

**Let's empower women... Oh! But not in our  
management board**

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**TEACHING NOTES**

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The authors prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. Although based on real events and despite occasional references to actual companies, this case is fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental.

# Introduction

This document serves as a guideline for the moderator on how to present the case and how to conduct the discussion in order to help students reach the learning objectives. First, a synopsis of the case will be presented. Then, the learning objectives will be stated and the theories underlying the case will be explicated, after which the levels of learning will be exemplified. Next, instructions for teaching will be given, concerning the presentation on the one hand and the discussion on the other. Finally, this document will be concluded by a short reflection of the development of the case in order for the reader to appreciate the case-writing process.

## Case Synopsis

In April 2019, the non-profit AllBright Foundation published a report stating that 53 of the 160 German listed companies required to establish a gender quota for their management board had explicitly set a target figure of 0%. While a statutory gender quota at the supervisory board level has been successful at increasing female participation, the desired trickle-down effect into management boards has failed to materialize so far, with German executive teams remaining predominantly male. Zalando, Germany's biggest online fashion retailer, was one of the companies called out in the report. Apart from the company's main target group being women, Zalando has always been vocal about their diversity and inclusion efforts, priding themselves with offering a variety of initiatives aimed at increasing the participation of women in leadership. This raises the question of how the aim of having at least 0% of women in the management board is consistent with Zalando's corporate culture and how the company should proceed.

## Learning Objectives

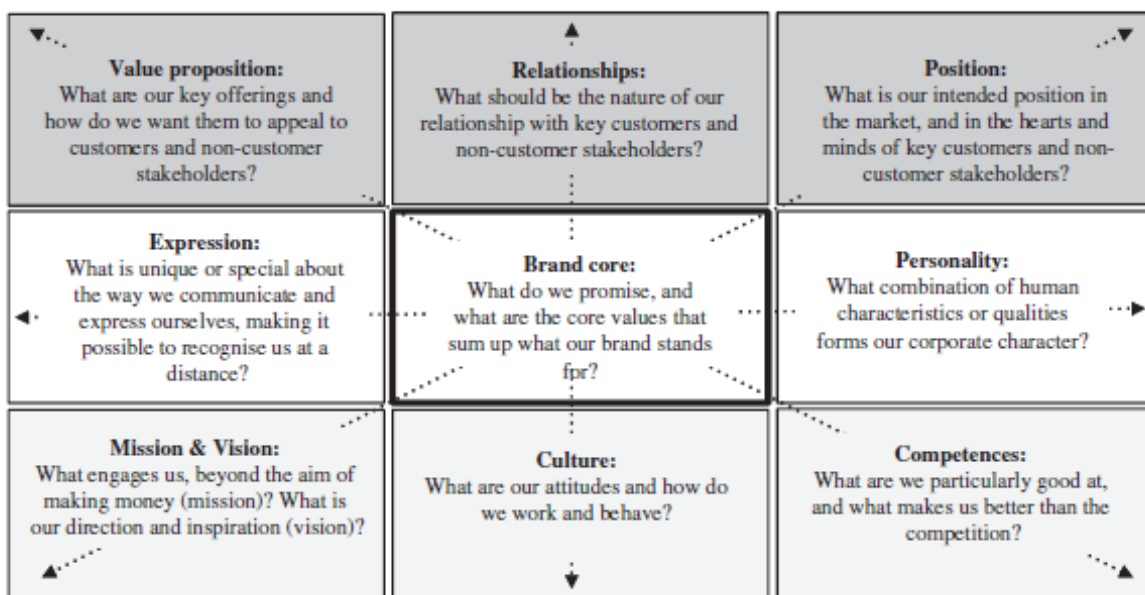
The aim of this case is to consider the importance and impact of corporate culture, employer branding and corporate communication in management decisions and corporate reputation. Students will be able to achieve the following objectives:

- Understand corporate culture and corporate communication as key elements of corporate reputation;
- Identify the key aspects that may affect HR management and employer branding decisions;
- Analyze possible future situations that may affect corporate brand reputation;
- Evaluate the risks and benefits of management decisions in short-term and long-term;
- Consider the issues presented in corporate communication strategies and HR management decisions.

# Corporate Brand Identity & Reputation Matrix

The Corporate Brand and Identity (CBI) Matrix (Urde, 2013, see **Figure 1**) is a framework that helps managers to create, define and align the identity of the brand. It is composed of nine elements that are organized in layers. The three elements at the bottom reflect internal elements of the company (mission and vision, culture, and competencies) while the three at the top reflect external elements (value proposition, relationships, and position). There are three elements that are both internal and external and which are positioned in the middle of the matrix (personality, brand core, and expression).

Brand managers can use this matrix to make sure that all aspects of the brand are consistent and, therefore, coherent with the brand core (which consists of the brand promise and values), in other words, ensuring all the elements of the brand resonate with the company’s values and what the brand represents. The core should also be reflected in the surrounding eight elements of the matrix.

