

DOES PALM OIL COMPANY INTERNALISE ITS STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABILITY? A CASE STUDY OF DB BERHAD

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study is to explore how a palm oil company, namely DB Berhad¹ (thereafter DB), engages with its internal stakeholders in achieving sustainability. Interview data and annual reports of DB are analysed, and Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital serve as the conceptual framework of the study. The study found that due to accumulated pressures from its dominant stakeholders, such as NGOs, local and international communities, and key players within the supply chain in the palm oil industry, DB internalised its stakeholder engagement practices within the group of companies. A variety of resources, tactics, and dispositions were employed by in order to improve its sustainability practices and to gain legitimacy from its stakeholders.*

Keywords: *Stakeholder engagement; sustainability, Bourdieu, the palm oil industry*

Introduction

In recent times, research in stakeholder engagement has received mounting interest among researchers within the social and environmental accounting field. The complexity of business environment has pushed organisations to develop engaging practices to foster the process of creating value for stakeholders and society (Stocker et al., 2020). Ngu and Amran (2018) claim that stakeholder engagement indicates that organisations recognise the importance of stakeholder inclusivity and participation in creating long-term values for the business.

Stakeholder engagement can be seen as the process that involves mutual responsibility and involvement between organisations and stakeholders in the activities of the organisations, such as decision making, communication, and information sharing processes (Bellucci et al., 2019; Prado-Lorenzo et al., 2009; Wehn et al., 2018). Stakeholder engagement can also be regarded

¹ The actual name of DB Berhad has been disguised.

as stakeholders participating in business management by raising issues that may have positive or negative impacts on organisations and thereby enhance their accountabilities (Lane & Devin, 2018; Rasche & Esser, 2006).

It is important for organisations to engage with their stakeholders as firms are made up of stakeholders - the communities and markets - within which the firms operate (Noland & Phillips, 2010). A meaningful engagement with stakeholders may produce tangible changes to organisational practices and help organisations to anticipate and manage conflicts, improve decision-making from management, employees, investors, and other external stakeholders, build consensus amongst diverse views, create stakeholder identification with the outcomes of the organisation's activities, and build trust in the organisation (Amaeshi & Crane, 2006; Burchell & Cook, 2006).

However, stakeholder engagement has also been regarded with skepticism as organisations may use the engagement process to gain important information to their advantage for public relations and marketing (Barone et al., 2013; Owen, 2003). Rinaldi et al. (2014) further asserted that stakeholder engagement is used by organisations to improve their financial performance rather than moving towards greater sustainability. Nonetheless, Civera et al. (2019) found that empowering less powerful stakeholders such as coffee farmers to access the market independently along the coffee supply chain can make the whole coffee business more sustainable and resilient as well as strengthening the financial and social stability of farmers. Likewise, Azlan et al. (2020); and Waris et al. (2019) revealed that stakeholder engagement strongly influences the success of renewable energy projects.

In Malaysia, Elijido-Ten et al. (2010) mentioned that stakeholder engagement is not a new phenomenon, still, there have been limited studies investigating the organisational stakeholder engagement practices. In response, this paper examines the way an oil palm company, DB Berhad, engages with its internal stakeholders in achieving sustainability. The annual reports, sustainability reports, and interview data with key players in the industry was analysed and Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus, and capital serve as the conceptual framework.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section explains the concepts of habitus, field, and capital as propagated by Bourdieu. The second and third sections discuss the research methodology and background of DB Berhad, respectively. The sustainability issues in the palm oil industry is elucidated in the fourth section. The findings and the conclusion of the study are discussed at the final and penultimate sections.

Bourdieu's Praxeology

In his seminal text *Distinction*, Bourdieu offers the equation of '[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice' (1984, p. 101) as a reference to human actions in the social world. It includes the transformation of human action that uses the "intellectual resources of structural analysis, but approaches structures in terms of the ways in which they are produced and reproduced through action" (Calhoun, 2003, p. 288). He claims that the concepts of habitus, field and capital were developed as a way of understanding and explaining practice. This practice is defined by Bourdieu as the outcome of internalised knowledge created from history but which manifests as an agent's skills, proficiencies and competencies, and enabling them to understand what is transpiring and what might transpire so as to achieve a particular goal or purpose (Webb, 2012).

