

The Role of Collaboration in Achieving Corporate Social Responsibility Objectives

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The lack of a conclusive business case for corporate social responsibility is at the heart of the ongoing debate over the role of business in solving social and environmental problems. Although the link between CSR activities and firm financial performance is still debated, research suggests that the relationship depends, at least in part, on how the CSR initiative is executed.¹ Given that CSR initiatives are often in collaboration with NGOs, we focus on factors that influence the effectiveness of these collaborations.

Research suggests that firms are more likely to enjoy business benefits from these relationships when they go beyond simple cash donations and include expertise, access to strategic knowledge, and in-kind resources.² Austin positions corporate involvement along a continuum.³ At the one end, relationships where firms make traditional donations are labeled *philanthropic*. He argues that in the *transactional* stage, greater business benefits can accrue when the firm focuses donations around specific activities (e.g., a percentage of every sale). At the other end of the spectrum are *integrative* relationships that are characterized by shared employees and activities, a relationship that approximates a joint venture.

Our framework expands previous categorization by including the potential for collaboration with other firms, or multiple NGOs. A basic form of integrative collaboration is between a single firm and a single NGO, such as the long-standing relationship between Timberland and City Year where Timberland donates financial support, products, employee volunteers, and management expertise. Another structure includes multiple firms and one NGO, such as the Responsible Care program of the chemical industry. A third structure occurs when one firm works with multiple NGOs, such as Starbucks working on a range of social and environmental issues with Oxfam, Global Exchange, and