

HOW CORPORATIONS OVERCOME ISSUE ILLEGITIMACY AND ISSUE EQUIVOCALITY TO ADDRESS SOCIAL WELFARE: THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL CHANGE AGENT

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While corporations are increasingly being called on to improve social welfare, researchers have primarily focused their efforts on the role of external pressures and top managers in shaping a corporation's engagement with social issues. As an alternative, I consider the role of social change agents who work within corporations and direct their firms to address a social issue. I suggest two issue impediments obstructing these efforts—issue illegitimacy and issue equivocality—that are shaped by economic philosophies, institutional fields, firm missions, and social change agent beliefs. These impediments ground four types of issues that social change agents attempt to advance: convertible, blurry, safe, and risky. I propose meaning-making tactics best suited to address the type of social issue individuals seek to advance inside a firm: framing, labeling, maintaining, and importing. I argue that by matching the issue type and meaning-making tactic, social change agents will more likely influence top managers to support a social issue. This article contributes to the literature by explaining how meaning making serves at the heart of impediments to and potential solutions to firms' efforts to improve social welfare and by spotlighting the role of a firm's employees in encouraging the organization to improve social welfare.

Scholars and practitioners have increasingly called on corporations to improve social welfare, beyond maximizing the wealth of shareholders or even stakeholders. To date, scholars consider progress on this front mediocre at best and have prodded corporations to do more to promote social welfare (Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Walsh, Weber, & Margolis, 2003). Some public corporations (which I also refer to here as "firms") have taken up this challenge by dedicating important resources to social issues that can benefit the greater good, beyond wealth maximization, such as health care, poverty, or the natural environment (Bies, Bartunek, Fort, & Zald, 2007). Because firms are powerful forces of social life (Perrow, 2002), they have the opportunity—some might even say the obligation (Donaldson, 1982; Hinings & Greenwood, 2002; Werhane, 1985)—to supplement traditional roles once served by governments and to address social issues to make the world a better place. Such a call

could not possibly come at a more pertinent time as society faces many difficult challenges that firms can, and do, impact (Golden-Biddle & Dutton, 2012).

Having both the opportunity and perhaps obligation to do so, why don't more corporations seek to address issues involving social welfare? I suggest there are two main reasons. First, a corporation's top managers often struggle with fully understanding the scope and implications of social issues and what role they can play in addressing them (Epstein, 2008). This makes it difficult to prioritize among stakeholder claims that might be advancing some interpretations of an issue over others (Freeman, 1994; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Such "issue equivocality" refers to competing meanings of an issue, including its purpose, scope, and implications for the firm (Sonenshein, 2007). Second, corporations face legal and financial pressures to focus on shareholder value (Sundaram & Inkpen, 2004). As a result, top managers often make decisions in contexts where creating value for nonfinancial stakeholders is not considered a legitimate part of a firm's activities (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & De Colle, 2010). "Issue illegitimacy" refers to interpretations signifying that allocating resources to an issue falls outside a justifiable basis for firm action, because, for instance, it

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conflicts with norms, prevailing practices, or commonly understood meanings about the firm (Dougherty & Heller, 1994).

Given issue equivocality and issue illegitimacy, it is difficult to imagine that top corporate managers would ever use a firm's resources to address social issues. However, scholars have offered a number of possible explanations for why managers might do so. Theories of stakeholder salience (Agle, Mitchell, & Sonnenfeld, 1999; Mitchell et al., 1997) examine managers' prioritization of competing stakeholder claims, something shapable by stakeholder attributes such as power, legitimacy, and urgency. This perspective helps explain why some stakeholders garner managerial attention, but its focus is not on a particular social issue.

Furthermore, social issues are complex and can involve multiple stakeholders (e.g., a local community impacted by poverty, a nonprofit attempting to help alleviate poverty, government institutions trying to get citizens off public assistance). Alternatively, some social issues may not be represented by any stakeholder because they have not been identified as issues (Best, 1995) or they lack formal backing or representation by a stakeholder group. Because stakeholder perspectives tend to focus on managing a firm effectively rather than managing social issues responsibly (Harrison, Bosse, & Phillips, 2010), firms may overlook critical social issues, even from perspectives such as stakeholder salience. Finally, stakeholder salience perspectives provide little detail about internal organizational dynamics that might lead firms to address a social issue.

Another set of theoretical perspectives emphasizes that a firm might address social issues to the extent those issues are financially aligned with the interests of the firm. However, these theories, broadly captured under the umbrella of instrumental stakeholder theory (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Jones, 1995), provide little guidance on why corporations might address issues beyond their economic interests and focus on addressing social issues as ends in themselves (Margolis & Walsh, 2003). For example, Hess and Warren (2008) argued that many corporate social responsibility activities adopted by firms are simply intended to hold back stakeholder pressures by showing symbolic involvement, without making any meaningful contributions to benefit society at large. Furthermore, this perspective, similar to stakeholder salience, focuses on top managers' navigation of external pressures on

the firm, thereby obscuring internal organizational dynamics that also shape whether corporations address social issues.

In this article I look inside the public corporation to describe how individuals—those I call social change agents—act as a catalyst in convincing their firms to support a social issue, such as through resource allocations (Dacin, Dacin, & Tracey, 2011; Davis & White, 2015; Kistruck & Beamish, 2010). I take a descriptive approach in examining how social change agents use meaning making—the construction and advancement of an interpretation of an issue—to influence their corporations to support social issues. A meaning-making perspective offers a way to understand how employees without formal power can nonetheless shape the allocation of a corporation's resources toward the social good. I focus on social change agents in the context of public corporations because while public corporations are increasingly being called on to play a role in addressing social welfare (e.g., Margolis & Walsh, 2003), they are nonetheless prone to adopting a shareholder maximization perspective that makes the social change agent's task extremely challenging. This helps to clarify the processes that underlie how social change agents convince top managers about a social issue. However, while I develop the theory in the context of public corporations, the perspective I offer here might also be applied to other types of organizations that have a strong profit motive.

My main proposition is as follows: to foster social issue adoption from within corporations, social change agents shape the meaning of issues in ways that address issue illegitimacy and issue equivocality. To elaborate on this proposition, I draw from research on sensemaking/sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1995, 1999) and issue selling (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Howard-Grenville, 2007; Howard-Grenville & Hoffman, 2003; Sonenshein, 2006, 2012). By integrating these perspectives, I elucidate the undertheorized role of employees (versus top managers) in helping steer a firm toward addressing social issues by helping overcome key issue impediments. This contrasts with research in which scholars have primarily considered social issue adoption as something primarily driven by external constituents or a firm's top managers. At the same time, I explain how the very meanings of social issues are debatable and contestable, thereby offering one

important pathway to understanding how corporations might change their orientation to critical social issues.