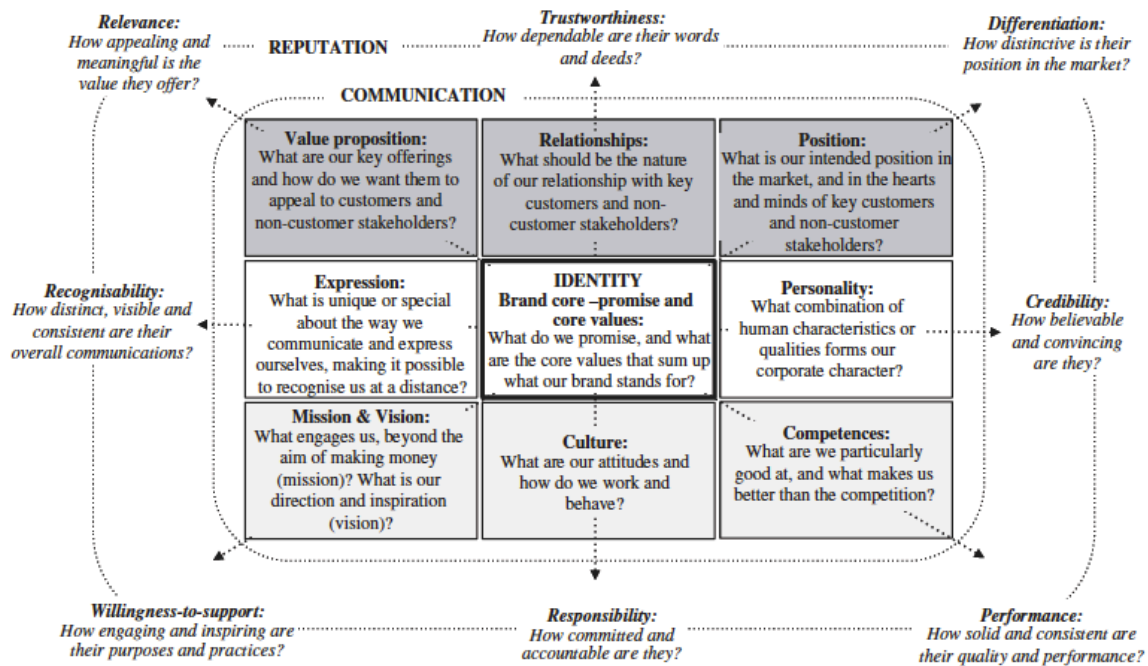


**Fig. 1** Corporate Brand Identity Matrix, Urde (2013)

Urde and Greyser (2016) integrated the CBI Matrix into a broader framework. Their objective was to outline the connections between the elements of the matrix described above with their corresponding elements of corporate reputation. Brand identity and reputation are deeply connected or, as the authors state, “they are two sides of the same coin” (Urde & Greyser, 2016, p. 95). Identity is a more internal perspective while reputation can be described as the overall perceptions of the organization’s stakeholders like customers, community, investors, and providers.

By presenting a single framework it is possible to analyze not only the different elements of the brand identity but also their relations with corresponding reputation elements. Urde and Greyser (2016) consider that strategic brand management addresses this tension between the inside-out perspective (corporate identity) and the

outside-in perspective (corporate reputation). For that reason, they introduce the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation (CBIR) Matrix (see **Figure 2**). Alignment between the brand identity and its reputation elements is very important for brand managers. This matrix considers an additional element that is communication. This new element refers to all the strategies and activities that the brands conduct in order to connect the internal and external elements.



**Fig. 2** The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix, Urde & Greyser (2016)

This framework has multiple applications and functions. The matrix can help brand managers understand the dynamics between the corporate brand identity and reputation management. It also can help identify issues and areas of improvement to strengthen the reputation of the brand (Urde & Greyser, 2016). In addition, the matrix can inform about the alignment or misalignment between different elements and it can help assess sensitive issues or even a brand crisis.

If we take this framework to analyze the case of Zalando, we should pay attention to the interaction vertical. This is the line that connects reputation elements like trustworthiness and responsibility with the corporate brand identity element of culture, at the bottom. Culture refers to the attitudes of the company and the behaviors that are expected from all employees. Zalando’s culture stands for boldness, leadership, and diversity as they want to become the leading fashion platform in Europe.

As Zalando state themselves, diversity is a fundamental part of their culture as they value people from different backgrounds and talents. Therefore, they want to be perceived as a company that welcomes passionate individuals, creative, open and technology-driven. At the same time, this brand identity element defines the nature of their relationships with different stakeholders like employees, customers, non-

customers, investors and so on. The stronger this relationship exists over time, the more likely it is that stakeholders trust the company.

