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Your Corporate Social Voice

By Michael W. Peregrine

Traditionally, companies have been reluctant to take public stands on major issues of the day, particularly if the issue is controversial or divisive. The risks can be great, and the benefits uncertain. Yet major corporations often find themselves on the frontline whether they wish to be or not. That is when boards and executives need a well-considered approach to exercising their social voice.

Pressure on companies to participate more openly in public social discourse is likely to increase as extraordinary economic and political volatility strike the business environment. Such volatility can create pressing enterprise and workforce culture risks that may require a response.

Corporate leadership thus has reason to pursue near-term planning for whether and, if so, how its public "voice" might be timely exercised should circumstances warrant. The pros and cons associated with this public voice underscore the importance of close board of directors involvement in any related planning process.

The term, corporate social voice (CSV), generally refers to approved statements and perspectives publicly expressed by companies and their CEOs on leading social issues of the day. The organizational benefit of exercise of the "social voice" is to become more closely aligned with the interests of all its stakeholders, including shareholders, employees, communities, suppliers, and customers.

The underlying presumption is that, on certain sensitive and highly controversial issues, these stakeholders expect their company to adopt a principled public position. Of course, that is not true in every case.

Over the last ten years, many businesses have considered reorienting strategies in order to serve these broader stakeholder interests. This is especially true in circumstances where government has either pursued policies perceived as directly contrary to stakeholder interests; or seemingly been unable to provide solutions to pressing social and political issues of great interest to those stakeholders.

Decisions to exercise the corporate social voice are most often the result of a thoughtful leadership evaluation, adapted to particular facts and circumstances.

This has resulted in business organizations publicly engaging with a variety of sensitive social and political issues, including gun control, LGBTQ matters, abortion, gender concerns, voting rights, and immigration enforcement.

Decisions to exercise the corporate social voice are most often the result of a thoughtful leadership evaluation process, which includes senior executive leadership and the board of directors, with input from external legal and communications advisors (among others).

Such processes work best when they adapt to particular facts and circumstances, including shifting consumer and workforce sentiment, government perspectives, and economic realities. This can result in companies changing their approach from the broad and active exercise of a corporate social voice to a more limited, targeted approach.

Note in this regard the 2024 policy shift adopted by Harvard University. Based upon a comprehensive "Report on Institutional Voice in the University," Harvard adopted the position that, while the university and its leaders have a responsibility to speak out to protect and promote its core function, they should decline from issuing official statements about public matters that do not affect that core function (e.g., statements of empathy).

The Harvard Policy describes the university's core function to include such matters as protecting the

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university's autonomy and academic freedom when threatened. These include outside forces seeking to determine what students it can admit, the subjects it can teach, or the research it supports. The policy also recognizes the need for a mechanism going forward by which questions on issues that may relate to the core function may be resolved.

Corporate social responsibility blends business performance, law and regulation, corporate governance, and social and environmental goals.

The corporate social voice is somewhat related to, but should not be confused with, three other corporate concepts:

□ ***Corporate responsibility*** generally refers to "behavior by corporate leaders that conforms with law and results from the proper exercise of fiduciary duties, as well as ethical behavior beyond that required by minimum legal requirements." It is a respected governance principle that arose in response to Enron-era governance, leadership, and advisor deficiencies.

□ ***Corporate social responsibility*** generally refers to a dedicated business strategy that incorporates social, environmental, and ethical factors into day-to-day operations and shareholder relationships. By its nature, it blends business performance, law and regulation, corporate governance, and social and environmental goals. It is grounded in a belief that commerce is expected to engage collaboratively with society.

□ ***Corporate citizenship*** is a term that refers to the business practices that position a business to actively and positively contribute to society as a whole. As the Conference Board has noted, it reflects the strategic integration of a company's social, legal, ethical, and economic responsibilities. There is particular emphasis on how the company interacts with its communities, workforce, consumers, and the environment.

The exercise of the corporate social voice is often viewed through the perspective that the public has greater trust in business than in government to solve issues of public importance. While companies cannot solve every issue of public importance, many can be more effectively addressed with corporate leadership.

This is consistent with the view that the long-term interests (both financial and social) of shareholders, and those of the companies in which they invest, are inseparable. Thus, the expectation is that exercise of the corporate social voice will have a favorable impact on the company's constituents (which, of course, is not always the case).