A MEANING-MAKING APPROACH TO SOCIAL ISSUES

Traditional examinations of a corporation's role in addressing social welfare, such as those based on stakeholder theories, focus on describing or prescribing how top managers make decisions (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al., 2010). In these studies researchers tend to treat social issues from an "objectivist" perspective by suggesting that social issues exist "out there," waiting for action by top managers. A key task for top managers is to decide which competing stakeholder claims to prioritize, such as responding to a local community's concerns about pollution from a factory and shareholders' worries about the cost of retooling a factory to reduce its environmental impact. In contrast, a meaning-making approach proposes that there is a rich interpretive process, shaped, in part, by a firm's members, that often unfolds before top managers recognize they are facing a decision about a social issue in the first place (Sonenshein, 2007). That is, issues are not inherently issues but are, rather, constructed as issues through meaning making (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). Such an approach directs scholars' attention to the firm to understand how meaning making influences how a firm's top managers determine they have decisions to make about improving social welfare. This is important, because by the time top managers realize they have a decision to make, a rich interpretive process has already strongly influenced them to make that decision in a particular way. Weick remarks, "So-called decision making may simply ratify what was made inevitable much earlier when an innocent-appearing set of judgments mapped an issue out of a much larger set of possibilities that has now been forgotten" (1999: 420). Put simply, and applied to the context of social issues, a social change agent shapes how a firm's top managers make decisions about social issues by advancing an interpretation of a set of cues bundled into an "issue." Once top managers interpret that they have a decision to make about a social issue, the social change agent has already done significant interpretive work that subtly shapes how these managers ultimately make decisions about the issue.

I unpack my arguments by first describing how issue illegitimacy and issue equivocality hinder a corporation's advancement of social issues. Afterward, I describe how different categories of meanings shape these issue impediments. I then move to the core part of my argument, proposing four different issue types based on the degree of issue impediments, along with the corresponding meaning-making tactic that I suggest best advances an issue given these impediments. I conclude by proposing a recursive model of how meaning making shapes social issues inside corporations.

Issue Impediments to Advancing Social Issues

Issue illegitimacy. A key impediment to firm action on social issues is these issues' perceived illegitimacy. Scholars with an issue-selling perspective have suggested the importance of legitimating issues inside firms to garner managerial attention (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Implied in this perspective is that social issues are often interpreted inside firms as lacking legitimacy (Sonenshein, 2006). For example, Piderit and Ashford proposed that social issues such as those concerning the natural environment, minority group treatment, and AIDS are "less consensually legitimate 'business' issues" (2003: 1478). As a result, I favor the term issue illegitimacy to connote that social change agents often face the impediment of lacking legitimacy for the issues they seek to advance. While issue-selling research is not explicitly framed within institutional theory, there are important similarities to and differences from the (il)legitimacy institutional theorists describe.

First, both perspectives focus on the attainment of legitimacy, but they differ regarding the referent of legitimacy, with institutional perspectives focusing on organizations vis-à-vis their institutional field and issue-selling perspectives focusing on an issue vis-à-vis a firm context. Second, both perspectives recognize that legitimacy gets conferred by entities when there is an interpretation that the object of legitimation (an organization or an issue) matches properties deemed appropriate within some socially constructed system (i.e., an institutional field or firm). Third, issue illegitimacy, similar to legitimacy described by institutional theorists, is shaped subjectively by individuals (Suchman, 1995).

Accordingly, individuals can use meaning making to increase the legitimacy of an issue or correspondingly decrease the illegitimacy of an issue (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000; Sonenshein, 2006). Fourth, institutional theorists have offered varying typologies of legitimacy, with common distinctions around moral, pragmatic, or cognitive legitimacy (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Suchman, 1995). Issue illegitimacy can similarly come in several different forms. For example, an issue can be illegitimate because it is not perceived to be a normative or moral issue to adopt (e.g., a firm considers that it has no obligation to the environment) or because it is not in a firm's interests (e.g., addressing this social issue will take away resources better allocated to other issues).

Issue equivocality. A second impediment is issue equivocality, which refers to multiple meanings about an issue (Weick, 1995). Issues do not have inherent meanings (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977); rather, firms serve as a marketplace of meanings that are advocated by members and acted on by top managers (Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001). When equivocality is high, this marketplace is very pluralistic, with multiple interpretations of an issue, such as around its scope, relevance to the firm, and implied action.

Social issues are often equivocal because firms and their members lack effective ways to measure them (Epstein, 2008). They are classic "wicked problems" in the sense that they are complex and ill-defined (Mason & Mitroff, 1973). For example, social issues can affect numerous constituencies in ways that are difficult to fully comprehend (Sonenshein, DeCelles, & Dutton, 2014). There also are conflicting discourses about social issues, with a variety of logics that might be used to shape the meaning of an issue (Bansal, 2003; Sonenshein, 2006). This renders social issues hard to comprehend and therefore even harder to act on. For example, issue equivocality may lead top managers to simply avoid making decisions about the issue, reflecting a status quo bias (Hambrick, Geletkanycz, & Fredrickson, 1993).

Social Change Meanings That Shape Issue Illegitimacy and Issue Equivocality

In this section I explain four categories of meanings that shape issue illegitimacy and issue equivocality for a social issue for a firm: economic philosophy, institutional field, firm mission, and social change agent beliefs. Although this list is

not exhaustive, I focus on these categories of meanings because they help ground a multilevel set of meanings that can influence a social issue and, as I argue below, they have clear theoretical connections to the issue impediments. These levels also map onto Wood's (1991) three levels for understanding corporate social responsibility around expectations placed on firms because of their role as economic institutions (economic philosophy and institutional field), expectations placed on a specific firm because of what it is and does (firm mission), and expectations based on the moral actors of a firm (social change agent beliefs).

Economic philosophy. As scholars have pointed out, broad economic philosophies can shape how people think and act (Hausman & McPherson, 1996). These theories can become self-fulfilling prophecies that reinforce behavior over time (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005). Two competing economic philosophies that are highly relevant to understanding a corporation's role in advancing social issues are shareholder primacy and the stakeholder perspective (Stout, 2012).

