

The LEAD Forward March Brief

What is your leadership's role in addressing social inequality?

This is undoubtedly a time in our relatively recent history when leaders and their teams cannot remain silent about their role in geopolitics. What companies choose to pay attention to has a profound impact on their employees, their customers, their suppliers, and indeed on our society itself.

It seems more than ever employees and customers expect leaders to offer public advocacy on social inequality, sexism, racism, climate degradation, and geopolitical themes. And they will expect, even to the point of demand by boycotts, action on issues such as climate change, and social inequality, and to take a stance against radicalized groups.

Yet there is often a mismatch between the media coverage and communications of an organization and the reality of the lived experiences of the different groups within them. Do you find your leadership also at something of a crossroads?

You are not alone; we often hear some of the very difficult issues facing leaders include:

- **Social and corporate overexposure.** It used to be that we could remain private about our views and separate our businesses from politics. No longer is that accepted, and customers expect us as leaders to take total accountability for the actions of our businesses – no matter how remote. This includes conditions within our supply chain partnerships, our governmental associations, our carbon footprints, and the social impact we (or fail to) create.
- **The personal becoming political.** Amid surging polarization of views in most of our communities, what and how we behave is viewed as an indication of our company's stance on political, social, and environmental concerns. It can take one leader to express their own opinion and the organization can easily be accused of diversity washing (and this goes along with green washing, rainbow washing, gender washing). Strong emotions are evoked often with outcomes we simply did not expect.
- **Social media posts backfire.** Once a statement goes online, we can no longer control the narrative or how it is understood. Anyone with a mobile phone becomes the multiplier of our comments, actions, inactions, or mistakes. Reputational risk can take years to correct and wipe out the entire value from a business.





Engaging in dialogue in a new online world

To develop and maintain a culture that can navigate such a polarized landscape, we as leaders need to give a voice and responsibility to our teams about how and when to speak up.

We need to use our voices often but wisely. Using our voice goes beyond the rhetoric and communication strategies we have been relying on, to involving all the organization in regular open dialogue. What we pay attention to really matters. We can make a difference by educating ourselves on what practices and policies are adversely affecting our people and our society.

These are some examples of how LEAD Forward has approached this need for public advocacy from leaders.

- **Reframe ethics as a social responsibility that concerns everyone.** Social ethics is ethics, which in turn represents our democracy. As Jane Addams quoted, “If we limit the voices we listen to, we limit the scope of our own ethical behavior”. What voices are you not hearing from in your own daily life? What about the hard-to-understand issues? We have hosted deep-space conversations between and within groups. This means becoming comfortable with spaces that might be unfamiliar to you and the top teams, which we found is the condition of achieving equal status.
- **Opening up inclusive spaces.** If groups are open to having equal status and spaces, they must be met with respect and co-operation rather than goals and outcome measures. This means intergroup meetings should be informal and welcoming rather than something legally or organizationally mandated. Groups should be allowed to share their understanding and experiences rather than trying to be measured by KPI outcomes. We have facilitated such spaces for a medium-sized business. Bringing a holistic understanding of what processes and systems were inherently discriminatory helped steer and focus their change efforts.
- **Disrupt the categorization of people.** Taking teams away to retreats, offsites and experiencing new environments provides the chance to mix groups and reduce the natural tendency for established social ‘power’ groups to stick together. Another way in which categorizations happen and can be misleading at best, and harmful at worst, is in your processes and people analytics. Allow for multiple identities and backgrounds to be captured in how your teams collect, measure and present people analytics. For example, when we work with clients, we advocate against single social category dashboards.

- **Be clear what you mean and will stand by (and are not prepared to walk past).** That gap between what you say and what you do creates dissonance. Pay attention to your own practices such as your own commitment to civic engagement, how and when you support local grassroots organizations, how you educate yourself about the ongoing cost of sexism and racism in our society and if/how the policies in your own company act against inequality. As a certified B-Corp company, we have taken our own steps to measure the impact we have and how we can adapt our everyday interactions.



What are the things that you can do to combat sexism, racism, and social inequality personally and interpersonally? What are the critical things you can introduce to change the legacy of inequality? We would be delighted to have these and other conversations with you. We can support you to get involved and prepare your team to make themselves open and vulnerable. You can't get half-involved. It can't be avoided in the current times. Companies and their leaders cannot afford not to take a stand if they want to uphold the democratic values of our society.

Reach out so that we can help you engage with your organization in dialogue contact:

scott.goldner@lead.berlin or keshia.fredua-mensah@lead.berlin

Know more about us: www.lead.berlin

LEAD YOUR
TRANSFORMATION
COMPANY
FORWARD