Abstract Despite recognizing the importance of developing authentic corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, noticeably absent from the literature is consideration for how employees distinguish between authentic and inauthentic CSR programs. This is somewhat surprising given that employees are essentially the face of their organization and are largely expected to act as ambassadors for the organization's CSR program (Collier and Esteban in Bus Ethics 16:19–33, 2007). The current research, by conducting depth interviews with employees, builds a better understanding of how employees differentiate between authentic and inauthentic CSR programs, and how these judgments influence their perceptions of the organization. We find that employees rely on two different referent standards to form authenticity judgments—the extent to which the image put forth in the CSR program aligns with the organization's true identity and the extent to which the CSR program itself is developmental. To assess the former, employees draw on cues about resource commitment, alignment between elements of the organization's CSR program, emotional engagement, justice, and embeddedness. The latter assessments are based on the extent to which the organization adopts a leadership role with regards to its CSR initiatives. We also find that perceived authenticity can lead to positive outcomes such as organizational identification and employee connections. This study contributes to the broad literatures on both CSR and authenticity, as well as more specifically adding to the conversation on authenticity as a potentially valuable lens for enriching business ethics theorizing.

- Content Type Journal Article
- Pages 1-20
- DOI 10.1007/s10551-011-1064-x
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- Journal Journal of Business Ethics
- Online ISSN 1573-0697
- Print ISSN 0167-4544

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