Shareholder primacy portrays social issues as contrary to the views of the primary entity that corporations ought to serve: stockholders. This economic perspective traces its intellectual history to economists such as Milton Friedman, who famously argued that

there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud (1962: 133).

From Friedman's perspective, social welfare gets maximized by business organizations' pursuit of their own profits, and therefore corporations have a moral imperative to directly serve only their shareholder interests (Stout, 2012). Such a view obstructs organizations from adopting certain social issues because they appear inconsistent with the basic principles of running a firm and might even require a breach of fiduciary duties to stockholders (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). As a result, this perspective delegitimizes many social issues, painting them as outside a firm's concern, expertise, and moral authority. Consequently, an organization's top managers often perceive that they have no obligation to adopt, or even an obligation not to adopt, a social issue—else they breach their duties to shareholders, which could subject the

organization to outflows of capital, lawsuits, or activist investors (Reiser, 2010). Such a perspective therefore tends to shape social issues as illegitimate for firms to address.

Several decades after Friedman's famous shareholder axiom, Freeman (1984) popularized the notion of "stakeholders"—the idea that a firm has several constituents beyond its stockholders, such as employees, customers, and the communities in which the firm operates. By broadening the constituencies of a corporation beyond shareholders, stakeholder perspectives better position organizations to improve social welfare more broadly, such as by allowing for consideration of employees, the natural environment, and local communities, in addition to shareholders (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al., 2010; Phillips, 2003). But this broadening of constituencies inadvertently can create a new challenge. The homogeneous focus on a seemingly easy-to-quantify metric—shareholder profits—gives way to a more amorphous set of indicators advocated by a more heterogeneous set of constituents (i.e., stakeholders; Harrison & Wicks, 2013). Consequently, issue equivocality increases as different stakeholders advance competing interpretations of social issues (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007). For example, an environmental watchdog likely has an interpretation of an issue around minimizing pollution from a factory that is very different from that of a supplier of coal to that factory. These different interpretations may emanate from different values or goals that create equivocal interpretations (McCaskey, 1982). Top managers, owing to these equivocal interpretations of issues, wrestle with how to prioritize stakeholder demands that come packaged with vastly different interpretations of the issue (Freeman, 1994; Mitchell et al., 1997).

Institutional field. Issue impediments are also influenced by a firm's institutional field, which involves a common meaning system among participants who interact with each other more frequently and fatefully than with those outside the field (Scott, 1995). An institutional field can include professional and industry associations, special interest groups, the general public, or any group that can exert coercive, normative, or mimetic pressures on an organization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Wooten & Hoffman, 2008). It can pressure firms to address issues, including social issues (Bansal & Roth, 2000; Galaskiewicz & Burt, 1991). Marquis, Glynn, and Davis (2007) proposed that shared meanings in an institutional field can delineate the

appropriate focus (e.g., health care, environment, etc.) and method (e.g., cash donations, volunteerism, etc.) of corporate social issue engagement. For example, scholars have shown that gay and lesbian employee rights came when a critical mass of organizations adopted more inclusive definitions of appropriate organizational action (Scully & Creed, 2005). Organizational decision makers, wanting to appear legitimate, signal compliance by meeting institutional demands.

While scholars have proposed that the institutional field can spur action on social issues, it can also make it difficult for a firm to meaningfully improve social welfare. First, many firms that address social issues because of institutional pressures do so largely to signal symbolic compliance (Dobbin, Sutton, Meyer, & Scott, 1993; Edelman, 1990). This reduces the likelihood that firms will take substantive action on social issues (Hess & Warren, 2008). Second, and more pertinent for issue illegitimacy, issues not favored by the institutional field lack legitimacy for even symbolic compliance, since firms have to meet other (nonsocial) demands from the institutional field. As a result, firms may be addressing only a narrow set of issues, and in ways that ground limited *meaningful* versus symbolic action. Furthermore, the institutional field can also create equivocality to the extent that there are multiple interpretations of the meaning of a social issue. For example, laws that were meant to prod organizations to address civil rights contained equivocal principles (e.g., interpretations included equality of treatment and equality of outcomes) that made it unclear how firms should address this issue until they experimented with approaches that eventually garnered legitimacy (Edelman, 1992).

Firm mission. A firm's mission can also shape issue illegitimacy and issue equivocality. Often-times a firm's mission draws from wider meanings about economic philosophies (or institutional fields) such that firms that focus on profit maximization draw from shareholder primacy theories, whereas firms that focus on a wider range of outcomes draw from stakeholder perspectives. However, firm missions are not equivalent to economic philosophies, since these missions are locally grounded in organizational norms that constitute a thicker, more contextualized, and potentially more influential set of norms (Sonenshein, 2005; Walzer, 1994). While economic philosophies or norms from an institutional field might provide abstract guiding principles for firms, a mission provides more concrete and substantial objectives

that firms seek to pursue, serving as a normative core that can provide more nuanced meanings about how they should allocate resources (Phillips, Freeman, & Wicks, 2003).

Firms with a predominantly profit focus elevate economic returns above all other considerations. This view discourages them from allocating resources in ways that do not maximize profits, considering any non-profit-maximizing issue as tangential (or worse) to their core mission. This has the consequence of delegitimizing social issues inside firms, thereby making less salient concerns about social welfare (Bundy, Shropshire, & Buchholtz, 2013). Absent explicit firm endorsement of social issues, actors may be reluctant to bring social issues to the attention of top managers (Dutton et al., 1997). Furthermore, key managerial decision making may prioritize other parties over the social good since a profit-oriented mission directs a firm's strategic purpose toward shareholders (Pearce & David, 1987).

Alternatively, some firms develop multidimensional missions that include not only a focus on profits but also a social welfare component (Hoffman, Badiane, & Haigh, 2010). For example, Interface's CEO instigated a dramatic turn toward more sustainable business practices, revising the firm's mission to minimize harm to the environment (Anderson, 1998). Such missions create internal criteria that orient a business organization toward the social good, subjecting it to self-imposed moral imperatives as opposed to outside moral pressures (Sonenshein, 2005). A stronger example of this comes from hybrid organizations that explicitly pursue joint purposes, such as the common good and shareholder returns (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). This endorsement of multiple missions allows traditionally for-profit firms to overcome structural impediments to pursuing the common good (even at the expense of shareholders; Gottesman, 2007).