The focus is on practice and what informs it – the influence by habitus, and on how practice forms the habitus, i.e., how it is shaped and reshaped.

Concepts of Habitus, Field and Capital

Habitus, an ambiguous concept, is an objective basis for regular modes of practice (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus is produced by the social world and serves as a '*durable and transposable but not immutable*' means through which agents perceive, understand and interact in that world (Grenfell, 2012, p. 52). Habitus is "the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them" (Wacquant 2005, p.316, cited in Navarro, 2006, p. 16). These dispositions are interpreted as the wide range of personal states, which are developed by the social positions of the agents rather than being innate (Wacquant, 2011). This is regarded by Bourdieu as "an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted" (1977, p. 95). With such Reay describes this transformation of habitus as a '*complex interplay between past and present*' (2004, p. 434). Thus, the habitus acts as the mediator through which the social world is articulated such as through practices related to accent, manners, styles of dress and modes of deportment (Reay, 2004). We conquer that "[i]t is through the workings of habitus that practice (agency) is linked with capital and field (structure)" (Reay, 2004, p. 432).

Field (another concept of Bourdieu) is intricately linked with habitus to form social structure, where habitus can then be fully functioned in relation to one another (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). A field, which is "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.97) is regarded as a field of forces which occupied by the agents in their position to conserve or change the structure that is constitute of the field (Bourdieu, 2005a, p. 30). This is an arena where agents "are defined by their relative positions" according to the amount and worth of the capital they hold (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724). In this arena, agents articulate and reproduce their dispositions and compete for the distribution of different kinds of capital (Ağın, 2018; Benson & Neveu, 2005; Bourdieu, 2005b).

Capital is another concept of Bourdieu, that has four forms which are economic (e.g., financial resources), cultural (e.g., non-financial assets, such as physical appearance, spoken language, academic achievement), social (e.g., an individual's social network), and symbolic (prestige and recognition, such as awards) (Bourdieu, 1990). Agents accumulated certain capitals to be in the sphere of forces within a field.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, we employed a qualitative case-based research approach to explore stakeholder engagement practices. Three key personnel of DB and an external stakeholder were interviewed to understand how and why the company engages in stakeholder engagement practices. The interview was conducted at the respective office, and each interview lasted between 45 minutes and two hours.

In addition, DB's annual reports and sustainability reports were analysed over fourteen years, from 2007 to 2020. The period covers the emergence and development of social, environmental, and sustainability of organisational reporting in Malaysia. In 2007, Bursa Malaysia's listing requirements mandatorily required all public listed companies to report on their CSR initiatives.

The annual reports are analysed as they represent important corporate texts to discharge accountability to stakeholders (Gray et al., 2014), with a relatively high level of credibility and reliability, and they are publicly accessible (Loh et al., 2015)). It is asserted that our focus is not on analysing the extent of disclosures and where the disclosures are disclosed. Instead, the focus is on how the palm oil company engages with its stakeholders via any internal stakeholder engagement mechanisms.

In analysing the data, first, the interview transcripts, annual reports, and sustainability reports were read to obtain an initial understanding. Then, the volume of narrative from the entire interview transcript and report was reduced to a focused set of extract. NVivo was used to record extracts related to our area of interest that was stakeholder engagement practices in the palm oil company. More specifically, general and specific narratives related to stakeholder engagement were extracted from the interview transcripts, annual reports, and sustainability reports. All extracts identified were subsequently coded into key themes using the coding function in NVivo. After constructing the initial key themes, the transcripts and reports were read and analysed again to identify any new themes.

Background of DB Berhad

DB Berhad (DB) is a multinational company listed on the Main Market of Bursa Malaysia. It is one of the largest companies with a market capitalisation of over RM50 billion and employed more than 100,000 workers. DB operates in multiple business divisions such as the property, industrial, motors, logistics, plantations, insurance, and healthcare. The company's major shareholders include government-linked companies such as Permodalan Nasional Berhad, Tabung Haji, Employees Provident Fund, and Kumpulan Wang Persaraan (Varkkey, 2012; Zurairi, 2015).

