

When Workers Take a Stand

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Recently, there's been a surge of employee activism on a range of issues. How do you handle it when it happens inside your corporation?

Douglas Brown in [Humans at Work](#) ↓





Social media has become a platform for activism, empowering workers to share their thoughts and opinions online.

It's important to them that companies engage with social issues, says Dodd. "There was a recent Forrester study that said 70 percent of millennial workers would rather work for a company that matched their values than a company that paid them more."

Social media has been key for organizing and broadcasting messages. And, with so many online research tools available, people today can find out a lot about companies, in a way that was close to impossible just 15 years ago.

In addition, a public perception that government can't get things done fuels the rise of employee activism. Pressuring the government might lead to nothing. But pressing hard on companies can pay dividends.

The issue that jumpstarted Dodd's interest in employee activism, transgender bathrooms, was highly controversial when she first began researching, she says. But thanks largely to public outcry against discrimination towards transgender people, more and more companies are beginning to support transgender people choosing their bathrooms.

Open conversations with top management

One key for employers: Understanding and articulating company values, says Denise Lee

Yohn, a brand leadership expert and author of *What Great Brands Do*.

Effectively engaging with social issues “requires leaders to be proactive about articulating the company’s values and ensuring everybody understands them and the rationale behind them,” she says. “When issues come up, where corporate behavior is under question, use your values as a filter to process what you do. Having the core values will offset a lot of issues.”



Experts say things like town halls are important for companies. Listening to employees is key to effectively engaging with social issues.

Not only is engaging with issues potentially helpful for overall morale, but it can also motivate employees and introduce new customers to the brand, says John Cipriani, vice president in the research division of Global Strategies Group.

“There is a real opportunity for companies here to ask and enlist employees in ways that can help with the corporate mission.”

Global Strategies Group recently completed a survey that, among other things, found that two-thirds of employees said they would share positive news about the company. The same study, however, found that only 30 percent of employees believe their company’s

communications are effective. When GSG dug deeper into the survey, the firm found that what employees really missed was simply more communications between senior management and the rest of the company.

Who to watch

Want a great example of who's doing it right? Look no further than Patagonia, Starbucks, Southwest Airlines and Microsoft. Cipriani also championed Salesforce.

"Salesforce actually encourages their employees to share what they are doing to create positive change," says Cipriani. "The CEO is very active, and encourages people to be activists, and communicates that to employees. The fact that the CEO is out there is a really powerful thing."

Employee activism wasn't much of a thing until the 21st century. But now it's here to stay—and will undoubtedly evolve. Companies that effectively engage with social issues will have mechanisms for listening to employees, will stay on top of social issues as they emerge and flare up, and will respond to issues that make real sense to employees and the company. The foundation of it all is deciding upon core values, talking about them publicly, and using them to help navigate engagement with social issues.

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