Broadening a mission to include multiple objectives, such as shareholder returns and social welfare, could help mitigate the illegitimacy of a social issue. But these multiple objectives may amplify issue equivocality because they create potentially conflicting bases for action (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). This raises the possibility that a social change agent needs to make sense of a complex set of firm values and interpret how an issue might satisfy these multiple purposes. For example, Besharov (2014) examined a chain of natural food stores committed to both economic and social values, documenting the struggles

some employees have with interpreting the pursuit of both objectives.

Social change agent beliefs. Social change agents' beliefs may contribute to both issue illegitimacy and issue equivocality. Meyerson and Scully (1995) proposed that social change agents can experience ambivalence because they hold strong values connected to a social issue but also identify with their firms, which might not endorse these values. Because of perceived differences in values, social change agents tend to be risk averse when raising issues to top managers (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), such as by avoiding being associated with an issue that might harm their career or reputation (Ashford, 1998; Ashford et al., 1998). As a consequence, social change agents may ascribe illegitimacy to an issue if they calculate some type of value incongruence or negative consequence for advancing an issue. This serves to perpetuate interpretations of the illegitimacy of a social issue as social change agents infer from their own inaction that the issue is illegitimate (Bem, 1967) and then transfer these interpretations, implicitly or explicitly, to others, perhaps by informing colleagues that the firm does not view social issues as legitimate. For example, several Amazon.com employees considered advocating for the firm to become more engaged in the Seattle community, where its headquarters is located. Kintan Brahmbhatt, an Amazon employee, commented, "I kind of tested the waters by asking around, and I got a sense it's not worth pursuing" (Martinez & Heim, 2012). Based on the beliefs of other social change agents at Amazon, Brahmbhatt developed a belief that social issues in general were not viewed as legitimate at the firm and may have then inadvertently enacted issue illegitimacy by sharing this belief with others.

Individual beliefs can also contribute to issue equivocality. Social change agents' dual commitments to their firm and an issue create equivocality as they struggle to reconcile support for the issue and support for the firm (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). More specifically, the social change agent interprets the issue from two perspectives: as a member of the firm who wants to see the firm succeed and as a person concerned about a social issue who wants to see the issue addressed. Such equivocality can stifle action as members struggle to work out competing meanings (Pratt & Doucet, 2000). When they attempt to sort through these different meanings, they may more readily interpret contradictions between the two beliefs, something that may prompt disagreement with

other firm members and confusion over the firm’s role in addressing the issue (Besharov, 2014).

Summary. I outlined four types of meanings that can shape issue illegitimacy and issue equivocality, while suggesting that mitigating one impediment can sometimes amplify another. For example, shareholder primacy and profit-oriented missions can foster issue illegitimacy by positioning shareholders as the main entity that ought to be served by the firm. This issue illegitimacy might be amplified by social change agents who worry about career risks and become reluctant to advocate for a social issue. Stakeholder perspectives and multimission firms can help reduce illegitimacy but may increase issue equivocality by enabling multiple interpretations of the meaning of the issue. The individual beliefs of social change agents can amplify this equivocality as the agents struggle to reconcile potentially conflicting allegiances to an issue and a firm that might not endorse that issue. Furthermore, an institutional field that legitimates a social issue may nonetheless create equivocality over how to enact that social issue.

It is also important to note that the types of meanings, while related, are best described as loosely coupled (Weick, 1976). Figure 1 summarizes the relationship among the different levels of meanings. The concentric circles in the figure show that the different levels of meanings are nested among each other, and the dashed lines indicate that the levels are porous. For example, economic philosophies can shape how institutional fields evolve, which can subsequently shape a firm’s mission and then influence a social change agent’s beliefs. This does not suggest that only proximate layers of meaning can influence each other. There can indeed be cases where, for example, an

economic philosophy influences a social change agent’s belief in ways not shaped by a firm. It is also important to note that actors such as firms or individuals can push back on these patterns of meanings and reshape them (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009; Reay, Golden-Biddle, & Germann, 2006), something I will suggest later when I propose a recursive model.

Issue Types and Meaning-Making Tactics

At the core of the concentric circles in Figure 1, I place “Social issue for firm”—the firm’s meanings about the issue, which are shaped by the four levels of meanings discussed above. In this section I describe a way of classifying the meanings of a social issue for a firm based on the degree of issue illegitimacy and issue equivocality. To preview this section, I group these issue impediments to ground four types of issues social change agents try to advance and propose the corresponding meaning-making tactic best suited to address each issue type. Each tactic seeks to advance an interpretation of a social issue in ways that more likely lead a firm’s top managers to support the issue. I describe four issue types (convertible, blurry, safe, and risky) that are based on the degree of equivocality and illegitimacy of the social issue inside the firm and their corresponding matched tactics (framing, labeling, maintaining, and importing; see Figure 2).

FIGURE 1
Social Change Meanings That Shape Issue Illegitimacy and Issue Equivocality

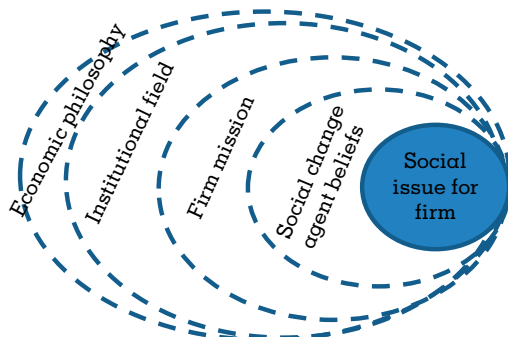


FIGURE 2
Matching Issue Type and Meaning-Making Tactic

		Issue illegitimacy	
		High	Low
Issue equivocality	High	Issue type: convertible Tactic: framing	Issue type: blurry Tactic: labeling
	Low	Issue type: risky Tactic: importing	Issue type: safe Tactic: maintaining

Convertible issues and framing. I refer to issues that have high equivocality and high illegitimacy as convertible. While there are sometimes inherent trade-offs between issue impediments (e.g., shareholder primacy that fosters illegitimacy but reduces equivocality), issues that have high levels of both impediments can occur for several reasons. First, an issue in a firm can be shaped by multiple levels of meanings that conflict. For example, a firm may have a mission that treats a social issue as illegitimate but may be embedded in an institutional field that does not. This can create equivocality, since there are multiple interpretations of an issue, as well as illegitimacy, since the firm's mission does not recognize the legitimacy of the issue. This is what happens when there are organizations that exhibit low institutional fit (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Alternatively, a social issue can be considered illegitimate inside the firm, institutional field, and broader economic discourses, but there can be equivocality over whether the social issue may be related to firm profits, thereby opening up the possibility of portraying the social issue as being good for business (Hosmer, 1994; Jones, 1995).