As a government-linked company controlled by state investment funds, DB has to act in the state's best interests. The board of directors of DB was appointed among prominent individuals who have diverse expertise and experience in the palm oil industry and public sector, and connection with the ruling government. For example, the board members include a previous Governor of Indonesia Central Bank, an executive of Land Custody and Development Authority of Sarawak, a special advisor for the president and executive committee of World Business Council for Sustainable Development, and a key individual in Malaysia Palm Oil Council (MPOC)(DB, 2008, 2010).

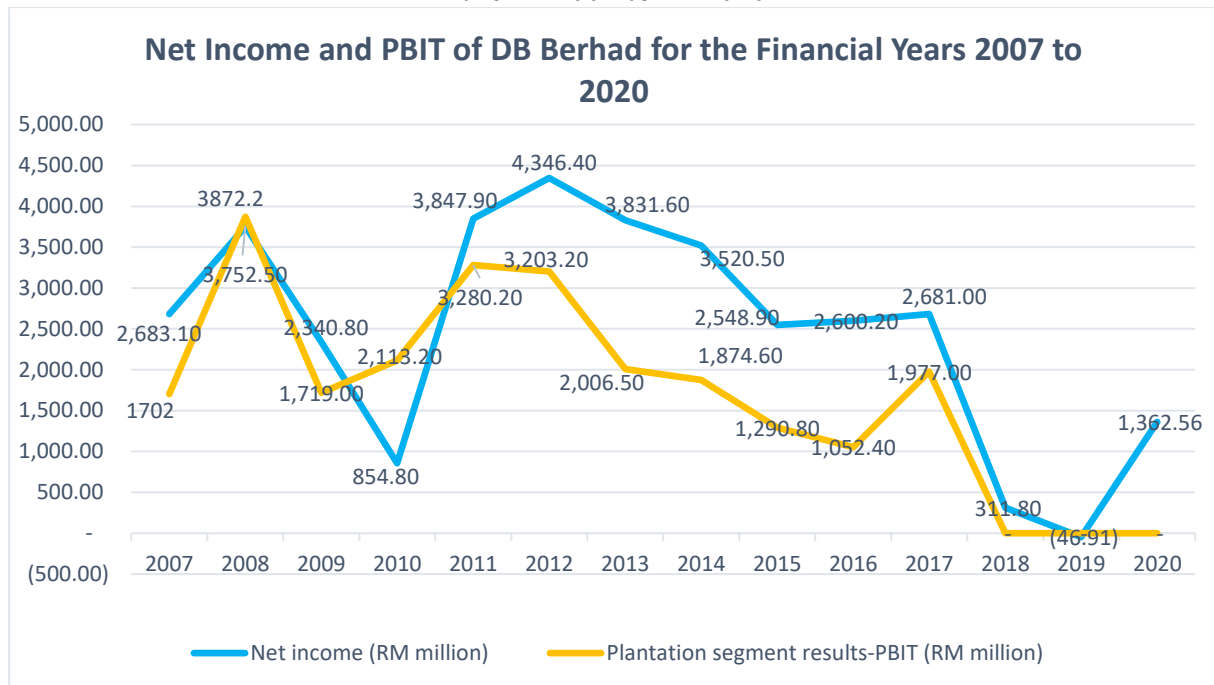
In terms of financial performance, DB consistently recorded profits for its overall group performance and plantation segment. Figure 1 shows the net profit of DB and profit before interest and tax (PBIT) of the plantation segment for the fourteen financial years under review. For the financial year 2007 (FY2007) and FY2008, DB recorded a Group's net profit of RM2,683.1 million and RM3,872.2 million, respectively. Out of the total Group's net profit, RM1,702 million and RM3,752.5 million were contributed by the plantation segment. The PBIT of the plantation segment decrease to RM1,719 million in FY2009 and rose to RM2,113.2 million in FY2010. The increase was achieved on the back of higher crude palm oil prices which averaged RM2,311 per metric tonne in FY2009/2010 versus RM2,177/MT in FY2008/2009. The midstream and downstream operations also reported stronger performance (DB, 2010).

