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The Big Idea Series / When Business and Politics Collide

Corporate Advocacy in a Time of Social Outrage

by Alison Taylor

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Summary. Today's employees, particularly young ones, expect their employers to speak out about the social, political, and environmental issues they care about. Many organizations have complied, only to find themselves locked into a cycle of perpetual statement-making... **more**

Recently I asked my MBA students whether they believed employers should be making public statements on the tragic events occurring in Israel and Gaza. One said he was "appalled" at the thought, but most took for granted that companies would speak out. Few even remember a time when companies avoided the political limelight.

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Employees, particularly young ones, want employers to provide much more than a paycheck. They expect companies to offer public advocacy on issues and to take concrete action on environmental and social issues — and sometimes they demand it. In 2022, for example, thousands of Salesforce employees signed an open letter urging co-CEOs Marc Benioff and Bret Taylor to stop doing business with the National Rifle Association. "It's not in our power to get background checks or other gun control measures passed by Congress," it explicitly argued, "but we can effect change by ending our commercial relationship with our customer, the National Rifle Association."

Today's employees are far more likely than those of generations past to raise alarms about what businesses are (or aren't) doing about climate change, racism, political conflicts, abortion, or gun control. And efforts to hold their leaders accountable in the public square have led young staff members in particular to leak embarrassing internal information on social media — or directly to reporters.

The messy reality is that employee and corporate speech have intersected in uncontained ways that make internal organizational conflict inevitable. Relying on even the most seasoned communications team to craft a convincing story about your corporate responsibility efforts no longer suffices in this fastmoving, interconnected, image-dominated, “gotcha” era — not when voices from inside a company can quickly pierce its neat and glossy narrative. And as a broader, far less legalistic idea of “business ethics” emerges in the workplace, the traditional approach, which treats whistleblowing solely as a compliance mechanism, has become obsolete.

Corporate leaders have wound up embroiled in complex questions about whom they represent — and on what basis. The Business Roundtable and other influential voices have called on businesses to balance the interests of *all* their stakeholders, not just shareholders. Experts have told executives that employees and the general public want them to take public stands on social issues — and that doing so might confer an edge in hiring talent or attracting customers. But the desire to balance stakeholder interests and speak up for employees on high-stakes societal questions is colliding with the realities of divided, polarized workforces, political dysfunction, and anger about corporate hypocrisy. These issues are particularly fraught in the United States in a charged presidential election year, though they resonate far more widely. And increasingly, companies are facing backlash around what they are or are not saying on issues such as ESG and DEI, with many hesitating to defend their choices, and sparking further employee frustration in the process.

What’s needed is a considered and deliberate strategy for speaking up. Corporations are not democracies. Stakeholders are not an electorate. Lacking both the authority and the mechanisms to advocate or represent *everyone’s* interests in a coherent way, corporate leaders risk undermining both their businesses and other societal institutions when they claim that they can — or feel that they must. There is a better approach.

How Did We Get Here?

Before discussing what corporations should do, it’s worth examining how we got here.

Transparency has become a weapon. For businesses, one of the most profound consequences of mass internet access is that they can no longer control their narrative. Anyone with a smartphone can instantly give detailed glimpses into a company's environmental disasters, labor rights violations, or just bad customer service.

In the 20th century, public relations was about effective communication. Mainstream media were concentrated — and reluctant to trigger libel actions or risk losing ad revenue — so companies could largely direct messaging through friendly, predictable channels. Today the public crowdsources opinions on where to work and what to buy, and then skeptically compares them to corporations' own claims. To make matters more difficult, there's no predictable formula for determining which mistakes will come back to bite you. Activists often target the best performers, and two companies can encounter wildly disparate responses for the same conduct. Reputational risk is less a linear accountability mechanism than a funhouse mirror.

