

# Corporate Political Responsibility Taskforce

*Expert Dialogue with Kristin Hansen & Tara Leweling Module #2*

## Hansen & Leweling - Module #2

**Elizabeth Doty:** [00:29:00] Well, hello and welcome to the Erb Institute's Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force Expert Dialogue Series. My name is Elizabeth Doty. I'm the task force director, and I'm delighted to be moderating today's conversation with Kristin Hansen and Tara Leweling. The Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force, or CPRT, is an initiative of the Erb Institute.

A 25 year long partnership between the Ross School of Business and the School for Environment and Sustainability at the University of Michigan. Led by Managing Director Terry Nelodov and Faculty Director Tom Lyon, the Erb Institute is known for its leadership in three areas. Teaching and Learning.

Business engagement with groups like the CPRT and scholarly and applied research. The CPRT's mission is to help companies better align their approach to political influence with their commitments to purpose and values, sustainability, and stakeholders. As we're seeing, corporate political responsibility is an increasingly [00:30:00] pivotal element in managing stakeholder trust, addressing systemic issues, and rebuilding public trust in institutions.

I'm honored to be talking with Two incredible folks who bring depth in academic expertise, government service and business leadership and now applying that to civic leadership. Our first guest I'll mention is Kristin Hansen, who's the executive director of the Civic Health Project. She is dedicated to accelerating the efforts of academics and practitioners, both.

And there's an important linkage there who are seeking to reduce polarization and improve civil discourse. And I remember when we first met that that was really important that these efforts be grounded in as much research and nuance and understanding as possible to be effective. In addition to that role at the Civic Health Project, Kristin serves on the advisory boards of all sides Business for America. And I see we have Sarah Bonk with us from business for America and the listen first project and as a year round lecturer in strategic communications at the Stanford graduate school of [00:31:00] business. So she's super busy. We're very glad that she's been able to join us today. Prior to this instantiation of a dynamic career, Kristin was also a senior executive at Intel and previous to that IBM.

And multiple startup software companies. She has a BA in political science, an international, a master's in international policy studies, and an MBA from Stanford Graduate School of Business. Which we won't hold against you. Yeah, yeah. And then Tara is our surprise guest. We had hoped, and then it came together at the last minute.

Tara is the Vice President of Corporate Brand at Allstate. And that means she leads corporate and financial communications, thought leadership, sustainability reporting, and reputation management, including amplifying Allstate's voice in national dialogues about the role of business in society. That's a really super job title or description.

Partnering with the CEO, the vice chair, executive leadership team, and presidents of eight different businesses at all different stages of growth, Tara helps all state build enduring interactive relationships [00:32:00] with stakeholders, and in particular has a focus on

advancing inclusive prosperity. And helping individuals and civic groups reach across differences, which will be a big factor in our conversation today.

She's also the executive co sponsor of all states employee resource group for veterans, military members and their families drawing on her own 22 years of active duty. Service in the U. S. Air Force. Previously, she served as executive director for international policy and programs at J. P. Morgan Chase and was acting senior director.

Listen to this acting senior director at the European affairs as well as the director for NATO and Western Europe at the White House. In the National Security Council. So today's headlines are personal for Tara. And I hope you'll share a little bit about some of how that's affecting your thinking. And then lastly, I just learned that Tara has a her bachelor's degree in science and history from the University of Michigan.

So, thank you for that and welcome to to both of you. I'm [00:33:00] so glad that you're here today.

Now let's go into this demand side and the way I'm understanding it. See if I'm paraphrasing this correctly. We are wired for belonging. And the need for identity and affiliation with groups and being validated in a group that's just built in. And I know that the sorting has been actually amplified over the last 30 or 40 years.

I think geographically there's been a lot of segregation by political party on that. So can you talk about what you think at a high level business can do to reduce that side or to move it towards a healthier form of this desire for identity? So,

**Kristin Hansen:** I would like to, you know, kind of step off from some comments that Tara was making a few moments ago.