In FY2011, the plantation segment contributed RM3,280.2 million to the group's operating profit. Meanwhile, the PBIT was affected in FY2012 by the lower fresh fruit bunch production by 3.4% despite the 0.6% higher average crude palm oil (CPO) price realised and 1.7% higher oil extraction rate (DB, 2012). The plantation segment's profit further declined from FY2013 and FY2016, from RM2,006.5 million and RM1,052.1 million primarily due to lower sales volume due to the lower fresh fruit bunch production (DB, 2016). In FY 2017, the profit in the plantation segment increased to RM1,977 million due to higher palm product prices. DB plantation demerged from DB Group in the same year to continue as an independent single plantation entity (DB, 2018).

After its demerger, DB suffered a loss of RM46.91 million in FY2019 due to the weaker performance from the upstream segment, which was affected by the fluctuation in CPO and palm kernel prices, as well as operational challenges faced by its oil palm and sugar operations (DB, 2019). Despite the outbreak of Covid-19 that led to volatile markets and foreign labour shortage, the profit in DB increased to RM1,362.562 in FY2020. The increase is primarily attributable to higher CPO and palm kernel realised prices (DB, 2020). Thus, over the fourteen financial years under review, the profit of the plantation segment fluctuated depending on the market price of CPO and the production of the fresh fruit bunch.

DB is chosen as the case company mainly because of its economic contributions to the palm oil industry and nation. Even so, DB was alleged to cause social and environmental harms, leading to habitat degradation, deforestation, and pollution (Forest People Programme, 6 December 2011). *DB has taken various measures in response to the allegations, including working with NGOs and environmentalist groups, obtaining sustainability certification (e.g., RSPO and MSPO), and implementing good agricultural and best management practices to improve its sustainability practices (DB, 2012).* DB has also undertaken conservation projects, reforestation, and orangutan rehabilitation project to stop deforestation and preserve the natural habitat. Considering the issues surrounding the company and the initiatives taken by DB, it is contended that DB offers a rich setting to enable the researchers to examine how a palm oil company improves its sustainability practices over time.

Figure 1: Group's Net Income and PBIT of the Plantation Segment of DB Berhad for the FY2007 to FY2020



Source: DB Berhad's Annual Reports, Analysis by Authors

Sustainability Issues in Malaysian Palm Oil Industry

The palm oil industry receives intensive pressures from NGOs, environmentalists and EU buyers over its unsustainable practices. The sustainability issues alleged by Western NGOs such as Greenpeace and Friends of Earth include human rights abuse, forced labour, extensive deforestation, and land degradation in the oil palm plantation. Doug Cress, coordinator for the United Nation's Great Apes Survival Partnership stated that "the impact of the cultivation of palm oil plantations on orangutans is devastating, it has wiped out virtually their entire habitat to this point" (BBC News, 4 August 2015). Furthermore, "palm oil plantations are threatening the tropical forest, encroaching on protected and traditional lands, and linked to alleged human rights abuses and violations" (Verife, 2013).

Due to the violations, protests and boycotts were made against the palm oil industry. In 2012, the French Senate approved a 400 percent tax hike on palm oil shipped into France. The tax hike is based on the claims that palm oil causes obesity as it contains a high level of saturated fats, and the palm industry is causing deforestation (MPOC, 2012). In 2015, France's Ecology Minister, Segolent Royal, had urged the public to stop eating Nutella as it was claimed to contribute to deforestation: "We have to replant a lot of trees because there is massive deforestation that also leads to global warming. We should stop eating Nutella, for example, because it's made with palm oil" (The Guardian, 17 June 2015).

DB, a Malaysian palm oil producer, was also accused of causing deforestation and pollutions. When DB was expanding its palm oil plantation in 200,000 hectares lands in Liberia, the community leaders complained to the RSPO about the impacts of the operations of DB:

“In Bomi and Grand Cape Mount County where DB Berhad is currently engaged in active land clearing, active planting of oil palm, destruction of our sacred sites, destruction of our crops, damming of our creeks and streams, filling in of our swamps, destructions of gravesites, destruction and pollution of our drinking water sources, forceful displacement of our people without adequate compensation, active planting and cultivation of oil palm including the massive establishment of an oil palm nursery without our free prior informed consent” (Forest People Programme, 6 December 2011)(Forest Peoples Programme, 6 December 2011).