However, when the AllBright Foundation report was released, the commitment of Zalando to diversity was questioned by their stakeholders. On one hand, they consider diversity as a fundamental element of their business and their identity, but on the other hand, they showed no commitment to integrating more women into the managing board. Therefore, this issue affected one of the key elements of the brand identity (culture) and it also had implications for other elements of their corporate reputation like relationships and trustworthiness.

Some key stakeholders that were vocal about this issue were female customers and feminist activists. They called to boycott the company on Twitter and this is very important as female shoppers represent a very important group for any company operating in the fashion industry. Additionally, female employees of Zalando could have been impressed by the internal policies and found a contradiction between the values promoted inside the company and the reality inside the leadership team of Zalando.

The company ignored the social context that prevails in several countries in Europe. Gender equality is one of the priorities for companies, governments and the society. This is the social pressure that Zalando could have detected even if they were not forced by law to integrate more women in their board. This is what the company reacted to half a year later, sending out a press release to communicate with their main stakeholders that they were aware of this misalignment and they were willing to redirect their strategy in order to comply with their diversity commitment. They did not want to lose the trust of their customers and business partners.

## Corporate Culture

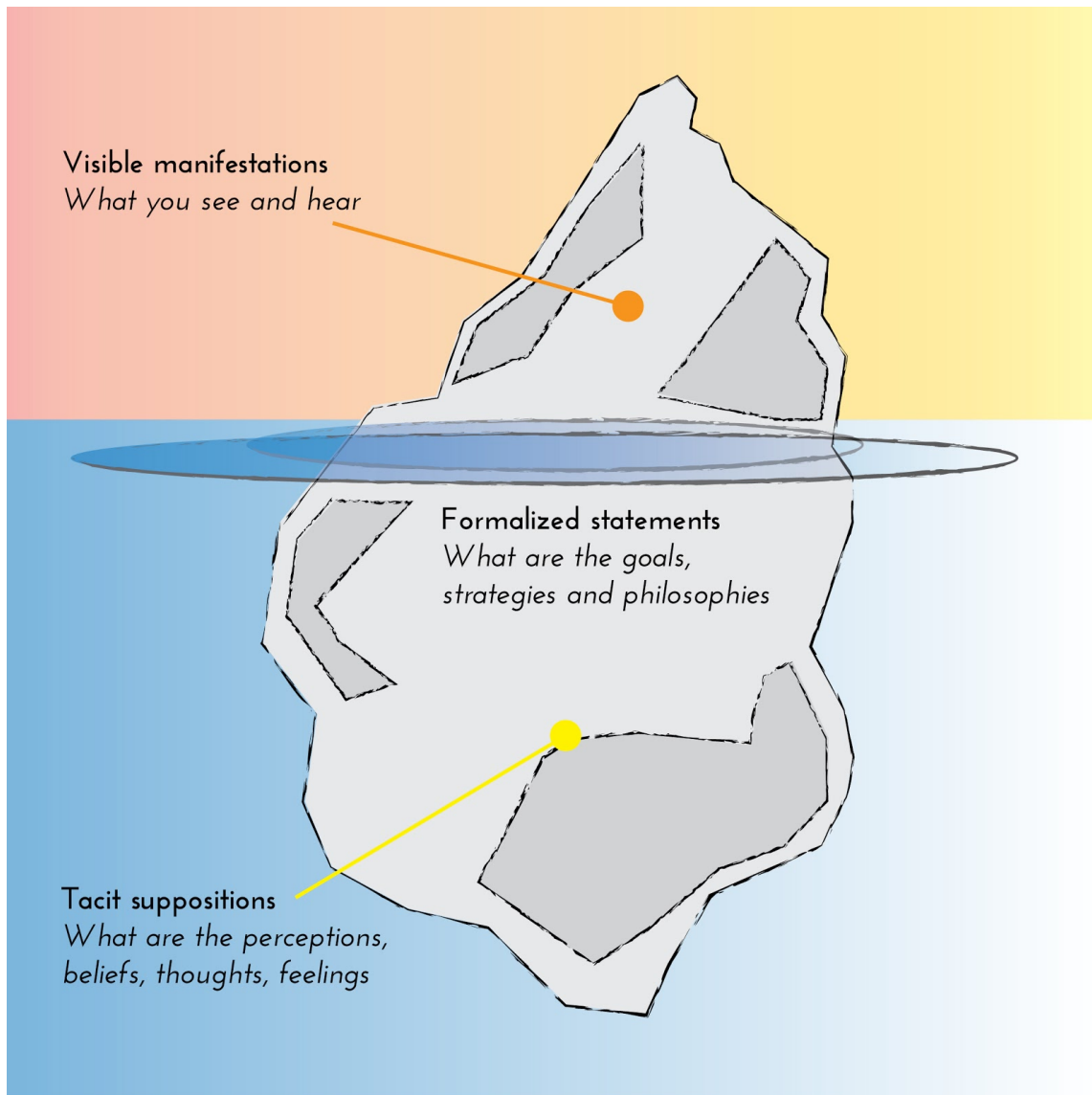
Corporate culture is constantly transformed and constructed over time. It is about the values of a business, the behavior within it, and it leads you through problem-solving and ways to communicate. In other words, as Deal and Kennedy (1982, cited in Roper & Fill, 2012, p. 56) expressed, it is “the way we do things around here”, referring to employee behavior in the workplace. In Zalando’s case, the importance of corporate culture is reflected in the core values of the business. Zalando’s corporate culture is about employee participation and representation while celebrating diversity and promoting inclusion.

