WHEN MORAL SIGNALS COLLIDE: HOW CEO RHETORIC AND MORAL CONDUCT SPILLS OVER TO CORPORATE REPUTATION

BROWN BAG SERIES

Hoffman Center for Business Ethics

Wednesday, September 17, 2025

12:30 p.m. to 1:45 p.m.

Hybrid Event, LaCava Building, Room 168

Zoom: Register Here

CEOs often use rhetorical moral signals to enhance corporate reputation, especially in firms active in ESG and CSR. These signals include CEO advocacy—promotion of widely accepted issues—and CEO activism—public stances on more contentious topics.

Beyond rhetoric, substantive moral signals—CEOs' actual behavior in both public and private life—are increasingly scrutinized and significantly influence perceptions of the firm.

This research investigates how stakeholders interpret these signals through a sensemaking process, using attribution theory to assess whether the CEO's motives are seen as genuine (other-serving) or self-serving (impression management). Scenario-based experiments reveal three key findings:

1. Substantive moral signals affect firm-level perceptions and corporate reputation.
2. Rhetorical signals backfire when paired with unethical CEO conduct.
3. Even business-related activism loses credibility when the CEO has a history of immoral behavior.

Thus, CEO morality matters: personal ethics can amplify or undermine the reputational effects of rhetorical moral signaling.

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