The term *convertible* helps connote that while these issues might seem difficult to advance because of high illegitimacy and high equivocality, social change agents can reshape (i.e., convert) them in ways that increase the probability of top managerial support. This is because while high equivocality might obstruct meaning making (such as what is this issue really about for the firm?), it may also provide for more flexibility in *sensegiving*—the process of attempting to influence others about a meaning construction (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). More specifically, under conditions of high equivocality, social change agents have a higher level of interpretive discretion to construct the meaning of an issue in strategic and/or variable ways that best support their pursuit of change (Sonenshein, 2010). This is because high equivocality creates a wider array of discursive resources for social change agents (Hardy et al., 2000).

I propose that framing will be the most effective social change tactic for convertible issues. I base this reasoning on framing's ability to imbue equivocal interpretations with meaning (which helps resolve issue equivocality), coupled with its ability to strategically capitalize on that equivocality to shape the meaning of issues to be more

legitimate (which helps resolve issue illegitimacy; e.g., Sillince & Mueller, 2007). Framing helps position the issue in ways that correspond to the interests, values, and problems of top managers, and it jointly resolves the challenge of diverting from established meanings about an issue as illegitimate while imputing new meanings that address equivocality (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009). One way that framing accomplishes this is by selectively highlighting and concealing meanings to advance a preferred interpretation of an issue (Fiss & Zajac, 2006), such as by presenting economic meanings often thought to resonate with top managers and withholding normative meanings often thought to deter top managers from acting on a social issue (Sonenshein, 2006).

Howard-Grenville and Hoffman (2003) documented social change agents' use of framing at a large semi-conductor manufacturer. When employees encountered resistance to implementing more stringent pollution standards for a manufacturing process, they reduced their use of language around pollution and instead framed their request as a means to increase their capacity for production. They sought to understand what types of arguments would best appeal to the targets they were attempting to influence. As Howard-Grenville and Hoffman observe, "Only through making the goal directly relevant to . . . [other organizational members] by framing it in the language of an operational problem, did . . . [the social change agents] gain the influence to motivate action" (2003: 79).

Blurry issues and labeling. I refer to high equivocality, low illegitimacy issues as blurry issues. They are blurry in the sense that they are hard to interpret, even though there is the abstract sense that they could be perceived as legitimate inside the firm. For example, a firm may support the basic concept underlying a social issue, but its members may have competing interpretations of the scope of the issue or implications of the issue for the firm. The major problem the social change agent faces for blurry issues is confusion, something that warrants meaning-making tactics that reduce equivocality (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) to allow a firm's members to coalesce around an interpretation of an issue.

I propose that social change agents will be most effective at gaining top management support of blurry issues by using labeling. This tactic involves meaning making that helps construct

a plausible interpretation of what the issue means by using a label to concisely convey a compelling interpretation of the issue. Agents use labels to structure the social environment in the wake of equivocality or uncertainty, but they seek not only to help understand the social environment but also to control it (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997). It is this joint focus on understanding (to reduce equivocality) and control (to shape the meaning of issues in ways that advance the social change agent's view of the issue) that can help spark a dialogue about a social issue. Furthermore, once labeled, meanings that are now configured around an "issue" become reified such that the label (and therefore the issue) becomes more legitimated. In other words, labels do not reflect reality but, rather, create that reality (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Absent a label for a social issue, it becomes hard to discursively refer to that issue, which reduces the prospects that a firm's top managers can comprehend the meaning of the issue, allocate any time, attention, or money to it, or even recognize that they face an issue in the first place (Andersson & Bateman, 2000). In this sense, labeling solves the key impediment for blurry issues (i.e., issue equivocality) in ways that help the issues become communicated about and subsequently acted on (Chia, 2000).

The value of labeling recently unfolded inside and outside firms where social change agents interpreted an ambiguous set of meanings around social inequality with labels such as "the one percent" (Gitlin, 2012). This label concisely captured the meanings of income inequality that many Americans supported but did not realize was an issue in the first place. But labeling can also happen inside firms. Parmar (2014) describes how an employee and his supervisor applied different labels to the same set of events—one predicated on a political struggle and the other on obedience. As Parmar puts it, "Each took similar cues and embellished them with other cues from their experience and memory to retrospectively construct a plausible narrative" (2014: 1112f). Similarly, I described (Sonenshein, 2009) the labels employees at a retail organization used to construct issues arising during an organizational change, showing that equivocality provided them with the ability to label issues emphasizing principles around employee rights.

Safe issues and maintaining. I refer to issues with low illegitimacy and low equivocality as safe issues to connote that both issue impediments are

relatively minimal and that social change agents take minimal risk in trying to advocate for these issues. In fact, safe issues are those that are often sought out by change agents because they can help advance their careers (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Existing research suggests that such a supportive environment in which to advocate for a social issue is likely rare in most firms. For example, there are usually conflicting sets of meanings about issues (Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2002; Dutton et al., 1997), especially social issues (Sonenshein et al., 2014), and many social issues are interpreted as illegitimate (Sonenshein, 2006). However, some firms adopt a particular social cause, and social change agents who advocate for an issue tied to this cause find themselves in a better position than most social change agents. For example, Walmart has embraced a sustainable supply chain (Gordon, 2014), and social change agents can use this support to push for other types of sustainability issues consistent with this initiative.

For safe issues, I propose that the most effective tactic for a social change agent is maintaining—that is, helping top managers maintain their interpretation of the social issue in ways conducive to their support of the issue. Given our psychological tendencies to confirm what we already think (Nickerson, 1998), one approach is for a social change agent to prevent any disconfirming interpretations from undermining the status quo. Maintaining can also involve social change agents' reference to a firm's artifacts, such as its mission statement, to interpret how the social issue is consistent with the firm's meanings (Sonenshein, 2005). For example, Dutton and Dukerich (1991) documented how the issue of homelessness became advanced at the Port Authority because employees interpreted the social issue as consistent with existing meanings about the organization's mission. As another example, Microsoft has explicitly endorsed the importance of sustainability. Gina Broel, an employee with a passion for the environment, was able to successfully champion making Microsoft's conferences more sustainable. She started with simple initiatives, such as eliminating bottled water, but eventually built off of the firm's support of the issue to push for an expanded view of sustainability at the company (Maw, 2014).