In this case, in order to understand how Zalando’s corporate culture is defined, it is relevant for the students to identify the three levels of corporate culture defined by Schein (1999), using the metaphor of an iceberg where a huge part of the culture is hidden below the surface (see **Figure 3**). The three levels are:

**1. Artefacts and behaviors:** The visible elements of the company, as objects, words, slogans, language, products, and services, stories and myths. *What are the tangible and identifiable elements of Zalando?*

**2. Espoused values:** The elements below the water surface, the company's philosophies, strategies, and goals. *What is Zalando's belief system?*

**3. Assumptions:** Also below the water surface, difficult to see for the outsider. The unconscious shared values within the organization. *What are the embedded beliefs and shared values within Zalando?*



**Fig. 3** Representation of Schein's (1999) corporate culture metaphor

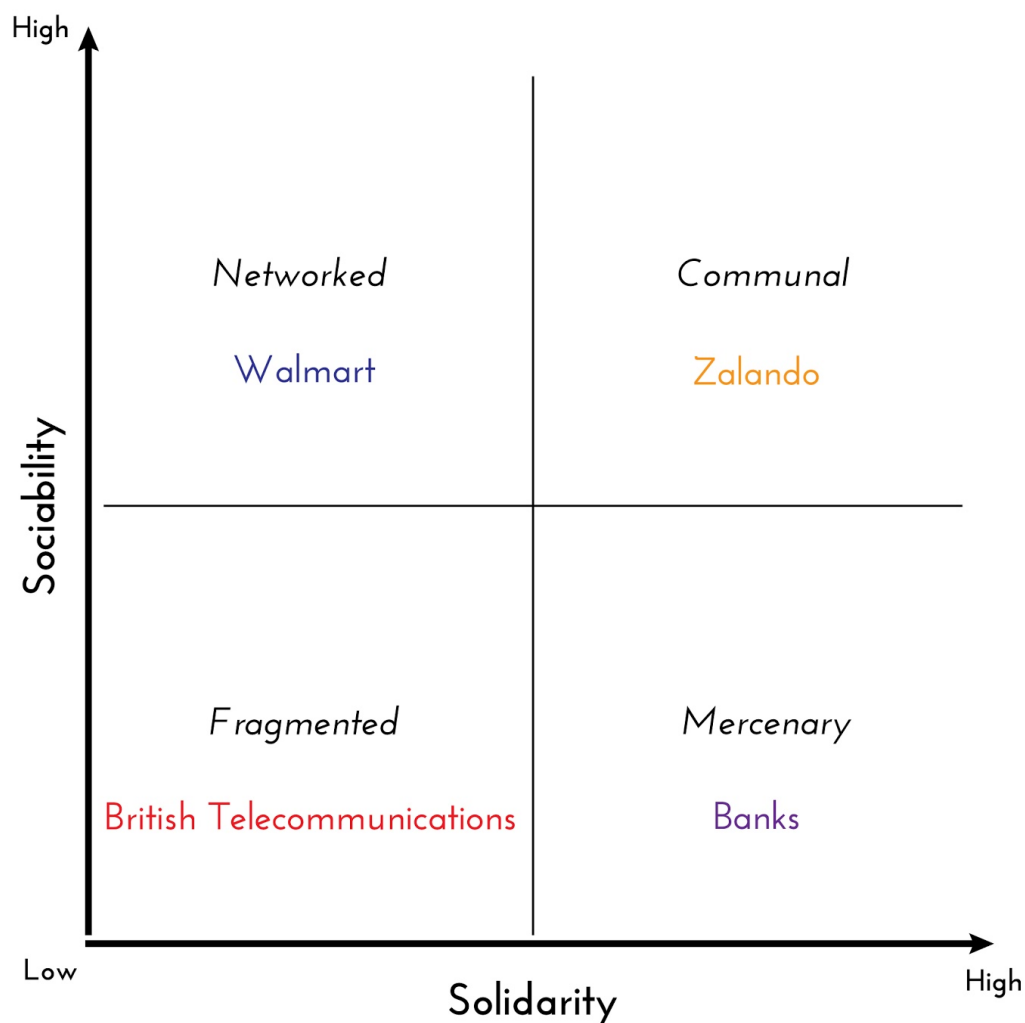
In addition, identifying the type of organizational culture in the company can will help students to analyze Zalando's corporate culture and take better management decisions in accordance. Therefore, Goffee and Jones (1996) propose four forms of organizational culture (see **Figure 4**):

- **The networked organization:** A highly social workplace but very politicized.
- **The mercenary organization:** Business-based communication. Work and social life are clearly separated. Sometimes employees don't feel empathy with the company.
- **The fragmented organization:** There is no organizational membership.