The statement by the community leaders urges the Liberian government and DB to protect the rights of the farmers by agreeing to bring their concession agreements in line with international human rights principles and to recognize legal community ownership over the land. However, DB claimed that it had upheld the international human rights standards and voluntary guidelines such as the UN Global Compact (World Rainforest Movement, 2013). The allegations against the palm oil industry have also led to DB to take additional measures to improve its sustainability practices. In particular, DB attempts to enhance its sustainability practices through the organisation’s internal stakeholder engagement mechanisms which is discussed next.

Stakeholder engagement in DB

The initiative taken by DB to improve its sustainability include restructuring the governance structure by appointing a Head of Group Corporate Social Responsibility to manage the Bursa Malaysia listing requirements in 2007 that all public listed companies must disclose their corporate social responsibility activities. DB then established the Group Chief Sustainability Officer, who had knowledge and expertise in the field of sustainability. The appointment of these key experts was to create ‘cultural capital’ (also known as knowledge on sustainability) and to instil knowledge about sustainability among its employee and top management.

A corporate sustainability governance structure was also established by DB in 2011, “with the board of directors being the highest authority accountable for the Group’s Sustainability strategy and performance” (DB, 2011, p. 58). The sustainability governance structure aims to instil good corporate governance and high ethical values in the Group. A good structure of corporate sustainability governance will ultimately provide sustainability awareness throughout the Group from the top to the bottom. This awareness will create greater ‘cultural capital’ in sustainability within the organisation.

In DB, “sustainability is embedded in [their] organisational approach and is led from the top” (DB, 2014, p. 19) and to ensure that sustainability is enshrined in the core values of the business, on 28 August 2012, the Sustainability Committee (SC) was established to ascertain that the group’s objectives, policies, and practices have sustainability considerations. “The SC’s philosophy is to ensure that business includes not only Profit but People and the Planet aspects as well” (DB, 2012, p. 67). This establishment of committee internalised the ‘cultural capital’ of sustainability throughout the company.

DB also internalise its governance in order to achieve high performance. For example, its Code of Business Conduct guides their employees in upholding its Core Value of Integrity, Respect and Responsibility, Enterprising and Excellence which promotes exemplary and responsible

behaviour (DB, 2019, p. 28). This internalising governance “continued to provide the benefit of its leadership towards successful implementation of corporate strategies, ethical practices, and sustainability approaches” (DB, 2019, p. 29) which lead to long term success in delivering sustainable value. This effort can be seen as a way to strengthen ‘cultural capital’ and ‘social capital’ within the company.

DB also organised a series of lectures for its employees and required the top management to attend the sustainability programs conducted by Bursa Malaysia and external training providers. The training and lectures aim to develop knowledge and understanding on sustainability practices among top management which would then be easier for them to disseminate and promote sustainability information to employees and other stakeholders.

“Beginning in August 2008, we have launched the lecture series on sustainability, which is aimed at provoking dialogue and encouraging the interchange of ideas on sustainable development. This initiative further underlines our commitment towards sustainable development” (DB Berhad 2008, p.49).

Furthermore, Sustainability Book was distributed to all levels of staff to disseminate knowledge about the right sustainability practices to be applied to all levels and functions within the group of companies. The Annual Report of DB mentioned that “continuous engagement initiatives for employees and annual Global Employee Engagement Survey (GEES)” (DB, 2015, p. 88).

DB also created a biannual group of financial events to establish a two-way communication channel between the employees and the executives of the company (DB Berhad, 2011). A series of roadshows was conducted where the president and a group of chief executives visited offices and operations across the Group to meet and speak with employees (DB Berhad, 2011). These initiatives were taken to show that DB is adept at dealing with sustainability issues.

On top of that, DB appointed a well-known environmentalist as its sustainability advisor to demonstrate to the members of the public that DB is aware of the sustainability issues shrouding the palm oil industry. The advisor is expected to assist DB in its sustainability practices. This has been highlighted by an executive interviewed that:

“We have a conservationist sitting on our boards making sure that we are doing the right things. He is our advisor for the sustainability practices of the company”
[Interviewee-1].