Threats from within pose perhaps the most challenging issue for corporate affairs teams, as employees seek to hold leaders accountable for ethical missteps. For example, employees organized protests and walkouts at Google over lucrative and secretive sexual harassment settlements. When Amazon announced a $10 billion investment to tackle climate change, employees broke confidentiality agreements to highlight the company's ongoing work with oil and gas companies. Workers at McKinsey helped reporters trace the firm's simultaneous relationships with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and

Purdue Pharma. And at X (formerly Twitter), Elon Musk accused employees of offering the public blow-by-blow accounts of the chaos following his acquisition.

Employees have become the cultural auditors of their organizations. And wise executives must assume that anything they say or do can become public knowledge.

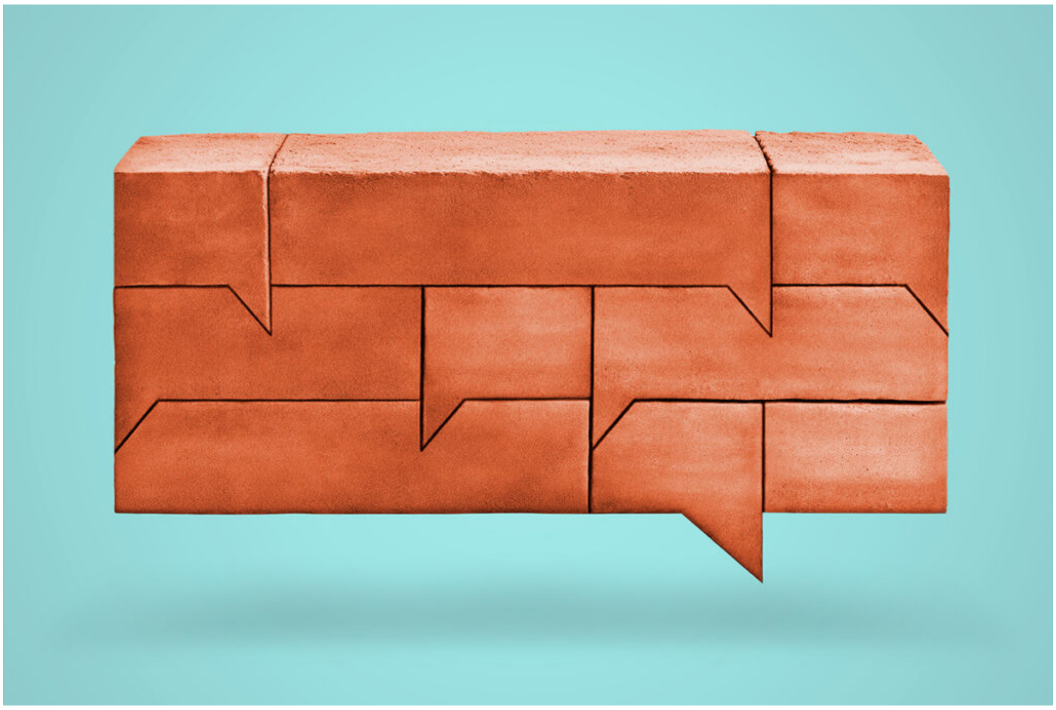
Business has become global and harder to control. Globalization offers companies enormous growth opportunities and access to cheap labor and raw materials, and reduces oversight from various national legal and political institutions. But it also exposes them to a wider range of social and political risks.

In 2022, for example, Western enterprises encountered enormous pressure to shut down their Russian operations after the invasion of Ukraine. Prominent Yale professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld fashioned a spreadsheet to help the media track which companies were in and which were out, and CEOs had to decide almost instantly whether to keep paying employees in Russia, evacuate nationals, sell their assets, or stay put. Even companies that seemed to handle that crisis well soon faced questions about their operations in other countries with egregious human rights violations, such as Saudi Arabia. Consumers increasingly hold brands responsible for environmental irresponsibility and forced labor in their supply chains, but those same consumers still want the stuff they ordered, right now.

These are not merely questions of geopolitical risk in a multipolar world. As University of Chicago professor Luigi Zingales pithily puts it, “We now have the politicization of the corporate world because we have corporatization of the political world.” In other words, the public believes businesses are more responsive to its dictates than nation-states are, and it expects business to play a larger role in a world reeling from political and regulatory failures.

