

Response to Richard Marens

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to Dr. Marens. We are grateful for his interest in our article and for reinforcing the relevance it may have for a wide range of scholars, including those interested in employee rights. While we share many of his concerns, we take issue with much of his critique, which presupposes that we were making substantive claims about the content of responsibilities stakeholders owe to each other. Our focus was much broader, to develop the idea of stakeholder responsibility, and to illustrate its promise. Rather than serving as a barrier to employee rights, we see our elaboration of stakeholder responsibility as a vehicle for discussing the rights and responsibilities of various stakeholders—including employees—in relation to the firm and to other stakeholders. In our response, we hope to build on a number of areas addressed in Dr. Marens's response to our article in order to highlight some critical issues central to fostering the two-way conversation between corporate responsibility and stakeholder responsibility.

Our intent in this article was not to build a substantive theory of stakeholder responsibility. Rather, we note on page 375 of our article that our central goal is “[t]o develop a richer understanding of stakeholder responsibility.” We attempt to do this through defining stakeholder responsibility, discussing why we believe a stakeholder responsibility perspective is important for both academics and practitioners, and how the topic of stakeholder responsibility might be integrated into future research and business practice. Aside from an initial broad description we specifically avoid getting into details in terms of describing what stakeholders owe each other or the firm. Instead, we highlight why it is important to address the broad question of stakeholder responsibility, a concern Dr. Marens clearly shares.

He claims that our “treatment of employees is incomplete and unrealistic.” We did not go into the depth that one might expect if writing an article about employee responsibility. In Table 2 (p. 392) we outline a set of responsibilities for key stakeholder groups largely as an illustration or as a generic beginning point. For employees we suggest the following responsibilities, “Enact the mission and values of the firm in daily behaviors; exercise voice in responsible ways; reciprocate firm efforts to build trust and commitment through contributing skills, knowledge, and flexibility.” These responsibilities, while quite broadly described, are realistic, particularly if reinforced by incentives and institutional mechanisms, as we highlight at the top of p. 394.

As to whether we are guilty of treating employees as means without respecting their ends and broader purposes, we have tried to acknowledge employee rights, while also emphasizing the importance of mutual responsibilities. For example, on p. 389 we explicitly reference Bowie's discussion of firm-employee relationships and specifically the employment-at-will doctrine. We note employees' claims to rights with regard to receiving advance notice, being treated with respect and dignity, having employee loyalty honored, and recognizing “the burden employees

bear when they are terminated with little advance notice.” We then suggest that employees have important responsibilities as well to employers, for example, due to firm investments in these employees.

While we disagree with these aspects of Dr. Marens’s critique, he has raised a number of important issues that warrant attention as business ethics scholars begin to consider more directly the responsibilities of stakeholders—employees, as well as other key stakeholder groups. Dr. Marens alerts us to the potential pitfalls in expecting stakeholders to assume responsibilities without mechanisms to reinforce key stakeholder rights and without incentives and institutional supports to reinforce responsibilities. This is a point we try to reinforce on page 394, but it merits more emphasis.

Dr. Marens argues for the importance of academics directly engaging stakeholders and learning from them. This is an excellent point and it goes beyond our encouragement for academics “to communicate directly to audiences outside the academy and outside firm boundaries—customers, suppliers, investors, NGO’s, and others.” There does indeed need to be a two-way conversation and in the case of employee responsibility one can certainly go beyond groups like SHRM to include discussions with unions and NGO’s, for example.

Shifting the focus to stakeholder responsibility does not minimize or negate the importance of corporate responsibility and Dr. Marens reinforces this critical point in his response. But it is time to move away from an exclusive critique of firms in regard to corporate responsibility. Yes, we do need to acknowledge when firms such as Starbucks, Citigroup, and Southwest Airlines do not uphold their responsibilities. We also need to hold employees and other stakeholder groups accountable as well for fulfilling their responsibilities.

In taking the time to develop his response to our article, Dr. Marens has made an important contribution in opening up an exchange of ideas about corporate and stakeholder responsibility. No doubt there will be differences in areas of emphasis and controversy in how academics and practitioners approach the topic of stakeholder responsibility. We also hope there will be broad areas of agreement and convergence as well. Ultimately what matters most is that a two-way conversation has begun, one that we hope will engage many others over time.

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