So, implicitly what she was describing is the fact that workplaces have some unique Attributes in our society today in terms of [00:34:00] having leaders who are highly trusted, you know, when you compare trust levels of business leaders versus many other roles in society today, you have these. These settings, these constructive settings in which, by and large, employees register high trust in their leadership, and that makes business leaders a good source for objective information for knowledge that can move the needle forward on complex issues.

So trust is one of those key attributes that workplaces Somewhat uniquely have to help us address highly polarizing issues such as masking that that came up in the question a few moments ago, a second really interesting attribute about workplaces is that as adults workplaces are one of the few places we go now where we expect to keep learning this idea of lifelong learning and an expectation that our workplace will deliver that to us and an expectation from our managers [00:35:00] and leaders that we will continue to learn.

Workplaces are already geared towards teaching skills providing tools, providing forums and opportunities to practice and essentially to cultivate norms or an ethos that we would, we would regard as constructive, constructive in terms of the work we're trying to do, but frankly, constructive in terms of how we.

Behave and operate in broader society. So when we're talking earlier about this, these group ish or these tribal tendencies, you know, there's a whole set of norms have kind of been wrapped around that that tribal instinct that we have norms around signaling our strong beliefs canceling people who don't agree with our beliefs, right?

There's this. This whole category of norms that we see operating out in society and perhaps in our workplaces as well. And I think that workplaces can design a learning forums and opportunities that can help retool these norms, because. Well, I, I made the point earlier [00:36:00] that being groupish and wanting those group affiliations isn't unhealthy.

There are some unhealthy behaviors being wrapped around that largely in society so can we leverage learning infrastructure that exists in workplaces to help people build up. new skills, new norms, norms of listening of intellectual humility of curiosity and open mindedness. Can we have opportunities to practice and understand what is civil discourse?

What is a healthy versus an unhealthy interaction look like? And this can be very incremental because when we think about how we want people to behave in the workplace, We want them to get along. We want, we want coworkers to play well in the sandbox, but incrementally, we can build some even more pointed learning, knowledge, skills, and tools on top of that, that equip.

workers to perform better in the workplace, but then to take those same skills and tools back out with them into the world and how they interact with, with other human beings and in other forums whether that be in their [00:37:00] local politics or in their schools or in their faith communities or with their neighbors.

I think workplaces can be a wellspring of a newer, healthier set of norms that we all need to cultivate. The third thing I would just point out, and this is fairly obvious. The third attribute of workplaces that, that is so unique in this context of a lot of sorting that's going on in how and where we choose to spend our time.

Workplaces tend to be where we still do interact with people who may hold very different Political or ideological perspectives from our own, because that was not a selection criteria for how we got hired, most likely, and so that ideological diversity exists and puts people in proximity to one another with with the opportunity for positive interactions to occur that can break.

Negative stereotypes that we might otherwise be carrying around with us in the world. And so just the proximity is an important thing to understand and how we leverage that in positive ways. And and and to bring it back to Allstate, [00:38:00] you know, Allstate has these interesting dimensions of having employees that operate all over the country in all different types of communities, urban settings, rural settings, higher income, lower income.

Majority white, majority non white. You have all those differences playing out across the Allstate workforce. So it's not a surprise to me that Allstate has been pioneering in putting forth programming that is designed to address what can be, I'm sure, very sharp distinctions across the workforce at Allstate in terms of the political or ideological perspectives that employees hold.

So there you go. I'm setting you up.

**Tara Leweling:** I'm so happy to talk a bit about What we do internally on focusing on education and also a culture of bringing your authentic self and bringing your whole identity to work as much as possible. And that requires respect. It requires working with each other in dignity.

It requires creating space. [00:39:00] for conversation, which is just part and parcel of, of the culture and the work we do. What I'm also really proud of that we've been working on for

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several years now. And it actually was sparked, not by the workforce, but it was sparked by us seeing this polarization in society.

And in particular polarization in the communities we serve. is something called the Better Arguments Project which we developed in partnership with Aspen Institute and with Facing History and Ourselves, which have been two of our long, long standing partners. We looked at this polarization in society and said, we need, it's tearing communities apart.