In past years, national surveys suggested that consumers strongly opposed companies taking public positions on social and political matters. The prevailing sentiment was that this would be offensive to consumers, could risk significant brand damage, and provoke political pushback. However, that may no longer be the case. A series of more recent surveys suggest a notable shift in public attitudes towards the CSV.

The Trump Administration has shown itself very willing to pursue legal action against companies that it feels are acting contrary to the Administration's platform.

For example, a 2025 poll found that 51 percent of U.S. adults believed companies should take a public stance on current issues, representing a 13-percentage-point increase from 38 percent in 2024. A 2026 Ipsos survey generally confirmed this trend. Nevertheless, history suggests that public sentiment on the CSV is prone to major shifts in positions, depending on the political climate.

The potential for negative impact on corporate reputation is not the only risk from the exercise of the corporate social voice. The Trump Administration has shown itself very willing to pursue legal action against companies that it feels are acting contrary to the Administration's platform, or that are otherwise seen as serving as an opposition force. This has been demonstrated by highly publicized investigations, litigation, and other actions against law firms, colleges and universities, media companies, and others.

Drivers include representation of political opponents, DEI policies, challenges to Administration policies, and allegations of racial and national origin discrimination. The threat of loss of favorable corporate tax status has also been used by the federal and some state governments against companies in its political disfavor.

A recent, high-profile example of the corporate social voice is Microsoft's decision to file an amicus brief in support of Anthropic's challenge to the Defense Department's effort to designate Anthropic as a supply-chain-based threat to U.S. national security. The litigation arose from a dispute between the company and the government over proposed safety guardrails on the use of Anthropic AI.

In January, the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce released an Open Letter on federal immigration enforcement. Prior to this, few if any Minnesota businesses had weighed in publicly on the issue.

Microsoft agreed with the Anthropic position that the government should not be allowed to designate a company a national security threat merely because it had identified concerns with mass surveillance and autonomous weapons. Microsoft's decision to intervene in such a highly public manner was hailed for its willingness to take such a supportive stand despite the risk of government retaliation against its range of important defense contracts.

Another recent example was the January release by the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce of an "Open Letter" on behalf of more than 60 CEOs of leading Minnesota-based companies. The letter called for "an immediate de-escalation of tensions and for state, local, and federal officials to work together to find real solutions." This was in connection with the highly controversial federal immigration enforcement activity in Minneapolis earlier this year.

Prior to the release of the letter, few if any Minnesota businesses had weighed in publicly on the Minneapolis tensions. However, the willingness to participate was said to have been based on both concerns with the economic impact on Minneapolis of the ICE enforcement efforts, and on the well-being of employees of local businesses. The Business Roundtable, a prominent association of CEOs of leading American companies, followed with a statement of support for the open letter.

There was also an April 25 editorial in *The New York Times* on the risks associated with vaccine skepticism in general, and the return of measles in particular. The editorial explicitly calls for a dedicated response from corporate leaders, as well as from officials of other major institutions, as necessary, if vaccine skepticism is to be reversed.

There are many types of issues that might prompt the exercise of the corporate social voice, with no all-inclusive list. Yet boards will operate more effectively with a sense for probable "trigger points." These are typically issues that fall within one of three categories:

□ ***First*** *would be those which are likely to constitute a material enterprise risk to the corporation.* These are exceptionally harmful economic developments; judicial decisions, regulatory actions, and federal law enforcement policies with crippling implications for the company. Such issues include U.S. foreign policy and/or trade policy decisions that threaten corporate supply chains or competitiveness; and political decisions that threaten fundamental operating principles.

□ ***Second*** *would be governmental, economic, or social developments which appear significantly detrimental to the communities in which the company operates.* Examples would be aggressive immigration policies; politicized government budgetary decisions; punitive government law enforcement practices; restrictions on freedom of the press, and a significant reduction in climate change initiatives.

□ ***Third*** *would be developments for which the company's workforce had a significantly material reaction, both positively or (more likely) negatively.* These would include government policies viewed as limiting the rights of segments of the workforce; policies/enforcement actions regarded as discriminatory along gender, ethnic, or age criteria; job losses attributed to technology deployment, and military or law enforcement actions perceived as harmful to human rights. Many such triggering events could overlap several if not all of these categories.