- **The communal organization:** Founders and employees are friends, everyone works for the same goal in the same direction.

This four types of organizational culture are described through two dimensions:

- **Sociability:** the amount of genuine friendship amongst all members of a company.
- **Solidarity:** a measure of the capability of the workforce to work towards mutual goals.

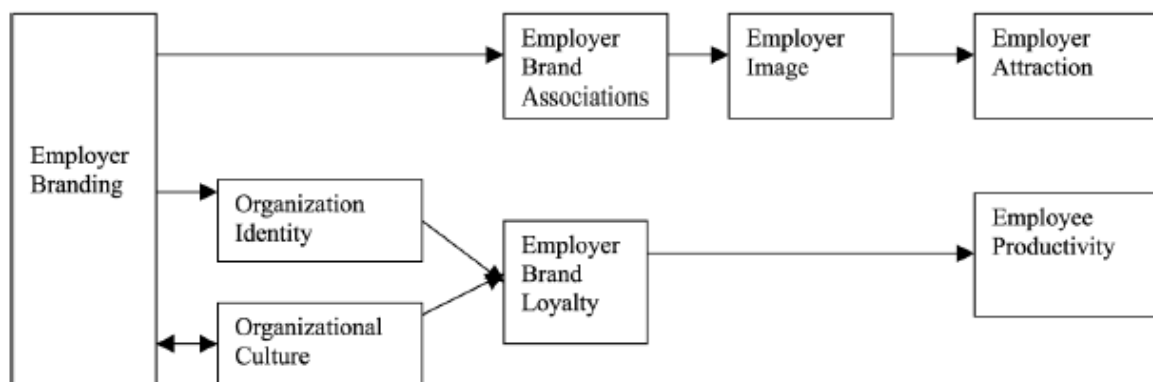


**Fig. 4** The four dimensions of culture, Goffee & Jones (1996)

# Employer Branding & Human Resource Management

Hatch and Schulz (1997) view corporate culture as the context in which corporate identity is created, which in turn affects the image perceived by outsiders. Conversely, image influences identity, which shapes corporate culture. This transference influences corporate reputation and suggests that the corporate culture should be marketed externally. Ambler and Barrow (1996) argue that employees are one of the most influential factors for corporate reputation and that attracting the best applicants is paramount. Hence, they make a case for the introduction of the employer brand, which they define as “the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company” (p. 187).

According to Roper and Fill (2012), the virtuous cycle of strong values, strong culture, best staff and strong brand that results from continuous employer branding efforts is a strong competitive advantage as it helps attract and retain the best employees, which in turn can serve customers in the best way, further strengthening the brand. To demonstrate the significance of a strong employer brand, Backhaus and Timoo (2004) suggest a conceptual framework incorporating human resource management and marketing concepts (see **Figure 5**). This framework illustrates two important outcomes of employer branding activities – attracting potential employees and ensuring the productivity of current employees. Hence, this framework can be utilized to understand how Zalando brand themselves as employer and which effect the absence of a quota for increasing female representation in the management board is likely to have.



**Fig. 5** Backhaus and Timoo’s (2004) Employer Branding Framework

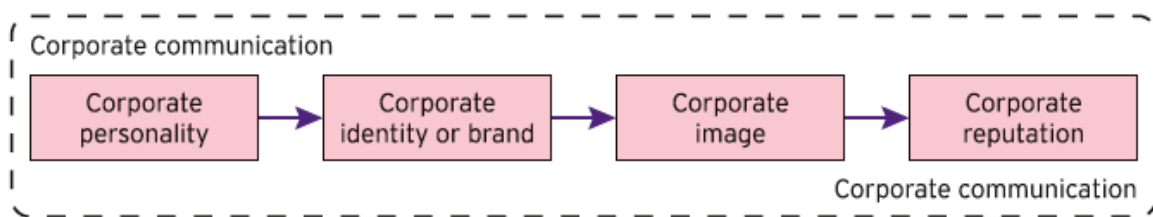
Moreover, students should determine how well Zalando’s brand identity fits with its brand image and what should be done in order to ensure a good fit, as corporate reputation can suffer from a mismatch between the two (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Martin, Beaumont, Doig & Pate, 2005). Martin et al. (2005) propose that HR policies and cooperation between HR and marketing teams can help create a coherent branding message that can positively impact brand identity and image. Students should offer suggestions about potential HR and branding activities that should be undertaken to strengthen Zalando’s employer brand.



# Corporate Communication

## The Role of Corporate Communication

Corporate communication forms the link between the different corporate reputation building blocks: corporate personality, identity or brand, image and reputation (see **Figure 6**). In this process, some gaps may arise. For instance, external stakeholders like media or NGOs can have a different perception of the company compared to employees of the firm. Ideally, the role of corporate communications is to make sure that all relevant stakeholders have the same information and perception of the firm.