We, as a, as a, as a community based business, are very concerned about this because it could, you know, obviously it has the potential of coming inside the company and tearing at the fabric of the company, but it also, we definitely saw it tearing inside of [00:40:00] communities. And so we created the better arguments project to really think about what could we do?

What can we do as a company to make a difference? It took us, I'm not I'm not going to say that was easy work. It took us from the time we decided to start working on it to the time we actually launched three years because we had so much deep discussion about how can we show up and to, to your point, not be careful about our brand, be careful about how, what it's going to mean for our, our workforce.

And so we, we tackled this question of, What could a company like ours in partnership with nonprofit profit partners that have experience in the space do and we create a better arguments. We went through a research phase, a design phase, a pilot phase. Now we're at the scale phase. And the foundation of all of this comes from Eric glue at the Aspen Institute, where he, he Talks about America itself is an argument, and we were [00:41:00] we were built on arguments.

And so what does that mean like how does it. So if you have a country that's built on arguments, how do communities and how do people inside communities engage each other. And we came up with the five principles of a better argument, anyone can go to the website and see it it's better arguments. org. One of my favorites of the five is prioritize relationships and listen, listen passionately, that in order to be able to bring your full identity, but be in conversation dialogue with each other, you have to be willing to, to really listen, you know, not just not just speak so that you're heard but speak, but really listen to what others have to say.

So we developed this five principles. Then we thought about. What would that look like to bring those into a community conversation? So we did some pilots in person. So it was before the pandemic, where in Detroit, we looked at how do you put these principles in practice in a community conversation around longtime community members and those who are moving [00:42:00] into the community for the first time.

And there was a lot of lack of trust between those, those two groups in Denver. We brought community together to talk about the tech boom and Those who were coming into Denver and creating high tech jobs, which in many ways were creating economic opportunity. But at the same time many people who were already in Denver felt it was not benefiting their community to have to have this economic growth and was causing all sorts of effects in terms of housing prices.

And what we discovered in that is that leaders even community leaders, even community leaders who do this work all the time don't always feel as equipped as they could in order to lead these community conversations. And so from that, we've now launched the Better Arguments. Ambassador program.

So we have trainings that Aspen provides every month to talk about the principles of a better argument and how one can bring those into one's own life [00:43:00] and perhaps into community groups to help. We also have a now a year long fellowship where a cohort is selected every year and they deep dive on this and spend a year together really reflecting on these principles and how they might be able to bring them back into their communities.

It's incredible work, but as I said, it took us. The amount of design we had to do and then testing and learning we had to do to get there was extensive because we needed to work out so many issues about how we show up in the space. But I couldn't be prouder of the team that put this all together.

**Elizabeth Doty:** Just fantastic. Thank you. I'm noticing some really great questions come up in the chat.

Tom Lyon: I mean, one had to do with the whole notion of bringing our whole selves to work. Like, I'm not at all sure why we want to do that, right? There are a lot of pieces of our whole selves that are totally un Related to our work here.

And, you know, I think it may well be good that we just decide. We're not going to talk religion at work, if you want to do that over drinks sometime that's fine but you don't really need to do [00:44:00] it. Maybe just as well we don't talk politics either I can work with a lot of people that I don't share political religious views with so I kind of question that whole premise.

And I guess the other. Question I had is just going to kind of the heart of the supply side of things. How are we supposed to have a non toxic conversation about politics in a country where the past president did not voluntarily seed authority in the face of a totally legitimate election where he lost 50 court cases, you know, with just absurd arguments, you know, and what amounts to I think, factually, a big lie about the election.

When you have a world where people refuse to recognize facts, how do you How do you proceed? You know, it just seems like we're in this kind of situation that journalism used to be in with regard to climate change. It's not a situation where both sides have legitimate arguments. [00:45:00] I worry that we're trying to be nicey nicey in a world where maybe we're past that point.

**Tara Leweling:** I mean, we should we should talk about this at length, and it's a great question. But my, my very, my very short answer would be. Because it's toxic not to bring our identities to work. I won't tell an Allstate story, but I will tell a story before I was at Allstate and in the corporate sector generally.

