# Making Healthy Dialogue a Corporate Value

**Creating a culture where healthy dialogue can take place is a challenge for businesses and many leaders don't know where to begin. Executives can begin to make a difference by introducing the promotion of healthy dialogue as a corporate value.**

By Jim Kerr and Nancy Halpern ● **February 8, 2022**

Feedback

A look at this year's Edelman Trust Barometer shows that:

- 68% of respondents agree that CEOs should step in when the government does not fix societal problems;
- 66% of respondents agree that CEOs should take the lead on change rather than waiting for government to impose change on them; and
- 65% of respondents agree that CEOs should hold themselves accountable to the public and not just to the board of directors or stockholders.

While these findings may not be all that surprising, given the cultural debates taking shape in American society today, they do pose a huge problem for CEOs.

***Which side of any given cultural debate should a CEO take?***

It is here where the value of "healthy dialogue" comes in.

Naveen Poonian, President and CEO of international manufacturing software company iBASEt, shared this frustration. "Whether debating vaccine requirements, voting rights, gun control or any number of the cultural issues making headlines today, there is no one-size-fits-all position to be taken here. Regardless of how I broach a tough topic, someone gets offended."

Clearly, creating a culture where healthy dialogue can take place is a big challenge for most businesses today and many leaders don't know where to begin. Let me suggest that the power to achieve this can be found from within.

Indeed, CEOs can, and should, set the example. By helping employees improve how they discuss the cultural issues of the day, CEOs will have impact on improving the way those same staffers discuss issues within the greater society.

That said, a CEO can begin to make a difference by introducing the promotion of healthy dialogue as a new corporate value—one that can be placed alongside common core values related to integrity, trust and commitment to customer, which most every business has in their values suite.

Of course, the work doesn't end by simply introducing a new value to the corporate list. Rather, work must be done to institutionalize it. Here are a few ideas for jump-starting the institutionalization of the promotion of healthy dialogue as a corporate value.

**1. Define the difference between dialogue and debate.**

Many people fail to see the difference, yet the distinction is important. In a debate, people want to "win" the argument and it's through arguing that tempers flare and conversations get out of hand. Dialogue, on the other hand, is a conversation aimed at exploring all sides of an issue to raise awareness and encourage additional thought. It is a healthy exchange of ideas with no expectations of changing minds or devastating an opponent. Make sure people appreciate the difference between dialogue and debate.

**2. Make it an expectation.**

Let employees know that you expect them to have healthy, respectful discussions on the issues of the day. Incorporate the ability to have peaceable dialogue in competency models and fold the characteristic into performance evaluation criteria. By incenting and rewarding staff for their ability to have healthy dialogues, we will draw attention to its importance and develop the skill through practice.

**3. Focus on the learning, not the winning.**

Feedback

This is an evolutionary process whose success is measured in how readily your people accept, absorb and apply it. Be clear that you're looking for ways to cascade this throughout the organization and that the "winners" are the ones who know how to debate in a constructive and inclusive way, not the ones who score points by being right.

Paul Falcone, Chief Human Resources Officer at Motion Picture and Television Fund and author of The Paul Falcone Workplace Leadership Series, offered this simple observation. "We have to learn how to stop lecturing, when all our staffers really need is the equivalent of a hug and some encouragement to learn and to apply news ways to better communicate with each other."

**4. This is not a game of perfect.**

When you're building a scorecard for competencies and behavior, what you're measuring is progress through incremental change. Recognize effort as well as achievement. Celebrate successes and be humble about the moments when people don't quite live up to the expectation. Better to be good, and keep improving, then to aim for perfect and beat yourself up when you, inevitably, don't achieve it.

**5. Practice makes better.**

Try, try and try again. Not only will you learn by doing, but you'll also see who the champions are by their ease and comfort in embracing the new normal. They can mentor others, coaching in constructive debut that drives the business forward. And the more you practice, the more capable you and your organization will be in tackling the sensitive and hot button issues when they emerge.

The promotion of healthy dialogue is a concept that corporate America likes to think it practices, but most organizations actually suppress its development by not placing an emphasis on it. Don't get lulled into a false sense of security because you say you encourage dissent. Instead, make it a corporate value and back that up by using some of the ideas above and you will be on your way of not only improving the way your people interact within your organization, but you will improve the way people interact outside of the workplace.

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