**Fig. 6** The building blocks of corporate reputation, Roper & Fill (2012)

According to van Riel and Fombrun (2007), there are three dimensions of corporate communications: Management, marketing, and organizational communications. The first one is related to the role of executives and managers as communicators and endorsers of the function; the second refers to all the activities intended to increase sales or improve a firm's customer relationships. Finally, organizational communications are designed to increase the identification, commitment, and relationships with different stakeholders. This type of communications is not sales-oriented (Roper & Fill, 2012).

The value of corporate communications should not only be seen as the management of stakeholder's perceptions but also in how issues around a company can be managed and solved.

## Issues Management

An issue is a disagreement between the company and a particular stakeholder group. When this contention receives media and public attention and requires a resolution, then it becomes an issue. The process of managing issues starts from the moment an organization is aware of the social, political and economic environment to see if there are significant changes in public opinion that could affect the company (Roper & Fill, 2012).

The publication of the AllBright Foundation's report caused alarm among companies that were listed and which had set a target of having at least 0% women in the management board by 2022. This was enough to catch media attention and also generate comments and engagement in social media, especially on Twitter. Companies like Zalando consider this case an issue, not a crisis. According to Roper and Fill (2012), not all issues have the potential to be a crisis but if they are not managed correctly then they could become a crisis.

If we take van Riel's (1995) definition of corporate communication, the role of corporate communications in a sensitive situation is to harmonize internal and external communications as effectively and efficiently as possible in order to keep favorable relationships between the company and stakeholders involved in the issue. Hence, corporate communication needs to ensure the consistency of messages between the company and internal and external audiences.

In Zalando's case, there is an inconsistency between the brand promise and the real behavior of the company; in other words, a misalignment between the identity and the image of the firm. In that case, according to Roper and Fill (2012), the role of corporate communication is to help reduce the uncertainty and save the positive relationships between the company and the stakeholders. However, when there is a gap, corporate communication has to work harder to narrow that gap.

According to Cornelissen (2008), an organization can take four key response strategies to handle issues: silence, accommodation, reasoning, and advocacy. The approach taken by Zalando is closest to the accommodation strategy. This approach consists of adapting to changes due to the pressure and overwhelming situation for the company. It includes changing in part the strategy of the company and a new stand of the company about the issue. Corporate communication, in that case, takes a more active role that ranges from website updates to advertising, events, and internal communications to communicate the change of the policy.

## **Media Relations**

Media relations is one of the tools used by corporate communications. It helps connect the firm with journalists, editors, bloggers, opinion leaders, and other influential actors that can be regarded as truthful, credible and trustful information sources. Media relations departments share official information of the company with opinion leaders in order to deliver corporate messages to their key audiences.

Common activities and communication materials of this area are press releases, interviews, press kits, and press conferences. Press releases are the most formal, immediate and official source of information that a company can share publicly. In these pieces of information, the company can share changes in the organization, future plans, staff promotions, new products, and more (Roper & Fill, 2012).

Media relations helps manage issues like the one faced by Zalando regarding their diversity policies. The press release that was published after the media turmoils had quieted down remains the key piece of information regarding the actions that Zalando took after the AllBright Foundation published the report that made the company rethink its diversity policy and strategy.

## Key Learnings

In order to identify whether students achieved the learning objectives successfully, **Table 1** exemplifies the levels of learning as guidance.

Levels of Learning		
Verb	Learning	Theory
<i>Recognize</i>	<i>Zalando's corporate culture and corporate reputation</i>	<i>CBIR Matrix, Corporate culture, and Corporate reputation</i>
<i>Identify</i>	<i>Zalando's corporate values and how they are embedded in the organizational structure</i>	<i>CBIR Matrix, Corporate culture, and HR management</i>
<i>Interpret</i>	<i>How the German context affects Zalando's corporate management</i>	<i>Background information</i>
<i>Analyze</i>	<i>Zalando's HR management issues</i>	<i>Employer Branding and HR management</i>
<i>Explain</i>	<i>Different possible decisions Zalando can take to reach their goal of gender quota</i>	<i>Corporate culture, HR management, and Background information</i>
<i>Justify</i>	<i>The managerial plan for gender quota in the short-term and long-term</i>	<i>HR management and Corporate reputation</i>

**Table 1.** Levels of learning

## Teaching Suggestions

### Introduction Phase

To aid the smooth flow of the case discussion, we suggest that all participants prepare name tags and that one person of the team keeps track of time during all parts of the session.

In order to set the mood and grab the attention of participants, the session starts by displaying two simplified CVs in the presentation (without revealing the name or any other identifying information of the candidates). The presenter can start the session by depicting a situation like the following: "Let's imagine that you are part of a management board and the board needs to hire a new member. The two CVs that you can see right now are the two final candidates for the position and you are going to vote for the best candidate. Raise your hand if you vote for candidate number one. Raise your hand if you vote for candidate number two".