I was 22 years in the Air Force. And one of my closest friends in the Air Force who I met sort of first, first day I was on active duty was gay. And she made herself sick, made herself and ended up medically retired by not being able to bring her full self to work, not being able to talk about who she loved and the relationship she had in her life, because at the time she was subject to don't ask don't tell and she couldn't talk about it.

So there's a toxicity that comes with. Not allowing people [00:46:00] to bring their full selves, not allowing them to bring their identity and to talk about what's happening to them and talk about what's happening in their communities that may be different. That's hap, that are happening in majority communities or other communities.

If we don't embrace it it, it ends up harming individuals in ways that, that actually can, you can lose productivity. In the case of my friend she ended up medically retired with Crohn's as a result of it.

Tom Lyon: That's a very good response. That's a great example right there.

**Kristin Hansen:** I think I'd like to also reinforce the point that I saw coming into the chat which is, you can set boundaries around what should or shouldn't be discussed at work, but the fact remains that co workers and colleagues will, in many cases, have awareness.

Of each other's identities, whether or not there's, you know, time explicitly set aside for discussing identities and viewpoints at work and because of social media, and because of the blurring and blending of [00:47:00] people's personal and professional lives, especially out on those platforms. You know, we show up at work.

And those identities are kind of swirling around us like planets in a solar system, whether or not we're talking about them. So, I think just as an important starting point, acknowledging that the identities exist, and of course, in many ways, we do grapple with identity in workplaces. Most DEI initiatives are heavily centered on understanding how to develop the right culture as well as policies around certain identity categories.

A lot of What we're poking at here in the discussion today is that in thinking about diversity and thinking about identities, there are others we carry that may not be quite so visible as race, for example, or gender. It could be the way that we think about things politically it could be our faith centered beliefs.

That too, that all of that becomes a construct of who we are, the person who shows up at [00:48:00] work. And so it doesn't, it doesn't mean you have to set aside half the workday for people to debate or deliberate political issues, but there needs to be an awareness of the fact that those types of diversity are sitting within your, within your workforce.

From a workforce that's very balanced and kind of reflects the the schism in our country you've got half a workforce that leans one way and half a workforce that leans another alternatively you might have a workplace in which 95 percent of your workforce identifies one way politically, and there is a 5% remainder that may feel very marginalized or that they're operating in some version of a hostile work environment because they are outliers in terms of what that political context looks like.

So these are all just dynamics to be aware of. Once you are, then you can kind of determine what the right culture values and policy you want to set around that. And there have been some, some well publicized stories, cautionary tales of [00:49:00] companies that have tried to muzzle. Discussion or you know.

bringing in particular political identities or politics to work. The example of Coinbase, the example of Basecamp, they're good to, to look at and learn from. I happen to think there, you know, there was some good spirit and intent behind what these companies were trying to do, but there was some real backlash and attrition, you know, Actual economic consequences to setting policies that said, we're not going to talk politics at work.

We're not going to bring these identities to work to go to your second point. I will use that Elizabeth to transition. So you asked, you know, how, how can you have civil discourse or how can you have a better argument if one side is holding to Absolutely. observable truth and the other side isn't. And it's not easy.



You know, you've asked us two very good, very hard questions. But what I, what I sometimes will say to try to guide a [00:50:00] discussion around this is it isn't that truth and facts don't matter, but it is important to put a primacy around feelings as well as facts and trust as well as truth. And, you know, I am someone who happens to believe that Joe Biden legitimately won the presidential election.

I also have friends who do not believe that. I have close friends who do not believe that, who are centered on the narrative that it was not a legitimate election.

Tom Lyon: Why do you keep them as friends?

**Kristin Hansen:** Because I love them. And what's behind that belief, I firmly believe are feelings. Getting down to the feelings is really important.

A lot of people We say are bought into that narrative or believe that narrative. It's really important to ask a deeper question. What's the feeling behind that? Is it a feeling of loss? People feel [00:51:00] that there was someone representing them who is no longer there to represent them. Is it feelings of fear behind whatever?