Business has become enmeshed with politics and social issues. For years, big business steered clear of taking overt political stances: After all, why would they want to alienate any potential customers? But in reality, the bright line demarcating business and politics has never been more than a convenient story — one that has become less credible with each passing year. The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis featured the injection of vast public subsidies into private companies, swiftly followed by severe austerity in public spending, which enraged many ordinary people. In 2011 Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados Movement in Spain, and the Arab Spring are early examples of intersecting sociopolitical frustrations that drew business into their tailwinds.

Gradually, business leaders began to signal their commitments to inclusion. For example, in 2016 more than 100 CEOs and other business leaders signed a letter opposing North Carolina's transgender bathroom ban. That same year, the election of Donald Trump marked a shift in the entanglement of business and politics. His administration had a proclivity for drawing business leaders into policy conflicts that might inflame the domestic culture wars. For instance, when the DACA program was canceled, hundreds of Silicon Valley leaders stood up to protect the Dreamers. Companies that attempted to maintain their focus on shareholder value soon found that the neutral middle ground had become quicksand: When Uber kept operating during a taxi drivers' strike at New York airports protesting the Trump administration's "Muslim ban," a #DeleteUber hashtag erupted.



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By 2018 CEO activism was being described as the "new normal" in the New York Times. And it has not faded, as U.S. business leaders continued to face politically charged decisions such as how to respond to the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision, Covid-19 mask and vaccine mandates, and inadequate gun control regulations. Now many are trapped between the Scylla of escalating, incessant employee demands, and the Charybdis of organized political backlash.

Regardless of what you think of these changes — as a necessary elevation of core values and employee voice, or an opportunistic way to galvanize customers and workers — the Overton window has clearly shifted.

The professional has become personal. In the classroom, I hear my students say repeatedly that a career should align with one's values. They're not alone. "Employees want to work for a company with purpose — that has values and sticks to them and isn't hypocritical about it," Douglas Pinkham, president of the Public Affairs Council, tells me. "They want to know: Are you doing something good for the world? Am I part of something positive, as opposed to just a money machine? ...The pressures to get involved in social issues are enormous."

That wasn't always the case. Corporations traditionally expected their leaders to set strategy and incentives and expected their employees to follow. But younger employees in particular want to be able to express their social identities and personal values at work. As a result, they increasingly hope — and demand — that enterprises adapt to their needs and interests, not the reverse. This applies to company stances on environmental and social concerns as well as internal culture and performance issues such as inclusion, remote work, and mental health.

Amid surging polarization, senior leaders need to listen to and benefit from employee voices without creating a silent, resentful minority — or slowing the pace of work and generating perpetual conflict.

The Uncomfortable New Landscape for Corporate Advocacy

Leaders are struggling to respond to this new landscape, with some playing whack-a-mole on every issue and others simply ignoring employee criticisms in hopes they'll go away. Many are considering whether — and how — to restrict employee speech; a 2023 Herbert Smith Freehills survey on the future of work finds that 97% of employers are attempting to impose some level of top-down control. Nondisclosure agreements and social media policies are commonplace but vary widely in effectiveness. Some companies are taking more-novel approaches. For example, Dell's employee advocacy program incentivized employees to speak about their company in an approved way by sharing brand-related content online in exchange for certification as a "social media and community professional." While analysis shows these efforts may bring positive attention to businesses in the short term, they fail to address the root cause of why corporate and employee speech has become such a thorny issue, and what organizations need to do to meet this moment.

When Can Speaking Up Be Prudent and Effective?

Ask yourself these nine questions before you lend your company's voice to an issue. If you answer no to any of them, it's unwise to proceed.

1. Is the issue central to your business's values, code of conduct, or other existing public commitments?
2. Is the issue an environmental or social priority, according to a rigorous materiality assessment?
3. Does the issue pertain to commitments you have made to your workforce, such as diversity and inclusion or human rights commitments?