Risky issues and importing. I refer to low equivocality, high illegitimacy issues as risky. These issues are risky because they are unequivocally illegitimate. Thus, there are limited

degrees of freedom in meaning making, in contrast to convertible issues. Given the pattern of impediments for this type of issue, a social change agent will be more prone to abandon his or her efforts, compared to the other three quadrants, since social change agents are often risk averse (Ashford, 1998). Without the enabling properties of equivocality (Eisenberg, 1984), the meanings that illegitimate a social issue may become too formidable an obstacle to overcome. As a result, I propose that risky issues are least likely to be advanced by social change agents at a firm. As an alternative, social change agents could find other venues to advocate for a social issue outside of work. To return to the Amazon example from above, Brahmhatt decided, given that the social issue was risky, to pursue it outside of his work setting. Thus, for risky issues, social change agents will, more so than other issue types, abandon their efforts to advocate for the issue at the firm.

While risky issues run a greater chance of being abandoned, it is possible that social change agents will decide to persist in trying to advance a social issue, despite the risks. This might reflect their strong social identification with the issue (Stets & Biga, 2003) or positive self-evaluations of their ability to spark social change (e.g., Sonenshein et al., 2014).

I propose that when social agents advance risky issues, they will be most effective using importing—that is, relying on meaning making that imports meanings from outside the firm to try to advance the issue (Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996). I base this claim on the fact that risky issues are unequivocally illegitimate for the firm. To respond to this, social change agents need to find another basis for advancing an interpretation of the issue, such as at the institutional field level. This allows them the possibility of interpreting the issue as legitimate on some basis outside the firm, such as through accounts in the media, competitors, associations, and NGOs (Campbell, 2007). These broader social forces can provide social change agents with meanings that help pursue their issues at work (e.g., Scully & Segal, 2002), but it is critical to recognize that because of the low equivocality of risky issues, there may simply not be enough equivocality about an issue to ground an interpretation that the issue has a legitimate basis for firm action. That is, while social change agents can embellish meanings they import from an institutional context

(Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009), they are still somewhat constrained by these meanings that serve as the foundation of their embellishment.

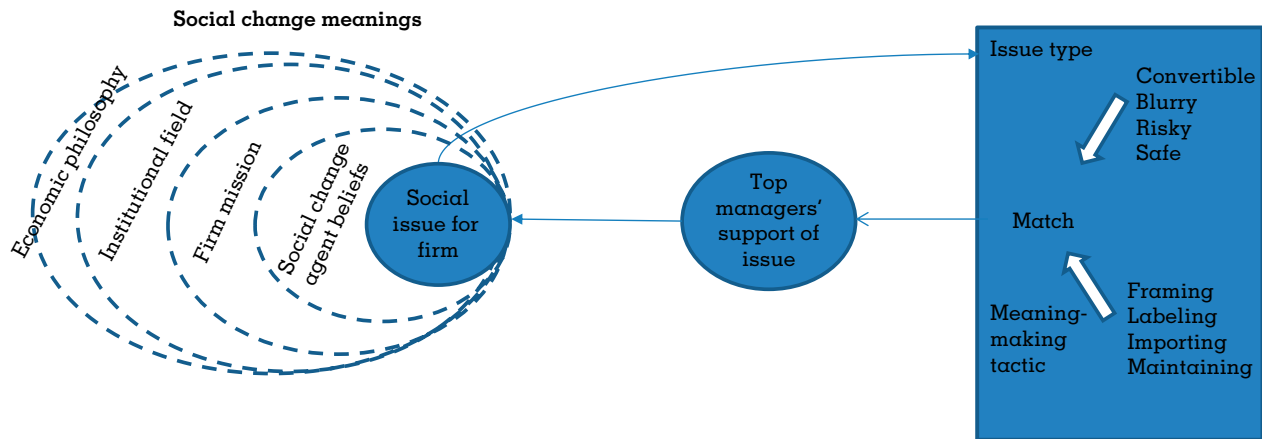
Creed, Scully, and Austin (2002) provided an example consistent with importing. They found that for gay rights, social change agents reinterpreted institutional meanings to advance the issue by borrowing from and elaborating on meanings of outside social activists. Another way social change agents can use importing is by conducting an analysis of the institutional field. Through trade groups, social networks, or public statements, individuals can learn about social initiatives in other organizations and various meanings likely to lead to their adoption. A social change agent can construct a story for his or her firm based on a competitor's approach (perhaps one that might have deviated from institutional norms to address the issue) that has embraced a particular initiative that should be adopted.

Recursive Model of How Meaning Making Shapes Social Issues in Corporations

Figure 3 presents a recursive model of how meaning making shapes social issues. First, at the heart of the model is the match between the four meaning-making tactics and the issue types summarized in Figure 2 and discussed above. These matched issue types and tactics influence whether top managers support, or do not support, an issue. This is because each properly matched tactic helps resolve a core meaning-making problem inherent in a particular issue type.

Convertible issues lack both legitimacy and coherence. Framing adds legitimacy to an issue by interpreting the issue in terms of a firm's widely shared language and discourse, while obscuring those aspects of the issue that may conflict with this language and discourse. The social change agent capitalizes on high issue equivocality to interpretively weave the issue into the firm's existing meanings (Dougherty & Heller, 1994), thereby allowing top managers to support the issue. Blurry issues lack coherence but have legitimacy. Labeling adds coherence by assigning a vivid symbol to the issue that can resonate with top managers. This allows top managers to notice, refer to, and act on the issue. It also helps concentrate their limited attention to a defined object, something essential because of top managers' limited attentional resources (Ocasio,

FIGURE 3
Recursive Model of How Meaning Making Shapes Social Issues in Corporations



1997). For safe issues, the main problem is essentially keeping the interpretive status quo, which is already supportive of the issue. Maintaining allows a social change agent to shape top managers' continued support for and/or expansion of an issue by reinforcing existing interpretations. Finally, risky issues exhibit illegitimacy but are particularly vexing because there is little equivocality about this illegitimacy. Importing draws from a wider set of meanings beyond the firm to influence top managers' interpretations of an issue as something the firm should address, since the firm's own meanings are not supportive of the issue.

While the four issue types have different patterns of impediments, corresponding effective tactics, and mechanisms that explain how social change agents can effectively act on them, they all share a similar process. That is, one approach to encouraging firms to act on social issues involves a bottom-up effort by social change agents who use meaning making to convince top managers to support an issue. Properly matched issue types and tactics enhance the likelihood of top management support.

