

Lektioita

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Discursive constructions of climate change engagement in business organisations

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In September, social and political activist Naomi Klein's new book *This Changes Everything* was published, stating that our economic model – capitalism – is 'at war with life on Earth'. Earlier this month, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its fifth assessment report confirming the results of previous reports and urging immediate, substantial and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions to limit climate risks to human and natural systems. According to the IPCC, anthropogenic – human induced – greenhouse gas emissions caused by economic and population growth are now higher than ever.

Finland is often cited as one of the most advanced countries in environmental and sustainability issues. In Finland, climate change features quite often in the news. Commonly, newspapers' political sections report on international conferences and other summits where world leaders strive to agree on climate goals for the future. Mostly, the results of these conferences have been major disappointments to climate activists, as well as to the countries most likely to suffer climate change's heaviest impacts. In the newspapers' economic sections, the topics typically fall into two categories: the latest low-carbon technological developments or the negative impacts of emission restrictions on the competitiveness of Finnish companies. In the science sections, the sensitivity of natural systems to climate change is reported, along with drastic predictions for the future.

Climate change is increasingly becoming of interest in business research. Management, organisations and corporate sustainability researchers posit that businesses have both strategic and moral obligations to address climate change. From a strategic point of view, managers and organisations need to consider a major shift in interactions with physical and political environments. Business organisations' moral obligations stem from the financial, technological and organisational assets they control – vital resources when developing responses to climate change. In addition, climate regulations and societal demands call for businesses to reduce their direct and indirect greenhouse gas emissions.

However, addressing climate change requires fundamental theoretical and practical changes. Climate change has been identified as drastic large-scale system alterations that may force us to re-examine "business-as-usual" and the conceptions we have of ourselves and of our social, economic and political systems. This is quite different from typical corporate responsibility or environmental issues. No individual actor or organisation can be held responsible for causing climate change. Likewise, no individual actor or organisation can solve the problem either by stopping or reversing the changes already taking place. The expected impacts are not fully known, and they are happening on a truly global scale. These affect different geographical areas in a variety of ways. The expected

effects cannot be controlled by individual companies or industries. Therefore, addressing climate change is not a question of which companies or industries should do what; rather, it is a question of how we as a society can address this challenge and change our conceptions and ways of acting, living and consuming. It has become a question of how economic and political actors, including business organisations, are a part, and drivers, of this societal transformation.

Societal transformation requires us to question the taken-for-granted assumptions of business and society. One of the current conceptions we need to re-examine is the business-nature relationship – in particular, the separation of natural environments and economic activities. Climate change is usually seen as an environmental issue affecting natural systems and causing, for instance, flooding, heat spells and melting of ice caps. These weather extremes are, however, so drastic that they pose risks for humans and economic activities, too. For instance, severe flooding causes crop damage and refugees fleeing the area, which in turn cause economic problems.

In addition, traditional business language also views nature and business as unequal, one superior to the other. Mostly, the economic system is presented as superior to the natural environment. In traditional business terms, profitability and economic development are seen as primary aims, as things that enable the pursuit of social and environmental goals. The natural environment is depicted as an infinite resource that can be used to advance economic growth and development. For instance, consider the recent developments of the Talvivaara mining company. This mine is located in the northern part of Finland, in the Kainuu region, which is wrestling with high unemployment rates. The mine was seen as bringing employment and prosperity to the region. However, the mining operations have caused an extensive environmental disaster, and the company has received much criticism for poor handling of environmental issues. Now, as the mining company is struggling with economic issues as well, the public discussion over the company's future has become lively again. Some say that saving the jobs of the company's workers should be a priority and that the natural environment will recover over time, while others argue that the company should not be financially supported because it has been unable to prove it can operate viably.

Business organisations can foster societal change by improving their operations and developing

products and services for consumers. While these activities are vital for bringing about change, equally important – and maybe even more so – are the ways business managers and professionals talk about climate change: what they present as important, possible and desirable. Business managers are well-respected high-status leaders whose views are often cited in the news. These leaders' perceptions and statements have a direct influence on the ongoing societal and political discussions of sustainability. In addition, language use is not 'only words'. The way issues are presented has consequences. For instance, when climate change is publicly presented as "the most pressing issue facing humankind", this statement is likely to spur action in some way or another. The way high-profile people talk about sustainability moulds our perceptions of what is viable and desirable in terms of actions and activities.