Set of facts, true or false, people are holding to are typically some very, very deep seated feelings and emotions. And I think digging down to those is worthwhile. And this takes us in the direction of constructive civil discourse and the kinds of healthy interactions that we need to try to foster across society, starting with our close friends, starting with our family members, With our coworkers is digging down a level below the facts to the feelings that are there.

It's, it's really worthwhile and it will create healthier work environments as well as healthier personal relationships to do that. But it was hard, Tom. I'm not saying it's facile or trivial to sustain that kind of relationship. I simply wouldn't allow the political context to wrench some of my closest friends away from me.

Now going to the supply side. So [00:52:00] there are Forces. We, we, in our team, sometimes we call it the toxic sludge, just like the constant ending toxic sludge coming from the supply side of content that is meant to divide us. It is meant to turn us against one another. It is meant to weaken us the fabric of our society.

Those forces could be coming from within our country. They could be coming from beyond our country, but you know, make no mistake. Someone's doing it because it benefits them to make us feel more divided. That's what we talk about in terms of the supply side. Now, within the business context, conflict entrepreneurs exist.

There are companies that directly benefit because division exists because divisive content is being produced. That's not most companies though. And those of you who are here as part of this task force, you're not here because you're conflict entrepreneurs. You're here because you're thinking, how can I make?

This problem better. What can I do to contribute in a positive way to the division? [00:53:00] I see in the country or in my customer base or in my company. And so I want to talk about what can be done constructively on the supply side. We've talked about. Demand side issues training, education, fostering civil discourse in the workplace on the supply side.

There are a couple of important things I would ask you all to think about as members of the task force. One is, you could make a decision to be a counter narrative to counter the toxic

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sludge and to determine that with your public voice. And your public voice should always be an articulation of the values that you've centered your company on.

I know Tara talks about this all the time with all state, you know, developing clarity about your values and speaking with a consistent voice as a company about what those values are. I would encourage you to think about social cohesion. as a value that your company wants to assert. A company can have a point of view on race.

A company can have a point of view on climate. It can have a point of view on taxes. I'm just asking you to consider [00:54:00] social cohesion. What is your point of view on that as a company? What is the value that you place on that? And what are you willing to say about the importance of social cohesion, the importance of preventing violence, the importance of establishing social cohesion?

Cooperative or bipartisan norms in our governing chambers. These are all things that you can have a public voice about. So that's one thing I would suggest on the supply side to consider social cohesion as part of your corporate narrative. The second thing I would really urge you to consider as members of this task force is where your corporate dollars are.

And corporate dollars could be philanthropic, they could be donations to candidates, they could be support for nonprofit organizations are all different ways in which corporate dollars flow and show up, and all I want to suggest again here is considering whatever your Other policy decisions about those corporate dollars, consider making a proactive set of [00:55:00] decisions to let corporate dollars flow towards organizations that are working on behalf of social cohesion.

So make that part of your. Your political and social activism as a company is to pay attention to organizations that are doing good work nationally and locally to foster social cohesion. A lot of different ways this can be done. It could be anything from helping to rejuvenate local journalism or solutions oriented journalism to.

Supporting organizations that are dedicated to civil discourse and bridge building like better arguments within the Aspen Institute, but there are literally hundreds of these organizations nationwide, all under resourced and all striving every day to build social cohesion at the local and national levels so those would be my things I would, I would urge you all to consider is social cohesion as a narrative.

And as a philanthropic category.

**Elizabeth Doty:** Thank [00:56:00] you. And Kristin, as you describe that, and it's so clear, I really appreciate the clarity because it makes it. The question you can really ask yourself as to whether to to act on and this invitation you're making to me suggests we need to overcome the demand side in ourselves to remind ourselves that there is work to be done.

I mean, people in my life are shocked to know how many people are finding this idea of social cohesion. The third side, better arguments that there is a healthier way. To engage our most difficult differences, but we have to overcome that assumption and writing people off in order to do it. Yeah. And there's people who need the help.

**Kristin Hansen:** I'd like to just quickly quote or cite a colleague. It's Kami Akhavan who runs the the Dornsife Center for the Political Future at USC. And he talks about depolarizing as a process that is Intra personal interpersonal and [00:57:00] institutional. It is all 3 of those things and you're right. The work does begin within each of us as individuals to make the commitment that we're going to embrace and demonstrate.



