Responding to social issues

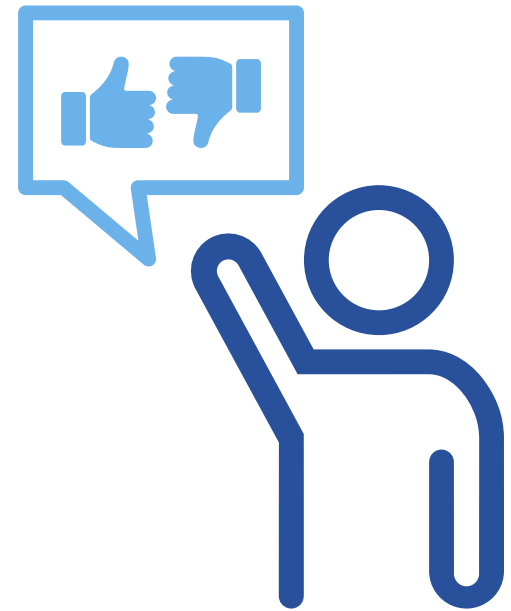## The 'when' and the 'how' of workplace responses

Toolkit
August 2022

Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion
Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion

Introduction

In the Spring of 2022, CCDI hosted a roundtable discussion titled "How to respond to social issues in the workplace", featuring panelists from three CCDI Employer Partners: Peel Region, Hyundai, and Deloitte. Attendees at the session included 60 individuals from 45 Employer Partner organizations spanning 14 industries. The discussion between the panelists, comments from attendees, and a survey completed by attendees during and after the event revealed several key considerations for responding to social issues.

The panelists were asked to discuss a significant issue their organization responded to, how they approached the decision to respond, the organization's response, and lessons learned throughout the process. The survey, which 21 attendees completed during and post session, asked the following questions:

- What key factors does your organization consider in its decision whether to respond to a social issue?
- Reflect on a social issue that your organization (or other organizations) responded effectively to. Which concrete action(s) did they take that resonated positively with you?
- As they plan for the future, how can companies be better set up to respond to social issues?
- Reflect on an issue that your organization did not respond effectively to. What was the biggest mistake your organization made?
- Reflect on an issue your organization chose not to respond to. What were the reasons for not responding?
- Overall, how satisfied are you with your organization's response to social issues? (Answered on a scale of 1-5)

This toolkit, built from the information gathered during this roundtable event, aims to guide employers in determining whether to respond to a social issue or event and developing their own framework for how to respond. While there is no one size fits all approach, we hope this document will provide the tools for organizations to respond in ways that make their employees and communities feel supported and heard.

Recent events and their impact

Often, social justice issues can suddenly enter public awareness through a triggering event that becomes viral through social media. But these events illuminate issues that have been negatively affecting some people for much longer. For example:

- In 2017, the #MeToo hashtag went viral and called attention to the global problem of sexual violence and the systems that keep it in place.[1]

- The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and the Black Lives Matter protests highlighted longstanding inequality in the justice system, police brutality against Black people, and anti-Black racism.[2]

- The COVID-19 pandemic revealed much about the inequalities in Canada and globally. Topics of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia,[3] mental health,[4] wealth inequality,[5] and gender inequality were all brought to the forefront.[6][7]

- The confirmation of unmarked graves at residential school sites across Canada emphasized the grim reality of the treatment of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, historically and in the present.[8]

- The murder of the Afzaal family in London, Ontario, on June 6, 2021, exposed the persistence of Islamophobia in Canada.[9]

These events, and the larger issues they bring to public awareness, can and should be a trigger for social change. Each event provoked difficult and valuable conversations on issues many people had previously ignored. While these issues may seem to come about suddenly to someone not affected by them, it is essential to understand that they have been affecting those involved for some time.

Why respond?

As these events occur, people are calling on organizations to take a public stand against social issues. In a report from HRPA and Diversio, 92% of employees want to see their CEO speak out about diversity and issues of equality.[10] In the same survey, 73% of consumers indicated that they would not purchase if a brand does not support social justice, and 90% wish to see organizations engaged with equality. However, it is important to note that 78% of these consumers indicated that they perform research to ensure the organization is authentic.[11] In addition, the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer revealed that 52% of consumers would buy or advocate for brands based on their beliefs, and 6 in 10 employees will choose employers based on shared beliefs and values. Finally, a Gartner study reported that 65% of employees seek out employers with a strong social and environmental conscience, including making public statements on social issues and taking action.[12]

Workplace demographics are shifting rapidly, with more equity deserving groups in the workforce:

- Between 2016 and 2036, the proportion of workers who are immigrants to Canada is expected to increase from 1 in 4 to 1 in 3.[13]

- 47% of workers over 15 are women,[14] and 53% of university-educated workers are women.[15]

- The Indigenous identifying population in Canada is growing significantly faster than the non-Indigenous population.[16]

- The proportion of people with disabilities in the workforce has increased from 4.9% to 9.1% between 2006 and 2016.[17]

As these groups are more likely to be affected by social issues, it is increasingly important that affected individuals feel supported by their employers. Further, employees are looking for employers who share their values. According to a 2019 Gartner study, when organizations take a stand, compared to organizations that stay silent, 18% more employees show high levels of discretionary effort. Additionally, seeing their employer involved in social issues improved engagement among peers for 60% of employees.