To build and maintain cohesive organizational culture in a deeply polarized, broadly vocalized society, leaders must develop norms and processes that enable them to respond to ethical concerns and political issues before they blow up. These processes should give employees both agency and responsibility over when they choose to speak. And they should help organizations act proactively and strategically to ensure they can back up their public positions.

The time has come to rethink how organizations talk about and act on political, social, environmental, and cultural issues. The solution is to involve employees more effectively in determining corporate advocacy, while leaders exercise far more restraint in making promises and taking positions. Fundamentally, your approach to cultivating corporate culture has to change.

A New Speech Culture for a Vocal, Polarized World

To proceed with integrity on matters of corporate and employee speech, you must create a culture that's attuned to the social challenges we face today, and you must be realistic about how your company can (or cannot) address them. This goes beyond deciding who can say what, when. It involves designing an organization where regular discussions among all employees about social priorities is anticipated; where ethical concerns are part of day-to-day work; where politics are considered a healthy part of discourse; and where everyone is attuned to how corporate choices impact human beings. Without this foundation, the decisions you make as a leader about when to speak — or when not to — will ring hollow.

Involve employees in setting realistic priorities. Companies tend to make three big mistakes when setting and publicizing societal, political, and environmental priorities.

First, they speak out on these issues as a form of stealth public relations — they project their ambition along a huge range of topics in an effort to appease stakeholders in the short term. Making a public statement is often a way to compensate for, or distract from, a lack of meaningful action, and it is increasingly the norm. For instance, the Carbon Disclosure Project recently reviewed 4,100 corporate commitments on climate change and found that fewer than 100 were credible.

Second, organizations are reluctant to set tight priorities. So they end up with a laundry list of goals and aspirations that fails to distinguish among risks, opportunities, and negative impacts that require ethical guardrails. When corporations suggest that they can address every relevant issue, they overpromise and underdeliver, fueling impatience and diminishing trust.

Third, senior leadership teams tend to set strategy and goals in isolation from the rest of their workforce or delegate the task to teams of consultants.

Changing the way you determine your priorities — and whom you involve — can correct all three errors. Issues such as sustainability and diversity are distinct in that at least some employees feel passionately about them and yearn for a sense of agency in setting goals and enacting change. Students in a recent sustainability class told me that they focus less on which brands to patronize and lifestyle changes to embrace and more on pushing their *employers* to take action because doing so leverages their impact.

Instead of awaiting such organized activity, or ignoring misalignments between senior leaders and staff, it's wise to include your employees when you use a materiality assessment to set environmental and social priorities. Any credible materiality assessment takes the concerns of internal and external stakeholders into account. And once you have listened to the full range of concerns and opinions, the imperative is to candidly focus on the handful of issues your business is truly capable of prioritizing.

Employees should also be invited to contemplate the company's actual leverage over an issue. For example, there might be limits on what an internal diversity program can achieve when the pipeline of job applicants is heavily skewed to a particular identity group. The same applies to an organization's efforts to tackle climate change in the absence of supportive public policy. Even the new CEO of sustainability poster-child Unilever recently recognized that the company has made too many vague, sweeping, long-term commitments at the expense of short-term performance, admitting that it ought to have focused on fewer, more-critical issues.

Sam Hartsock, a cofounder of qb. consulting, has worked to involve employees in sustainability strategy at numerous companies, including Ben & Jerry's and Bumble. "We always advise our clients to think about their employee engagement [around ESG] holistically," she says. "If [they] only speak to senior leadership, the result is an echo chamber that leaves out a whole section of key stakeholders. This results in a skewed image of the business, presents significant risks, and produces an ill-informed ESG strategy."

Instead, try to pinpoint what your employees expect and value. Surveys and focus groups can help identify internal sources of pressure, enthusiasm, pain, and tension. Then select individuals who could help lead initiatives and make decisions. If you involve employees in setting environmental and social priorities, you'll be better positioned to achieve them, and your public commitments will be anchored in a robust internal framework. Perhaps most important, your employees will carry increased responsibility and accountability for ensuring their success.