The power of words should not be underestimated, especially in relation to changes in attitudes and behaviours. Climate changing measures – for instance, energy efficiency – are still typically seen as something that can be taken if conditions are favourable (i.e. they are not too expensive, their designs are appealing or they do not require extra time or effort). As long as we talk of energy efficiency as something that we should take care of, nothing happens. In addition, the available options are quite easy to dismiss as futile – because large industrial countries and developing economies are emitting far more greenhouse gases than we can ever save by riding bikes or switching off lights. However, this attitude is dead-end, and it will definitely not help us to innovate and imagine alternate lifestyles.

Business language typically focuses on effectiveness, rationality and profitability. Win-win opportunities are preferred in business, as they address both the economic and other desired, usually social or environmental, goals. For instance, improving energy efficiency is a win-win opportunity for business as, normally, saving energy saves money even as it cuts down on harmful emissions. However, this logic quite systematically avoids conflicts, and it is thus known as "picking the low hanging fruit". Engaging in energy efficient practices, while a necessary activity, does not challenge fundamental business or consumption patterns – hence, often times it provides only a temporary fix. In addition, asking difficult questions can lead us along new paths towards innovation.

Climate change has brought up moral and ethical questions, such as what is valued and valuable,

what are our responsibilities and what is right and wrong. Still, these questions are viewed as separate from business. This is what the traditional business viewpoint tells us. However, climate change, as an extreme issue with global and intergenerational impacts, highlights these kinds of moral and value questions. Last week, in an interview published in *Helsingin Sanomat*, the national daily newspaper, John Broome, professor of moral philosophy at the University of Oxford emphasised that climate change is a moral issue, above anything else. Simply put, when some people emit greenhouse gasses, other people suffer the consequences. Professor Broome also criticises the IPCC for relying on the most likely scenarios, considering these the equivalent of lifeboats on ships. These are there not because the ship will probably sink but because buying lifeboats is cheaper than risking human lives. According to Broome, we should focus less on what is most likely to happen and more on the small likelihood that something truly bad will happen.

In many ways, business organisations can be, and are, in the forefront of the quest for a low carbon future. In my doctoral thesis, I examine a project seeking to bring about this change: the Peloton project. The goal of this project was to empower individuals and organisations to fight against climate change. The project organised workshops for different industries such as food retail and housing, in which the challenges and opportunities of climate change were discussed. These workshops were extremely motivational events, creating a positive atmosphere based on a “can do” attitude. Thus, contrary to my expectations, climate change was discussed as something that can be managed in business organisations and that business professionals can easily engage with, even treating climate change activities as “fun”.

These companies saw what they are able to do and how they should engage with climate change. Clearly, this attitude towards climate change can overcome the paralysing complexity of the problem, producing actions and promoting changes needed to start the transition to a low carbon society.

In my thesis, I explain the patterns of interaction that were used to discuss climate change engagement in these business organisations. I offer an analysis of how different understandings of climate change are made meaningful and of the consequences of this use of language. I also present critical remarks about the discourses that professionals have offered. For instance, I discuss how presenting the complex issue of climate change as easy and straightforward offers a partial and limited view of the issue – potentially a cause for concern.

These remarks lead to a number of questions. Is it not enough that business professionals see climate change as an important issue and are inspired to address it in the best way they can? What more can we ask for? How can businesses engage with something that we still know very little about? Can business ever be truly sustainable? These are difficult questions and, thus, of utmost importance. Questions like these need to be tackled with, not shunned or silenced. They help us to reconsider our cultural values and the limits of human activity: what we value, how we seek to preserve it and what the purposes of our actions are. This is what climate change requires – that we rethink our values and attitudes to prepare for the likelihood that our lifestyles will change dramatically. The opportunity to look for new ways of imagining humans and our future is most likely a luxury that only the present generations have.