Helpful resources

- Why Engaging with Social and Political Issues Is a Non-Negotiable for Your Employee Value Proposition, Gartner, 2022.

- Brands can benefit by taking stand on social issues, but risks exist, Deloitte, 2022.

Risks of responding and not responding

The risks associated with responding to social issues are generally derived from a lack of consideration of whether the organization should be responding, which we will discuss in detail in the rest of the toolkit. Refinery29's response to the murder of George Floyd in 2020 provides an example with almost immediate consequences.20 The fashion and beauty website claimed to prioritize diversity in content, models, and staff and was one of many companies that responded to the killing of George Floyd by posting Black Lives Matter content on Instagram.

Ashley Alese Mistry ✔
@AshleyAlese · Follow

Hey @Refinery29, cool blacked out homepage! But you know what real allyship looks like? Paying your Black employees fairly, having Black women in top leadership positions & addressing the microaggressions your Black employees deal with from management on a daily basis.

10:39 AM · Jun 2, 2020

However, the company's response to this event, and its overall commitment to diversity, was contested by Black employees and past employees, who took to social media to reveal that the company's external response did not match the internal culture of the organization.

This response led to the hashtag #BlackAtR29, where dozens more stories were shared that revealed that the culture at Refinery29 was not what the company made it out to be. Ultimately, this event led to Christene Barberich, the top editor and co-founder of Refinery29, stepping down.[21]

There are also risks associated with the people who may disagree with the organization's stance. When Nike produced an ad campaign celebrating NFL player Colin Kaepernick's right to protest racial injustice by kneeling during the National Anthem, the backlash the company received was intense.[22]

However, the brand stood its ground, and its bold statement was ultimately a success. Since the controversial ad campaign, consumer perceptions of Nike have largely improved or stayed the same.[23]

Nike CEO Phil Knight has said, *"It doesn't matter how many people hate your brand as long as enough people love it. And as long as you have that attitude, you can't be afraid of offending people. You can't try and go down the middle of the road. You have to take a stand on something, which is ultimately I think why the Kaepernick ad worked"*.[24]
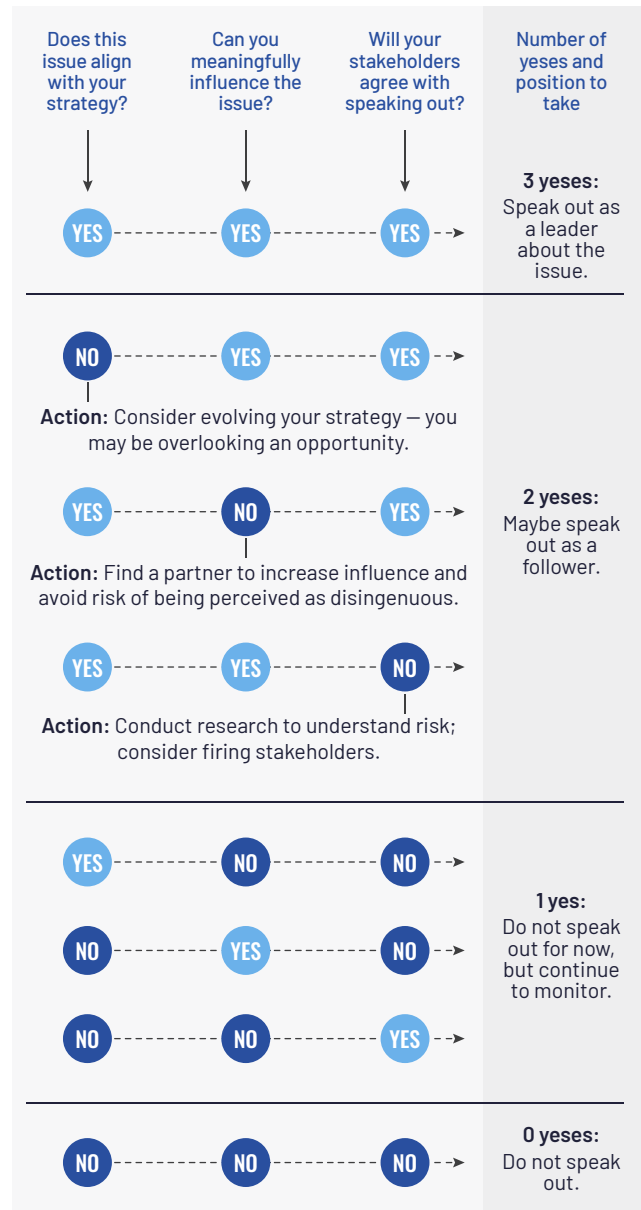
Finally, what are the risks of not taking a stance on social issues? A lack of response can send a strong message if an issue negatively impacts your employees or customers. For example, Netflix employees staged a walkout in response to how the company handled the transphobic content in comedian Dave Chappelle's special, hosted on the streaming platform.[25] Employees had raised concerns about the content internally, which were dismissed by leadership.[26] The walkout was widely publicized, with celebrities joining the protest and criticizing Netflix. The company has since released a statement saying the company has *"much more work to do both within Netflix and in our content"*.[27]