Reframe ethics as a process that involves everyone. For decades, ethics was simply equated with legal compliance. Now our view of what it takes to be a "good company" extends far beyond the boundaries of the law. Questions of ethics have come to reflect how a business impacts social, environmental, and political systems, and vice versa; a company can no longer operate solely as a self-interested, profit-maximizing black box. But there's been no playbook to help executives navigate this new world.

Traditionally, many consumer-facing brands have attempted to address social issues by setting up high-level, cross-functional task forces. But ethical and social concerns are converging so swiftly that businesses need to establish an active consultative process to ensure that their organizational values are robust. Ethics is a process that must involve everyone, from the C-suite to frontline employees.

Consider Dutch bank Rabobank's dynamic approach to ethical challenges. Its Global Ethics Committee, which includes young employees, considers the ethics surrounding emerging issues such as AI and cryptocurrencies and sustainability dilemmas such as whether to source solar panels from Xinjiang. "Every employee can raise a question or ethical dilemma," explains Francoise Rost, Rabobank's senior ethics adviser. "The committee deals with cases and themes with an ethical character in the 'gray area.' Often, there is not yet an internal policy or legislation or regulations in such dilemmas. The outcome of the dialogue can serve as a moral precedent for similar cases or contribute to internal policymaking."

Your corporation's impact on human beings is at the very root of your legal, operational, and reputational risks, even if *how* those risks might manifest is unpredictable.

Salesforce's Paula Goldman, the company's chief ethics and humane use officer, shares a similar process. "We created an ethical use advisory council that includes, notably, frontline employees, executives, and external tech ethics experts," she explains. "When an issue comes our way, we will debate it from multiple angles…and we'll make a recommendation to leadership."

Organizations can give their employees a framework for responding to nuanced and complex problems. Novartis, for example, developed an online, interactive ethical decision-making framework for staff. It isn't intended to replace conversation, and it doesn't give employees definitive answers about what they should do. Rather, it guides users through 15 questions to prompt deep reflection, exposes as many as six potential biases, and suggests additional materials and resources to explore. This is more practical and effective than laying out rules and sanctions. It gives employees the tools to develop an ethical code and offers them agency in drawing their own conclusions. It also emphasizes that ethical considerations and challenges are a key aspect of organizational decision-making in general.

Be inclusive and transparent about politics. Organizations cannot represent all employees' views on political questions. Issues such as racism, reproductive rights, and climate change are so fraught precisely because they have *both* political and personal dimensions. Nor can companies ignore these views, hope they won't crop up during the workday, or prevent employees from posting about them. As Hult International Business School professor Megan Reitz and author Jim Higgins have rightly argued, “Banning political speech is fundamentally implausible because it is impossible to draw a clean, objective line between what counts as ‘politics’ and what doesn’t — or which issues are ‘acceptable’ to discuss because they relate to the company’s mission and which aren’t.”

The best nonpartisan approach for coping with escalating political demands by employees is to emphasize *individual* political engagement, tolerance, and mutual respect. True inclusion means that someone should be able to hold a political opinion, even if it’s misaligned with the company’s dominant culture, without being penalized or “canceled.” Employers should respect healthy and inclusive discourse while setting clear ground rules around issues such as racism, sexual harassment, and calls for violence. A strong, clear code of conduct is useful, not least by making it clear what a corporation will *not* seek to control, as well as what it will. An institutional emphasis on individual choice and responsibility can help employees learn to be better political players themselves; indeed, it takes the heat out of demands for corporate advocacy and representation on an overwhelming range of topics.

Allstate Insurance stands out for having created the Better Arguments Project, a civic collaboration with the Aspen Institute and Facing History and Ourselves. The project focuses not on stymieing debate but on making it healthier and more respectful. It aims to teach U.S. citizens — including its employees — how to stop seeing winning an argument as the goal, and to be more vulnerable and compassionate.

Companies might also consider inviting a range of political speakers and promoting civic engagement by providing time off to vote. Organizations can support democratic engagement and even match employee contributions to specific causes without embracing them. To bake tolerance and inclusion into your culture, for example, a company could make having a track record of working successfully with people who hold very different values and opinions be a requirement for promotion.