Moreover, DB prepares the sustainability reports to record the company’s objectives, strategies, and activities regarding sustainability. The sustainability report “provides a window into how [DB was] internalising its commitment to sustainability” (DB Berhad 2011, p.7). The sustainability report also articulates how a sustainability approach is linked to the Group’s operating activities and its engagement and involvement with various stakeholders such as Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil Standard, and World Business Council for Sustainable Development in shaping DB’s sustainability agenda.

The employee of DB perceived the production of the sustainability report by the company enables the company to communicate with its stakeholders.

“We produce the handbook (on sustainability) to make sure that people understand what sustainability is”
[Interviewee-2].

Although it is beneficial to have information about DB's sustainability practices, the sustainability report does not provide all relevant information. An environmentalist interviewed noted that:

“Having a sustainability report is good but it does not tell you everything. The report does not address the negative issues but informs readers about positive events. It reports on issues that the organisation wants the public to know, and I regarded it as a public relation tool to show the nicest matters of the organisation”
[Interviewee-3].

In 2018, DB moved forward in its sustainability journey by producing its first integrated report. “[This] Integrated reporting was seen as an opportunity to improve communication with stakeholders” (IFAC, 2021).

DB planted its first GenomeSelect™ seeds in 2016 which capable of producing 15% more yield from the existing planting materials (DB, 2016, p. 12). Year 2020 revealed the success of its GenomeSelect™ seeds:

“Our GenomeSelect™ seeds have yielded up to 20% more than our current best-performing planting materials. As a result, the industry can now work towards eliminating deforestation within our value chain. We are currently scaling up production to meet our total replanting needs. Three years from now, we expect to produce more than 10 million GenomeSelect™ seeds a year. This will meet our annual replanting requirements in Malaysia with some excess for commercial sales”
(DB, 2020, p. 20).

This breakthrough success is the result of ‘cultural capital’ that has been inculcated within organisation. DB internalise its ‘cultural capital’ through research and development practice and produced high yield seeds for future planting.

The internal stakeholder engagement practices of DB are seen as approaches taken by DB to enhance the ‘cultural capital’ of all employees in understanding the sustainability issues arising within their operating activities. At the same time, DB attempted to gain social capital through its social connection with all levels of employees and members of the public and gaining trust and confidence from the public. These cultural and social capitals elevated the credibility of DB as the leader in the sustainability field in Malaysia and as the leading global sustainable palm oil plantation company. Hence, the cultural and social capitals give DB the economic capital by increasing the trust from customers, employees, and members of the public.

Conclusion

This paper explores the internal stakeholder engagement mechanisms adopted by DB in achieving its sustainability practices. The study found that due to continuous pressures received from the European Union and other stakeholders such as Greenpeace, Friends of Earth and members of the community, DB positively engages in sustainability practices. DB strengthened its internal sustainability governance structure and disseminated the knowledge of sustainability within the Group from top to bottom approach. The efforts taken by DB to improve its governance board structure and to disseminate sustainability know-how to employees indicate DB's attitudes towards the issue of sustainability. Sustainability is arguably enshrined in the DNA of DB and practiced by the organisation for a period.

However, DB was also seen to strategically put its practical sense in the sustainability field by playing the ‘game’. This kind of practical sense is “a ‘feel for the game’, that is, the art of anticipating the future of the game, which inscribed in the present state of play” (Bourdieu, 1998). The pressures received from European Union and other stakeholders have made DB move strategically to counter the accusation as these allegations will affect its economic capital (Deegan, 2019). This is in congruence with Hopwood et al. (2010) that integration of sustainability into businesses’ core strategy is not showing genuine interest towards showing transparency and accountability (Gray, 2010; Hopwood, 2009).

Future research could extend the current study and assess the stakeholder engagement practices in other palm oil companies. Further work could also be undertaken in different settings, such as examining the stakeholder engagement practices between the companies and stakeholders by comparing and contrasting the stakeholder engagement practices from the accounts of the companies and stakeholders (Kaur & Lodhia, 2018). Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field, and capital could also be applied to study the stakeholder engagement practices in other contexts or organisations.

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