A different set of norms, these norms of intellectual humility, open mindedness, listening, curiosity. Versus virtue signaling canceling you know, divisive rhetoric forwarding that rhetoric and so on. So it is an intrapersonal shift, it then delves into learning the skills and practicing the skills of civil discourse constructive discourse with those with whom we most disagree.

And make no mistake, it is a daily practice and challenge for me to stay emotionally connected with my best friend from high school who believes the election was stolen from Trump. But I am committed to that. That's the interpersonal part. And the institutional part goes to the ways in which everything from our voting systems to how campaign funds flow to how our [00:58:00] primaries work.

Either does or doesn't help social cohesion.

**Elizabeth Doty:** That's right. I'm, I'm right with you there. And I appreciate you're including the structural aspects, the institutional aspects, because that's one of the things that's been coming up in the task force conversation. I will say that I spent a weekend where my family made me promise not to talk politics because we knew we were diametrically opposed and it took me about 30 seconds to get into a political discussion.

But it was so. It was so wonderful to just dig in and let go of needing to persuade and at the end of the weekend, the, the other people in this argument and debate and exploration said, I've never had so much fun talking to someone who was so wrong.

I would consider that a victory underneath. I do think that the things I was raising. are now on their radar with more validity and more respect, and I learned how they thought, if nothing [00:59:00] else. So anyway, that's my, that's my criteria for a win.

If you would like to explore this in the private group that we do with our Task Force members, please reach out to me, Tom Lyon or Terry Nelodob at the email addresses below. We are right in the process of drafting principles around corporate political responsibility. In addition, you can go to our website to learn about upcoming expert dialogues.

In March, we have Khalil Bird, KB, who will be talking about the governance challenges that boards face in acting on corporate political responsibility and whether there are legal issues in supporting or safeguarding against systemic threats. As well as businesses role in structural or democracy reform.

Then we also have a resource listings that's continually updated. So if you've been there, I encourage you to go back our incredible student assistants that continually update that the civic alliance playbook is there. And then you can also sign up for updates and news. We're going to have a special event on April 6 with former Chief Justice Leo Strine and Dorothy Lund [01:00:00] on political spending.

And whether it's bad for business that will be a special event out of our normal series. And then the main link I have here is the Civic Health site that Kristin has, and there'll be pointers there to many others. And let me now turn it to you all, maybe 30 seconds, one thing that you would encourage let's say a government affairs officer to do in their companies that could help business have a positive impact in turning down the heat on toxic polarization.

**Kristin Hansen:** I guess this is a chance for me to plug some pending legislation. It's so hot off the presses. I kind of need to, to look it up as I'm as I'm speaking about it here, but it's called Building Civic Bridges Act. And Representative Kilmer, who has been one of the chairs of the

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Bipartisan Select Committee, For the modernization of Congress is one of many, many sponsors behind this pending legislation.

So I would ask you to just pay attention to the building [01:01:00] civic bridges act, which is squarely focused on bringing the heat down addressing toxic polarization in the country and strengthening social cohesion across the U. S. So that would be my parting thought.

**Elizabeth Doty:** Wonderful. Thank you so much. Much appreciated.

And we'll follow that through. And I'm sure other folks at Business for America will have it also at bfa. us. We'll have updates on legislation as well. Tara, can I ask you the parting action?

**Tara Leweling:** Sure. The parting action is I would encourage, in part, because this is led by Aspen, which is based in DC, for people to join one of our Better Arguments seminars.

Or potentially even a better the better arguments ambassadors cohort. It's incumbent upon policy professionals to really think about how they have impact on all sides of society. And this, I think, provides tools to help people better think this.

**Elizabeth Doty:** Yeah. [01:02:00] Incredible. That's great. Thank you so much. And thank you for what you're doing.

And for continuing to practice and for sharing what you've learned with us today. This was really valuable. I'm so glad you were here. Thank you. Thanks to all of you. Thank you for having me.