Healthy political engagement needs to go far beyond employee discourse. An unintended consequence of the surge in corporate political speech has been a renewed focus by the public (and sometimes, your employees) on organizational misalignment with political spending. At the annual conference of BSR (Business for Social Responsibility) in 2018, author Anand Giridharadas warned hundreds of sustainability leaders in attendance: “You may have lobbyist colleagues in DC that wear nice suits and cancel out your work.” More recently, a study by Ceres highlighted gaps between corporate rhetoric supporting the Paris Climate Agreement and lobbying practices that do the opposite.

As momentum builds behind corporate political responsibility, ensure that your spending matches your avowed sustainability priorities and consider augmenting transparency to build trust. Acceding to shareholder pressure over such contradictions, for instance, AT&T published a “political congruency report.” Or consider emulating IBM’s long-standing approach of not contributing directly to any political candidates — especially since some research suggests it brings little comparative advantage and may even negatively impact company value.

Base your commitments on how you impact human beings. Your ethical commitments should be based not solely on legal obligations but also on human rights principles. Although the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights are relatively new, and most corporate implementation efforts are still nascent, they can offer business unique help at this particular moment, for several reasons.

Most important, the Guiding Principles focus on individual agency, bodily autonomy, and dignity — they don’t attempt to impose values on people who may not share them. A key advantage of the human rights platform is that it encompasses the spectrum of economic, civil, political, security, and environmental issues. In 2022, for instance, the UN General Assembly recognized the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. Next, your corporation’s impact on human beings is at the very root of your legal, operational, and reputational risks, even if *how* those risks might manifest is unpredictable. The Guiding Principles consider the respective roles of business and government and account for the level of attribution and leverage your corporation has in causing and resolving negative impacts. (For example, they provide guidance in a scenario whereby you are doing your best to respect human rights in your supply chain factories, but the government is conducting aggressive surveillance and arbitrary detention of the local population, which is affecting your workers.) Corporations must identify whether their actions are causing, contributing, or are directly linked to negative human rights impacts. Finally, the Guiding Principles consider tricky trade-offs, such as those between freedom of expression and the right to privacy.

Human rights frameworks like this one explicitly direct corporations to evaluate their impact on stakeholders and prioritize their ethics efforts on that basis, rather than on opinions or ideology. For example, in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's nullification of *Roe v. Wade*, human rights principles suggest that the right to health is paramount, and reproductive rights are a key element. Businesses that make reproductive health care equally available to all employees and contract workers across the United States (including travel) are explicitly addressing the ruling's negative human rights impacts.

The most astute corporate responses always respect the principles of privacy and freedom of choice. In this case, a business would not require employees to discuss their choices with HR departments but would provide funds and medical coverage that can be accessed without involving the employer. So long as there exists no effort to force such health care on women who oppose abortion, it aligns with human rights principles to provide the same access to every staffer, anywhere in the United States. The rights of employees with values-based objections to reproductive care are not violated by the provision of care to colleagues.

Companies that fund candidates and organizations that seek to restrict this right, by contrast, are contributing to negative human rights impacts, and they should stop making such contributions.

Vestas Wind Systems provides an excellent example of a company grounding both its integrity and social responsibility efforts in a commitment to human rights, including an explicit pledge to "ensure the integration of human rights in the energy transition." This is notable, as many renewable energy companies try to avoid or sidestep the difficult human rights issues their technologies present. Beverage company Diageo has also outlined clear human rights commitments; it makes detailed operational assessments of its human rights impacts publicly available.

To be in line with good practice on business and human rights, ensure that your actions and spending are aligned. Be certain, too, that you've taken concrete steps to protect employees and supply chain workers from human rights violations before you mount any public campaign on an issue. On reflection, most companies will find that further internal work awaits.