After the votes are done, the presenter shares the following situation: "Every day, managers face a dilemma. On the one hand, more women should be in management and executive positions, but on the other, it can be difficult to find the right female talent". Then the names of both CVs are revealed and the objectively more qualified person is a man. The lecturer continues: "Should they go with the more qualified

person and hire the man? Or should they hire the woman to meet the gender quota? What can companies do to get more women into management positions?"

The intention of this short exercise is to generate reflexivity on diversity in organizations and the challenge that many companies face in their executive boards. This helps set the mood and the mindset to start the presentation of the Zalando case.

## **Presentation Phase**

The presentation starts with the presentation of the firm by using a corporate video of Zalando. This video is energetic and gives an overview of the company. This visual aid can catch the audience's attention and understand overall what Zalando is and what their business is.

After the video, Zalando business model will be presented with more detail but this will be done in a brief way as the next slide will show the identity brand and reputation matrix which is one of the main focus points of the presentation.

Afterwards, it is important to "zoom-in" into Zalando's culture and what initiatives are executed inside the company to foster diversity. Immediately after, the moderator will present what the German legislation says regarding gender quotas and how this is connected to the corporate organization of Zalando. After this, the following slide will show the AllBright Foundation's report together with an excerpt from Zalando 2018 Annual Report showing the target figures for female representation. This contextual explanation is fundamental to understand why this became a reputational issue for the company.

The lecturer can suggest participants to form groups of four or five people to discuss the Zalando case. The intention is that they will take the role of board members of the company and they need to decide what to do.

## **Management Question**

*How do you think the management board should solve this issue, taking into account Zalando's corporate culture and background?*

The following guiding questions can help the students to solve the case:

General guiding questions:

- How would you react to this report if you were in Zalando's management board?
- How would you justify a quota of 0% women in the management board?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of gender quotas?

Questions about CBIR Matrix:

- Which of the CBIR elements are affected by the issue at hand?
- Which elements are misaligned?

Questions about corporate culture:

- What is Zalando's corporate culture?
- How are artefacts and behaviors reflected in the tangible and identifiable elements of Zalando?
- How are espoused values reflected in Zalando's belief system?
- How are assumptions reflected in the embedded beliefs and shared values within Zalando?
- Which type of organizational culture does Zalando have? Networked, mercenary, fragmented or communal?

Questions about employer branding:

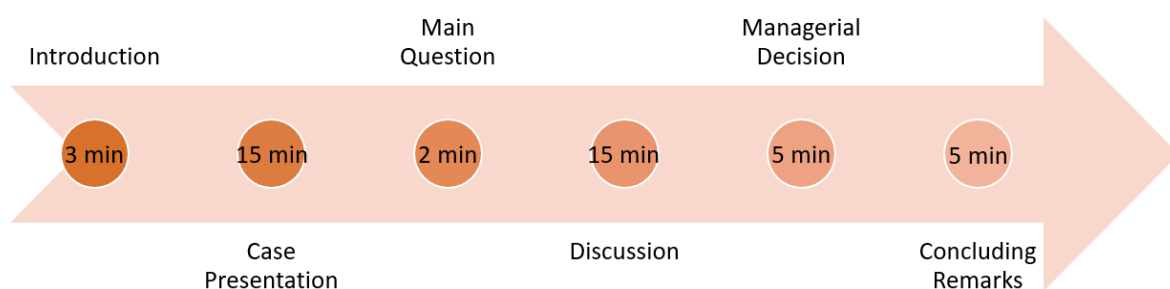
- Taking into account Zalando's corporate culture and identity, how would you describe their employer brand?
- Which employer associations and employer image does Zalando's employer branding evoke?
- Which implications does Zalando's 0% quota in the executive team have for attracting potential employees? Which implications does this have for current employees? Which implications are more harmful to the business in the long run?
- How can Zalando improve their employer brand and ensure that internal and external brand image match?

Questions about corporate communication:

- Is this a crisis or an issue? How can you distinguish between one and the other?
- What should the department of media relations answer to a journalist that wants to get a statement from Zalando about the 0% quota?
- Which are the most important stakeholders when it comes to the issue at hand?
- Which information should employees receive related to the issue of the 0% quota? Which information should customers and members of the public receive?
- Should Zalando communicate something specific to current female employees? If yes, what?
- If you were the Chief Communications Officer at Zalando, what would you suggest to the management board when it comes to the quota?

## Time Plan

The following time plan acts as a suggestion for the division of time spent on presenting and discussing the case:



## Board Plan

According to the general case-solving structure that we have been familiarized with during the course, we suggest the presenter encourages the students to adhere to the following format for the discussion:

1. What are the key issues/key challenges?
2. What is the situation at the time of the case, with regards to the company, industry, customers, competition, trends, etc.?
3. Which frameworks can be helpful to analyze the case?
4. What are the alternative courses of action?
5. Based on the evaluation of the alternatives, what are the recommendations?