When and how to respond

The most extensive research on responding to social issues in the workplace, to date, has been done by Paul Argenti, Professor of Corporate Communication at Dartmouth College. In the Harvard Business Review, Argenti proposes a framework to help guide decision-making on when to respond. Please note that this framework looks at the decision-making process from a business case perspective and does not take into account the complex moral questions that accompany some issues. Each issue is unique, and each organization has its unique set of stakeholders and values.

Organizations must also consider how to weigh the morality around a given response, the intensity of emotion associated with specific stakeholders, and the consequences of not responding. While further considerations may be required for some issues, this framework may provide value in helping your team build their own decision-making tree.

Does this issue align with your strategy?	Can you meaningfully influence the issue?	Will your stakeholders agree with speaking out?	Number of yeses and position to take
YES	YES	YES	**3 yeses:** Speak out as a leader about the issue.
NO	YES	YES	
Action: Consider evolving your strategy — you may be overlooking an opportunity.			
YES	NO	YES	**2 yeses:** Maybe speak out as a follower.
Action: Find a partner to increase influence and avoid risk of being perceived as disingenuous.			
YES	YES	NO	
Action: Conduct research to understand risk; consider firing stakeholders.			
YES	NO	NO	
NO	YES	NO	**1 yes:** Do not speak out for now, but continue to monitor.
NO	NO	YES	
NO	NO	NO	**0 yeses:** Do not speak out.

Framework graphic taken from: When Should Your Company Speak Up About a Social Issue? Paul A. Argenti, Harvard Business Review, 2020.

In the survey completed by roundtable attendees, CCDI asked what key factors their organization considers in whether to respond to a social issue. The results were not far off from Argenti's framework, with the following considerations being mentioned most often:

- The issue's impact and relevance to employees, customers or clients, and the broader community in which the organization operates.
- Whether the organization can take meaningful action.
- Whether the issue aligns with the organization's strategy and values.

Examples of these considerations put into action by our roundtable panelists are described below.

Who does the issue impact?

For the Region of Peel, the first question when a social issue emerges is, "does this affect the health and well-being of our employees and/or Peel residents?". After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the impact was undeniable. The organization's leaders and Culture and Inclusion team received numerous emails from employees expressing their discomfort and asking whether the organization was planning to acknowledge the situation. To learn how to best support Black employees, the Region of Peel organized discussion sessions they called "courageous conversations". These sessions created a space for Black employees to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences without fear of repercussions. As a result, the organization learned what their employees needed from them and how they could respond to racism, discrimination and the impact of external events in an authentic and meaningful way. See below for more information on these conversations.

Courageous conversations at the Region of Peel

"Courageous conversations" discussion groups started after a tragic event but grew into a substantial program that enabled the Region of Peel to better support all employees.

After the initial series of conversations held with black employees following the murder of George Floyd, the organization opened up conversations with all employees discussing several dimensions of diversity, including 2SLGBTQ+, East Asian, South Asian, Indigenous, disabilities, faith/religion and more.

These discussions, along with data from the organization's workforce census survey, informed a report of recommendations that are now being implemented across the organization.

Taking meaningful action

Is there something that the organization can do beyond communication? How will the response make a difference to those affected? If meaningful action is not possible, an organization's response risks being perceived as performative. Something that came up repeatedly in conversations at the roundtable event and survey responses was ensuring that your organization has done the required internal work before taking any external action. For example, what has the organization done to back up its public stance? This was the first question asked at Hyundai when deciding whether to respond to the murder of George Floyd. The company ultimately decided that its internal efforts were not yet strong enough to back up a public statement. Instead, Hyundai put substantial efforts into supporting their Black employees internally and creating a culture that is actively anti-racist. See below for more details on the actions taken by Hyundai.