Once you have been explicit and deliberate about employee involvement in strategy, ethics, politics, and human rights, you'll be better equipped to make consistent decisions on how to address social and political issues. Your employees may not always agree, and you must be clear from the outset as to whether they're allowed to disagree publicly. But because they've been involved throughout the process, and there has been clear consideration of how these issues will affect organizational culture, they should better understand what you are (or are not) saying — and why.

A New Era

The past decade has transformed the nature and impact of speaking out. Although leaders may find it frustrating and chaotic, it reflects a real desire for positive change among employees, who have found new ways to counter the hazard of retaliation for speaking out. Social media–enabled collective action is one, with young workers organizing on Slack, out of sight of management.

Leaders, for their part, need to adapt in order to run today's fluid, networked organizations. Barking orders from above while tuning out employee sentiment has become wholly impractical. Megan Reitz, an associate fellow at Saïd Business School, has worked for years on ways to improve the speaking-up process, and she sees this as a central leadership challenge. "How you respond in an agile way has had to shift from the traditional notion of someone at the top making all key decisions," she tells me. "We need reminding that a leader's perspective is not the [whole] truth, because we all think that how we see the world is the way it is. You need to do more than you realize, and you need to do more than just inviting speaking up."

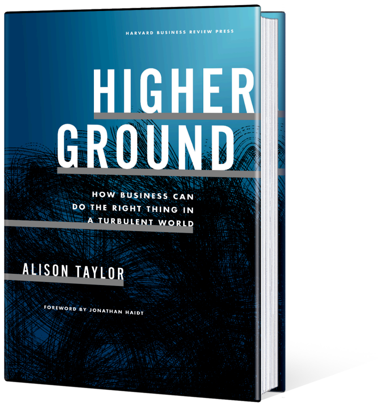
A 2021 academic study showed that listening, empathy, and persuasiveness have become far more valued qualifications in C-suite job descriptions and recruiter checklists. In an era of soft corporate boundaries and intangible value, an ability to tap into and leverage influence has become indispensable. So have familiarity with — and competence at handling — pressures regarding social responsibility.

Organizations need to solicit and support employee voice at all levels. They also need to continually emphasize the importance of individual accountability. That means taking a more considered and restrained stance on questions of corporate voice and advocacy. They'd be well served by striving to build more-tolerant cultures that feature less public grandstanding and more internal individual involvement and accountability. Employees should be encouraged to share positive examples of staff activity, highlighting exemplary ethical behavior. They should be involved in shaping the commitments an organization makes and in pondering the trade-offs and limitations it faces. Not least, they should be encouraged to exercise their individual rights and freedoms in the public sphere, rather than look to employers to represent their political positions.

Giving employees both agency and responsibility around speech is easier said than done. Still, creating a culture where that's the norm offers the most promising route through the morass of confusion and political turmoil that enterprises face today. It's inevitable that business leaders will get backlash around their decisions on speaking out on issues. But if they ground their decisions in a robust process and culture, and therefore make less frequent public declarations, they'll be better positioned to stand their ground.

Take my students' perspective on their employers' need to speak out about the present Middle East conflict. If they followed the strategies I outline in this article, most companies would soon be envisioning the negative consequences of empty "speaking up" when they possess little useful leverage. They'd limit corporate statements to expressions of humanitarian support for victims of the conflict and immediate concern for the mental and physical health of affected employees. They would allow employees freedom of expression on the issue while barring advocacy that would violate human rights.

Our new era calls for sharper, more limited corporate commitments, a more thoughtful approach to political speech and spending, and an end to the dangerous suggestion that profit-making entities can single-handedly solve fiendishly difficult societal challenges. Corporations should first seek to clean up their own messes and treat workers with dignity and respect. It is also squarely in the interest of corporations to support individual agency and engagement with the democratic process. Ultimately, credible corporate responsibility starts with more thoughtfulness and restraint over political and social advocacy, not empty speeches and overpromising.



Alison Taylor is the author of *Higher Ground: How Business Can Do the Right Thing in a Turbulent World* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2024), from which this article is adapted.

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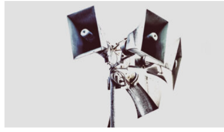

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