

Building a strong human rights policy from within

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The most important element of a human rights policy is its effect upon company practice and what happens once it has been finalised. Getting the language of the policy right is essential, as is determining whether to have a stand-alone policy, or a pointer towards a collection of existing policies. Also important is how the policy is formulated: within which business units, through consultation with communities and human rights experts or through dialogue with engaged investors. Nevertheless, these elements must all align with the ultimate goal of the policy which is to set clear expectations on human rights and develop accountability within the business. Without such practical implementation, there is a risk that business operations will not have the guidance they need and from the outside the policy may not stand up to scrutiny as a real commitment to human rights.

Strong human rights policies have CEO and/or board level backing and they are constructed involving a variety of business units. They also involve open and transparent consultation with impacted groups and international human rights experts. One interesting approach is to use the policy development process to create direct interaction between senior management and particular stakeholder groups. This sets the tone internally and externally that the company is taking the policy development exercise seriously.

A well-constructed human rights policy will feature a generic statement of support for human rights (often drawn from the company code of conduct or values statement); it will recognise the company's baseline responsibility to respect human rights and that the business could potentially impact all human rights; it may contain a non-exhaustive list of relevant parties: employees, suppliers, business partners, members of communities, etc or perhaps a list of priority human rights or issues for the business to address; and finally it will be transparent about the plans for implementation and the longer term vision.

Human rights policies will also often refer to other relevant policies within the business such as security, human resources, procurement, etc. These other policies may well contain human rights elements without naming them as such and it is essential that they are aligned with the human rights policy itself.

Once the policy is crafted, signed off and launched it needs to stay relevant and up to date. As the business and human rights debate has moved rapidly in recent years, good human rights policies may well include plans for updates and revisions. Additionally, companies may develop supportive sentences about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on their websites into full policies, others may move from policies focused solely on the workplace to those that embrace all human rights and others may transform human rights statements into full human rights policies.

Finally, human rights is as much about process and methodology as it is about the realisation of the actual rights themselves. These human rights process principles include: inclusion, participation, non-discrimination, empowerment, transparency and accountability. An excellent human rights policy will be created if these process principles can inform its conception, development and implementation from the outset.