To facilitate the recording of student answers, we suggest that the board is divided into three parts. **Table 2** below shows some possible answers.

Issues/Challenges	Alternatives	Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misalignment corporate culture/relationships</li> <li>• Strong employer brand, but inconsistent in terms of diversity</li> <li>• German context (statutory quota vs. voluntary quota)</li> <li>• Zalando's management board all-male from start</li> <li>• Recent addition of men to management board</li> <li>• Zalando's target group primarily young &amp; female</li> <li>• Growing awareness of gender inequality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ignore</li> <li>• Acknowledge &amp; maintain status quo</li> <li>• Change internally only</li> <li>• Change internally &amp; externally</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do nothing as this does not affect the brand core</li> <li>• Issue a statement explaining the misalignment</li> <li>• Emphasize all-male history of management board</li> <li>• Change quota for management board</li> <li>• Broaden brand focus to reflect inclusion &amp; diversity efforts towards target group</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** Exemplary board plan for in-class discussion

## Epilogue

The Zalando case is a prime example of the efforts a company might undertake in order to align its employer brand with its brand image and identity. This helps foster an internally and externally consistent strategy and create a strong corporate reputation. Zalando's willingness to change their gender quota at the management board level to reflect more accurately the inclusion and diversity efforts that have been an essential part of their corporate culture for many years indicates that they take the concerns of their stakeholders seriously. Moreover, it is a sign of the company's acknowledgment of the growing importance of rectifying gender inequalities in the workplace. By not only adjusting their internal communication but also repositioning the whole brand with a new slogan, Zalando sends an important signal for diversity

to all stakeholders. The Zalando case allows us to discuss the usefulness of gender quotas in general and, more specifically, the impact of female leadership participation on corporate reputation. In addition, this case illustrates the significance of corporate culture for employer branding. As such, it can be used as an evergreen case in courses such as Corporate Communication, Corporate Brand Management, and Human Resource Management.

## Reflection

This case has been created in partial fulfillment of the course Corporate Brand Management & Reputation as part of the Master's program in International Marketing & Brand Management at Lund University School of Economics & Management. In the beginning, we found it rather challenging to determine a case that would also be interesting in the future. With the help of the responsible professor for the course, Mats Urde, we decided on the Zalando case as it is broadly applicable due to the contemporary challenges of diversity management and employer branding.

In a way, we reverse-engineered the case from the management decision and traced what had happened to make Zalando change their gender quota as we had actually happened upon the press release announcing the 40/60/\* corridor prior to learning about the AllBright Foundation's report that prompted Zalando to adjust their diversity policy. Over the course of several weeks, we held regular meetings where we discussed our process and prioritized and distributed the remaining tasks. Due to the high frequency of the meetings, we were able to stay on top of the high workload that we faced during the term. In the end, we met with another student group to present the case in front of each other. Through that testing, we were able to make some minor improvements to the case.

Moreover, we reviewed the literature and additional materials to understand what theories or frameworks could help us explain Zalando's case. This exercise helped us look at this issue with different "lenses" and increased our analytical skills. At the same time, we were able to bring theoretical concepts into practice as we were trying to understand the problem and defining possible solutions. At some point it was challenging to stand in the position of a lecturer but, at the same time, we consider that this project was helpful for relearning and internalizing the theories when we were preparing the case to present it to others. We think that the act of teaching is also an act of learning as well. This experience made us reflect about the great number of circumstances and contexts in which companies operate and that we take for granted. We believe that in the future we will have more theoretical concepts that will help us understand contextual factors that may threaten a firm's reputation.

Furthermore, we think that this project really benefitted from the different perspectives of our team members. This helps us get different points of views when analyzing this issue and the members of the team bring creative ways to solve the challenges that we faced in the process. It was necessary to change perspective from student to teacher in a variety of ways. First, instead of simply applying theories and frameworks that someone else suggested as a means for solving the case, we had to evaluate which theories would be applicable to the issue that Zalando faced. Secondly,

we noticed that asking thought-provoking questions that would help students to solve the case is more difficult than merely answering questions. It appears that we have been taught to answer questions but never how to ask questions in a manner that would add to a discussion. As such, finding a suitable management question was rather challenging as we had to provide an adequate opening for the in-class discussion that would not push students into one direction or the other. Lastly, it was an interesting feat to determine the best way to ensure that the audience is engaged and interested in the case from start to finish.

Challenges more related to the case contents pertain to the German context - how could we ensure that students not familiar with German law around equal gender participation in leadership would have the necessary information to solve the case? In addition, how could we make students understand that, while it is legal to set a quota of 0% of women in the management board, such a declaration can be seen as morally questionable and can have serious implications for a company's reputation? However, this is exactly where the originality value of this case lies: In the interrelation between corporate culture, employer branding, and diversity management.



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