When the outcome of a social change agent's efforts to convince a corporation to address social welfare leads to top management support for the issue, the issue type moves from a state of higher impediments to one of lower impediments. This changes the meaning of the social issue for the firm (represented by the arrow connecting "Top managers' support of issue" to "Social issue for firm" in Figure 3), and these changes in meaning, in turn, can change the issue type (represented by

an arrow from "Social issue for firm" to "Issue type" in Figure 3). For example, a social change agent who successfully uses tactics such as framing or clarifying can transform a convertible or blurry issue, respectively, into a safe issue. In these cases the social change agent may have convinced top managers to support the issue, something that signals to members of the firm that the issue is unequivocally legitimate. When top managers subsequently enact these interpretations, such as by allocating critical firm resources to support the social issue, this can lead to an even stronger degree of positive changes in meaning due to consistency between meanings and actions (Simons, 2002).

Alternatively, when top managers do not react favorably to a social change agent's attempts, this can move an issue toward one of higher impediments. For example, unsuccessful attempts at trying to frame a convertible issue may turn the issue into a risky one. Top managers may sanction the social change agent for raising the issue or may refuse to allocate any time or attention to the issue (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). This may cause the social change agent to simply abandon advocating for the social issue at the firm or to use importing to rely on, for example, institutional meanings to attempt to influence top managers. Thus, I propose that successful framing or labeling tactics will turn convertible and blurry issues into safe issues, which will enable social change agents to shift tactics to maintaining. Unsuccessful framing or labeling tactics, however, will turn convertible and blurry issues into risky issues, which will lead social change agents to

abandon the issue or use importing. For risky issues, successful importing may mitigate one of the two issue impediments, thereby transforming the issue to either convertible (through introducing more equivocality, such as by calling attention to institutional meanings that might conflict with other meanings) or blurry (through convincing top managers about the legitimacy of a social issue).

Beyond the immediate issue at stake, top management (lack of) support for an issue can also have wider-reaching implications. This is because when top managers (do not) support an issue, they not only can change the meaning of the social issue for the firm but also potentially can change other levels of meaning. The closer the level of meaning making is to the core of the concentric circles found in Figure 1 and reproduced in Figure 3, the more likely the level of meaning will be reshaped by top managers' (lack of) support of the social issue. This is because these levels of meaning making are more proximate to the interpretive work of social change agents inside a firm. Consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), a social change agent who advocates for the issue is likely to revise his or her interpretation of the issue based on how top managers respond to his or her (or other social change agents') efforts. Support of the social issue might reduce differences between the two previously conflicting meanings, since social change agents can reach clearer interpretations by gauging top managers' reactions. Similarly, a social change agent's concerns about issue illegitimacy and subsequent career risk are likely to be amplified or dampened based on how top managers' react to efforts to advance the social issue (e.g., Sonenshein et al., 2014).

It is also possible for a firm's mission to change based on a revised interpretation of a social issue. This is what happened when Interface adopted environmental sustainability as an issue and subsequently changed its mission (Anderson, 1998). This can serve as a potent impetus for firms to improve the social welfare because it leads to an amplifying process that may positively shape the meanings of other social issues as a firm starts to reorient and enact its values in more socially sensitive ways (Gehman, Trevino, & Garud, 2013). In other words, through the actions of a social change agent in advocating for a single issue, a firm may move to more broadly engage with issues concerning social welfare.

Finally, it's least likely that top managers will impact the institutional field or economic philosophy based on support (or lack thereof) of a social issue. As larger systems of meanings composed of other firms, governments, laws, and so forth, these institutions are much more calcified in their meanings. They depend on a larger diversity of agents to shape them and have practices that may help reinforce them (Lawrence et al., 2009). While such broad institutional change is possible, it is more difficult for a social change agent to shape these institutions through support of a specific issue (Battilana et al., 2009).

In summary, I propose a recursive model whereby social change meanings shape the degree of issue equivocality and issue illegitimacy. These impediments ground an issue type that, when matched to a meaning-making tactic, can not only influence top managers to support the particular social issue but also can shape broader meanings about issues in and beyond the firm.

DISCUSSION

Contributions to Theory

This article explains how meaning making serves at the heart of both impediments to and enablers of a corporation's efforts to improve the social welfare. I proposed that multiple levels of meanings shape social issues inside a firm such that a given issue may exhibit varying degrees of issue equivocality and issue illegitimacy. These patterns of issue impediments, which sometimes involve inherent trade-offs between each other, ground four issue types: convertible, blurry, safe, and risky. I then proposed that social change agents who use a particular meaning-making tactic (framing, labeling, maintaining, or importing) matched to an issue type can influence top managers to support the social issue. Over time, top managers' interpretations can reshape not only the social issue for the firm but also possibly other levels of meanings. This can change the issue type inside the firm and the most effective tactic for advocating for that issue in the future.

A meaning-making perspective on social issues offers several contributions to understanding the role of firms in improving social welfare. First, the meaning-making approach presented in this article squarely positions the social change agent as a key impetus enabling firms to contribute to the social good. As a complement to perspectives that

favor external pressures (Marquis et al., 2007) or emphasize the role of top managers (Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al., 2010; Phillips, 2003), I focused on how employees can help steer firms toward addressing social issues. However, I also recognized that various external factors influence both firms and the social change agents who operate within them.

The development of a meaning-making perspective about social issues necessitates an inward focus on how social issues become "issues" for a firm's top managers in the first place and how various types of meanings within and outside the firm are used to shape this process. It emphasizes that "social," "strategic," or any other meaning that can be made of an issue is a consequence of a process to create a plausible interpretation of cues utilizing meaning-making tactics to influence others about that interpretation. By looking inside the firm, such an approach encourages researchers to examine the skilled actions of social change agents who help firms overcome the illegitimacy and equivocality that often characterize social issues.

The meaning-making processes I proposed also connect sensegiving tactics (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) to issue type, something that can spark research on influencing top managers about issues more generally. I proposed that social change agents can address the degree of issue illegitimacy and issue equivocality through tactics targeted at the type of issue they face. While there are multiple levels of meanings that can shape a social issue inside a firm, I proposed how the social change agent navigates these complex meanings to present compelling interpretations of issues to a firm's top managers. Such an approach spotlights the importance of both sensemaking and sensegiving as part of the meaning-making work of social change agents, and it adds important nuance to the specific tactics these change agents use, as well as when they are likely to be most effective.

