR management to achieve high legitimacy within the framework of the three dimensions of legitimacy proposed by Suchman. Additionally, this study evaluates the importance and performance of various CSR benchmarks through a performance-performance matrix.

The results of this research indicate the following findings. First, based on the results from the descriptive analysis of the sample, professionals evaluate companies to determine whether these institutions effectively implement CSR policies in their human resource management, as the scores for these policies are around 8.5 out of a possible 10. Thus, the efforts of these organizations to encourage voluntary participation by companies, train employees, implement communication channels between managers and staff, promote health, safety, and social benefits, foster diversity, provide opportunities, and ensure policies without discrimination are well regarded by stakeholders. Furthermore, the scores for various types of legitimacy indicate high values (almost 8 out of 10), suggesting that stakeholders support organizations that are ethical and align with CSR principles.

Second, when analyzing the structural model, all proposed hypotheses are confirmed. The significance of implementing CSR measures in achieving positive evaluations is highlighted. These results emphasize the important role that socially responsible human resource management plays in gaining social acceptance.

This information is novel as it not only empirically links CSR and legitimacy but also provides a more specific approach to applying CSR in human resource management. Additionally, considering the relationship between CSR and each individual dimension of legitimacy, the results should also be considered unique. Most existing research analyzes the connection between CSR and global legitimacy and treat it as a unidimensional variable (e.g., Brønn and Vidaver, 2009; Yang et al., 2012), while the present

research covers three types of legitimacy.

Company managers should continue to introduce CSR principles related to employee management to enhance social acceptance and increase their commitment during organizational performance improvement and development. These results underscore the importance of employee management in following socially responsible behavioral principles, as the organization will be perceived as an example of how others should behave. Furthermore, the proper implementation of socially responsible principles in human resource management is considered acceptable by stakeholders. Additionally, it will impact stakeholders' perceptions regarding the organization's ability to meet their needs and demands.

Third, the importance-performance map illustrates the variables of organizational learning and their degree of importance. This Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) specifically shows that the most significant variable of responsible human resource management for achieving high legitimacy scores relates to diversity, opportunity, and non-discrimination, followed by company volunteering and employee training. In contrast, CSR elements with lower levels of connection involve communication pathways or relationships between managers and employees as well as health, safety, and social benefits.

Considering the performance of various factors, the results indicate that the studied organizations overly strive to improve CSR factors that are less relevant to achieving accurate legitimacy evaluations. On the one hand, resources for enhancing policies related to health, safety, and social benefits, as well as those improving communication channels between managers and employees, focus excessively on the relationship between managers and employees compared to the rest of the CSR policies. Efforts made in managing diversity, opportunities, and non-discriminatory practices are recommended, as the results suggest that management of these aspects is appropriate. Regarding company volunteering, commitment to it is also optimal. On the other hand, practices related to encouraging and developing employee training need improvement, as the significance of this area is vital for achieving high legitimacy, while corporate efforts to enhance it are not as recommended.

Today, learning forms a core foundation of societies, with two very important and vital factors being management—which is considered the most crucial element for the survival, growth, prosperity, or demise of an organization—and people, who are the primary operators of any organization. There is no doubt that the success of any organization or group largely depends on the competence of its leader. Moreover, the survival and growth of organizations in today's rapidly changing world require the ability to respond timely and appropriately to ongoing environmental changes. In this context, only organizations that focus on and emphasize organizational learning can effectively anticipate necessities and environmental changes and continue their survival. Organizational learning involves the development of new knowledge and insights from the shared knowledge and experiences of employees and has the capacity to influence behaviors and improve organizational performance, one of which can be their commitment to social responsibility. In fact, the goal of organizational learning is to enhance employees' knowledge and skills to foster relatively stable changes in behavior, enabling the organization to quickly adapt to environmental changes. The stages of organizational learning include acquiring knowledge, distributing knowledge, interpreting knowledge, and memory. Knowledge sharing is a systematic activity aimed at exchanging knowledge, information, and experience among the members of a group or organization, involving the identification, distribution, and utilization of existing knowledge to more effectively solve organizational problems compared to the past. Therefore, the goal of knowledge sharing is to create new knowledge through various combinations of existing knowledge while optimizing its use.

Knowledge sharing is a fundamental tool for acquiring and distributing knowledge (both explicit and tacit) from within or outside the organization for the purpose of innovation and performance improvement. Given the previously mentioned points, organizational learning can enhance individual performance, job satisfaction, and teamwork within the organization. In fact, organizational learning is an important aspect of the organization that significantly influences its performance; it is more than just the need for immediate selection and is the best factor for increasing the speed of organizations in today's unpredictable world.

Communication skills can effectively address organizational conflicts when correctly applied. On the other hand, employees' abilities in listening and visual skills play a significant role in motivating and aligning individual and organizational goals. Verbal skills refer to the ability to create an environment of

understanding and cooperation and to carry out work through others, effectively engaging as a group member, understanding individuals' motivations, and influencing their behaviors.

Having visual skills requires one to first recognize oneself, be aware of one's strengths and weaknesses, and be able to create a safe environment for collaboration with employees. The results indicate that a comprehensive insight and awareness of how different units interact and collaborate through unification and integration of tasks will empower employees. Additionally, clarifying the timing of employee work and clearly defining their rest periods and organizational activities, along with polite interactions in organizational communication, significantly contribute to conflict reduction. Utilizing professional ethics in organizational interactions with senior management or other employees also plays a crucial role in reducing interpersonal conflicts.

Moreover, removing obstacles in employees' duties and ensuring direct interaction with other organizational components, as well as addressing their work-related issues and hierarchical concerns, can significantly reduce inter-organizational conflicts. Finally, preventing and eliminating rigid rules and administrative bureaucracy, and creating flexibility in the execution of organizational tasks can also play an important role in reducing organizational conflicts.

The information provided by the Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) is vital and has relevant managerial implications, as it gives managers insights into best practices for allocating resources to socially responsible human resource management policies in their pursuit of achieving high legitimacy evaluations. Based on our results, company managers should reorganize their resource distribution to emphasize socially responsible management. These institutions should begin by focusing more on enhancing the educational opportunities for their internal stakeholders.

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