"Immediate De-escalation"

How CSV Made A Difference

The Minnesota Chamber of Commerce released this letter on behalf of more than 60 CEOs of Minnesota-based companies in January, 2026.

"The business community in Minnesota prides itself in providing leadership and solving problems to ensure a strong and vibrant state. The recent challenges facing our state have created widespread disruption and tragic loss of life. For the past several weeks, representatives of Minnesota's business community have been working every day behind the scenes with federal, state and local officials to advance real solutions. These efforts have included close communication with the Governor, the White House, the Vice President and local mayors. There are ways for us to come together to foster progress.

With yesterday's tragic news, we are calling for an immediate de-escalation of tensions and for state, local and federal officials to work together to find real solutions.

We have been working for generations to build a strong and vibrant state here in Minnesota and will do so in the months and years ahead with equal and even greater commitment. In this difficult moment for our community, we call for peace and focused cooperation among local, state and federal leaders to achieve a swift and durable solution that enables families, businesses, our employees, and communities across Minnesota to resume our work to build a bright and prosperous future."

Executive leadership and boards may anticipate some near-horizon issues that could bring significant corporate and community disruption. These may ultimately present calls for exercising your corporate social voice.

The potential for extraordinary economic, geopolitical, and domestic turmoil increases the likelihood that companies may exercise their corporate social voice. As a result, boards and their management teams must be prepared.

Among these are the prospects of deepening involvement in foreign wars and the related economic and political implications; a massive increase in unemployment due to the widespread deployment of artificial intelligence; breakdown of the national health care system due to rising costs and decreasing government funding; significant administration challenges to the rule of law and to the independence of the judiciary; and potential government voter suppression efforts to influence the midterm elections. Also relevant are the "Coming Crack-Up" points famously articulated by *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks in his January 23, 2026 column [corpbrd.com/nytimes-brooks].

This potential for extraordinary economic, geopolitical, and domestic turmoil increases the likelihood that companies may exercise their corporate social voice. As a result, there is value in boards and their management teams confirming an internal review and approval process for possible CSV exercise.

This process might involve several steps:

□ ***First*** *is for the board and the senior executive leadership team to reach agreement on the role of the board in reviewing and authorizing the exercise of the corporate social voice.* In most instances, the parties will work collaboratively in the discussion process, but with the board retaining final authority.

□ ***Second*** *is for the board (or a key committee) and senior executive leadership to commit to monitoring elements of public debate on which their company may be expected to comment, given its market position, its public prominence, the communities in which it is headquartered, and the concerns of its workforce.*

□ ***Third*** *is to identify which of those elements have an "essential bearing on the company and its business," and thus may be appropriate for the CSV.* This may well include issues with an impact on corporate financial or operational conditions, workforce culture, enterprise risk, broader stakeholder issues, or corporate reputation. It may well exclude issues that are overtly controversial in the public milieu, regardless of the interests of their stakeholders.

□ ***Fourth*** *is to develop a decision tree that would help guide senior executives and the board in determining whether to exercise their corporate social voice in a certain situation.* This "tree" would include an assessment of the expected internal and external value to the company from such an exercise, as well as a reasonable appreciation of the risks involved to the company, as well as its officers and directors.

This would include potential risks from third parties such as federal and state governments, plaintiffs' attorneys, and consumers, as well as from its own workforce should the company elect not to comment.

The decision tree would also include deciding whether the board chair or the CEO would be the spokesperson should a decision be made to exercise your voice, and the process for approving the final content of any public statement.

One step that could be particularly helpful to corporate leadership is to conduct game-planning exercises of several possible situations in which your CSV exercise might arise. Scenarios based on the real-life Minneapolis and Anthropic examples might prove particularly effective.

In the current volatile political and economic climate, planning for exercise of the corporate social voice is not a superfluous activity or diversion from the board and management agenda. Rather, it is becoming an imperative. Assess the value of considering what, if anything, might merit a corporate social statement; the goals, objectives, and risks of such exercise; what the "voice" might be; legally appropriate lines of communication with peers on the subject; and game-plan risk scenarios.

Such planning will not necessarily establish exercise of the corporate social voice as a corporate policy. Nor does it commit the corporation to a particular course of action or inaction. Rather, it positions the corporation and its leadership to be prepared for timely action (or inaction) should circumstances arise. ■

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