More specifically, I considered how social change agents can respond to issue illegitimacy through tactics such as importing and framing. I also proposed how social change agents can respond more effectively to issue equivocality through framing and labeling. These tactics highlight the skill of individuals in manipulating the meaning of social issues rather than treating these issues as objectively defined and static.

This illustrates one way in which sensegiving not only shapes but also controls the interpretive reality of others (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). This also builds on research that has started to focus on the tactics of change agents (Ashford & Detert, 2015; Piderit & Ashford, 2003) by elaborating on when certain tactics will likely be most effective at garnering top management support for an issue. Furthermore, by developing a recursive model of how social change agents can alter the meaning of issues over time, I provided a pathway for how issue types can shift, something that suggests the importance of temporal perspectives when considering social issues (e.g., Howard-Grenville, 2007). That is, if the meanings of issues shift over time, it becomes essential to understand the changing tactics that individuals use to advocate for those issues.

Second, while I put meaning making at the heart of issue impediments, I also proposed how meaning making can suggest a path forward. The meaning-making framework presented here explains how social change agents can advance an issue despite issue impediments. Much of the extant literature theorizes that individuals will abandon their efforts at advancing an issue because of fears over career repercussions (Ashford et al., 1998). Yet some scholars have questioned this assumption (Ashford & Barton, 2007; Sonenshein, 2012), focusing instead not on whether social change agents will abandon or proceed with trying to foster social change but on *how* they do so under adverse conditions (Sonenshein, 2006). By focusing a theoretical lens on how social change agents can most effectively operate in difficult contexts, I offer novel theorizing about how to facilitate organizational efforts to improve social welfare across different issue types.

A third contribution is explaining how firms manage for stakeholders who do not have a legitimate claim on a firm's value (e.g., Phillips, 2003), are not salient to a firm's top managers (e.g., Mitchell et al., 1997), and do not serve a firm's financial interests (e.g., Donaldson & Preston, 1995). As Clarkson put it, "Social issues are not necessarily stakeholder issues" (1995: 105). Yet how social change agents make meaning of issues can transform social issues into stakeholder issues. Social change agents introduce issues that firms may eventually need to respond to but that are currently not represented by a stakeholder group or claim. This helps top managers better anticipate changes in the environment, as

well as innovate in ways that address the issue (Davis & White, 2015). By emphasizing that those outside of top management serve at the heart of this process, a meaning-making approach complements managerial-centric approaches to stakeholder perspectives (Freeman, Harrison, & Wicks, 2007) that largely remain silent on the role of employees, beyond advancing their narrow interests (e.g., worker rights).

On a related note, this research suggests the intriguing possibility that while scholars have positioned stakeholder perspectives as an antidote to stockholder-focused ones, such as shareholder primacy, trading stockholder for stakeholder perspectives may solve issue illegitimacy at the cost of issue equivocality. By understanding the trade-offs of stockholder and stakeholder views, scholars can better explain how economic philosophies about business organizations trickle down to impact individuals whose actions are instrumental for business organizations to engage with social issues. However, I also suggest that social change agents can capitalize on equivocality (Eisenberg, 1984; Sonenshein, 2010) to spark improvements in social welfare, as opposed to being stifled by it. In this regard, the equivocality impediment may be less pernicious than scholars think in some situations, thereby mitigating concerns that stakeholder perspectives inadvertently produce equivocality even while they reduce illegitimacy. As a result, this research proposes a possible solution to the stockholder-stakeholder trade-off whereby I argue that stakeholder perspectives trade off equivocality to solve illegitimacy. In fact, my theorizing suggests that equivocality coupled with low issue illegitimacy can be a very supportive meaning-making context for a social change agent. This is because while there is disagreement about the meaning of a social issue, social issues are interpreted as relatively more legitimate. Thus, stakeholder perspectives may hold an antidote to stockholder perspectives if they can reduce illegitimacy and bolster equivocality in ways that give social change agents the ability to strategically capitalize on that equivocality.

Finally, scholars can build on the ideas in this article by testing the key relationships and processes I have theorized. Qualitative studies of how social change agents advocate issues over time (e.g., Bansal, 2003; Howard-Grenville, 2007)

can unpack how a social issue moves across the four issue types. Process-oriented approaches (e.g., Langley, 1999) are particularly well suited to examine the broader evolution of issue meanings over time (e.g., Sonenshein, 2009), such as how the different levels of meanings shape a social issue for the firm. Furthermore, scholars can use survey data to examine the specific causal relationships I proposed between matching issue types and meaning-making tactics (e.g., Ashford & Detert, 2015). For example, a survey of top managers can provide data on issue impediments by asking open-ended questions about how these managers interpret the issue. Researchers can survey social change agents to determine which tactics they have used for advocating issues. Scholars can obtain data on top manager support of the issues from top managers, employee surveys, or archival data about social initiatives. Finally, scholars can consider how the arguments developed in this article can extend beyond public corporations. Even socially oriented organizations are limited in the type of issues they can address. The concepts developed in this article may help explain why such organizations expand (or fail to expand) the variety of social issues they seek to address.

Contributions to Practice

While researchers have spent considerable time documenting the external pressures individuals and groups place on corporations, they know far less about social change agents who operate inside firms. I proposed a set of tactics matched to issue types that I argued would most likely lead to supportive managerial interpretations of a social issue. Social change agents can use tactics such as framing, labeling, maintaining, and importing under particular combinations of equivocality and illegitimacy. Accordingly, it is important for social change agents to be cognizant of the degree of equivocality and illegitimacy for a particular issue in their firm. At the same time, I suggested that, contra previous suggestions (e.g., Ashford et al., 1998), when social change agents face inhospitable organizational contexts, they can nonetheless use these meaning-making tactics to transform their contexts into ones more hospitable to social issues. This releases social change agents from being constrained by a lack of contextual favorability within their workplace and provides them with alternative sources of meaning from which to make

sense of and give sense to social issues (Dutton et al., 2002; Dutton et al., 1997).

By examining issue equivocality and issue illegitimacy and connecting them to meaning making by social change agents, I proposed that firms may seek to improve social welfare because of, among other things, the critical role of the social change agent. This perspective explains the challenges firms face when trying to address issues to advance social welfare and how social change agents can use a variety of tactics to overcome key impediments to foster firm action on pressing social issues.

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