Setting the standard for social responsibility

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The ISO 26000 is the first universal, international standard to offer companies and organizations guidance on navigating the tricky area of social responsibility.

The ISO 26000, published by the International Organization for Standardization in November 2010, is a powerful tool to help organizations incorporate socially responsible behavior as an integral part of their operations.

The result of 10 years of documentation and consultation with a broad range of businesses, experts and stakeholders, the voluntary guidance standard is designed for any kind of organization, be it in the private or public sector.

Crucially, the aim of the ISO 26000 is to offer guidance to companies; it does not contain requirements and, therefore, in contrast to ISO management system standards, is not certifiable.

To help break down the document's main points for business owners and executives, IESE's Antonio Argandoña and Ricardo Isea have published a reader-friendly booklet.

SR: Social responsibility for all

Sustainability is the cornerstone of the ISO 26000. Companies are advised to focus on the economic, social and environmental sustainability of their activities, products and services.

The document also states that respect for and protection of human rights must exist regardless of the legal framework of the State within which an organization operates. In the same way, good labor practices must extend to cover a company's own employees as well as subcontracted workers.

The ISO package also recommends a holistic approach to environmental issues that includes taking responsibility for one's actions, not undertaking actions without first assessing their environmental impact, minimizing negative impact and applying the principle of polluters must pay.

Spreading the word

The standard urges organizations to try to instill the SR value system in other organizations. One way to do that, for instance, is to hire suppliers that adhere to their own principles of social responsibility.

Organizations should also encourage responsible and sustainable consumption, and even produce goods and provide services that are within the reach of the most vulnerable sectors of society.

The ISO also proposes the implementation of policies and processes that contribute to the political, economic and social development of communities that are within a company's sphere of influence.

Making a difference, now

The ISO package offers a series of tips for adopting and managing an organization's social responsibility program. Here's a sample of five of them:

- Examine the organization's features and the context in which it operates, and embrace the challenges posed by social responsibility. Here, one must identify the negative impact the organization has, establish priorities and seek to influence other organizations so as to maximize positive impacts.
- Make people aware of the need to embrace social responsibility, starting with the leaders of the organization, and integrate SR principles into the organization's policies, strategies, structures and activities.
- Establish communication that promotes dialogue with stakeholders to address legal issues and provide information on progress and areas of concern.
- Take into account the opinions of stakeholders as well as voluntary initiatives such

as codes of conduct, directives and declarations of principles and values.

- Monitor the company's performance through supervision, evaluation, verification, measurement and follow-up of compliance with SR.

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