A time for change at Hyundai

After recognizing that the organization had work to do before it could make an authentic statement, Hyundai has implemented the following actions:

- Organization wide learning sessions called "a time for change"

- Group and one-on-one discussions between leadership and Black employees

- Establishment of an employee resource group

- Signed the pledge with the Black North Initiative

- Implemented recruitment strategies to increase Black representation

- Created scholarships for Black students in automotive programs

Alignment with organizational strategy and values

Genuine and purposeful responses are often tied to the organization's strategy and core values. This concept is exemplified by Deloitte's response to the confirmation of unmarked gravesites at former residential schools across Canada. Deloitte has been making efforts on the journey of reconciliation since the release of the firm's formal Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), the first of its kind in corporate Canada. The RAP aligns with the firm's purpose to "make an impact that matters to our clients, our people, and our communities".

The integration of reconciliation into their corporate strategy enabled the company to be in the position to respond in a way that was meaningful and backed by action. In partnership with First Nations University of Canada and Reconciliation Education, and as part of the education pillar of the RAP, Deloitte launched a mandatory cultural awareness training program for all employees titled "4 Seasons of Reconciliation". Following the gravesite confirmations, the firm invested in additional 30,000 licenses for this program to share with clients, family, and friends and to expand the reach of this important training. See below for more information about Deloitte's RAP.

Reconciliation at Deloitte

The Truth & Reconciliation Commission Call to Action #92 calls on Canadian corporations to commit to reconciliation. In response, Deloitte created their Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) to hold the firm accountable. There are four pillars to Deloitte's RAP:

- Inclusion
- Education
- Employment
- Economic empowerment

These pillars align with the objectives of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business Progressive Aboriginal Relations program, and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals as called for by the Truth & Reconciliation Commission.

Read the Deloitte Reconciliation Action Plan here.

Helpful resources

- When Should Your Company Speak Up About a Social Issue? Paul A. Argenti, Harvard Business Review, 2020.
- Should your brand take a stance on social issues? Here's how to decide, Fast Company, 2022

Preparing for future events

In our survey, we asked roundtable attendees how companies can plan to be better set up to respond to social issues in the future. The two most common themes in the responses, which align with previous work in this area, were creating a strategy and listening to the people affected. These considerations, which are related and work together, are described below.

Communicating and listening

When an organization takes a position on social issues and supports it with internal action, it sends a message of care and safety to employees impacted by the issue. However, to do that effectively, the organization must first be aware of who in their organization might be impacted and what messaging and actions would best support them.

There is a common saying, "nothing about us, without us", which is often used by disability advocates but applies to all groups. Therefore, your organization should develop a strategy for future responses with the input of the full diversity of your organization. One way that this can be achieved, which more than one survey respondent mentioned, is to survey your organization or community to find out what matters to them and what kind of response would impact them.

Consider who needs to be involved in the conversation, from within the organization (individual employees, employee resource groups, committees, operational units, leadership, etc.) to external stakeholders and communities. Establish relationships from which you can build trust and open lines of communication. Once your strategy has been developed and implemented, allow employees to give feedback. Create a system for feedback, both for this strategy and other DEI initiatives, that allows employees to feel safe to freely provide input without fear of punishment.

In short, listen first!

Creating a strategy

In his work on responding to social issues, Paul Argenti recommends taking the time to become aware of current issues, deciding in advance which issues your organization has a view on and working with your communications team to create a playbook to help guide you in when and how to respond. This theme was also common in our survey responses, which mentioned creating a concrete strategy, playbook, guideline, criteria, or process for what issues to respond to and how to respond.

Argenti's framework, discussed earlier in this toolkit, provides a guide for developing your own playbook or strategy. Stemming from this framework and the CCDI roundtable participants, the following are areas to consider in creating your playbook.

Values and impact

From your consultation with employees and stakeholders, determine which issues matter to the organization and align with its values. Determining this will help you be confident in your decision-making and consistent in which issues receive a response. In addition, having a plan that aligns with the values and needs of the organization will facilitate authenticity and consistency in responses.

Reflection questions:

- Are employees affected by this issue?
- Is the community affected by this issue?
- Do we know enough about the issue?
- How can we learn more about the issue?
- Have we done enough work internally to make an authentic statement on this issue?

Processes

You may also want to determine steps and approval channels to expedite responses within this playbook. A question came up often about who should lead these responses and the answer will depend on the size and structure of each organization. Leadership, communications, DEI specialists, employee resource groups, human resources and the DEI council all play a part in taking action. Still, the most effective efforts start with solid buy-in from the leadership team. Efforts without leadership support are less effective and less likely to be sustained over time.

Reflection questions:

- Who needs to be involved in the creation of a response?
- Who is leading the charge?
- Whose approval is required before action can be taken?
- What can be pre-approved so action can be taken in a timely manner?

Methods of response

Likewise, coming from your consultations with employees and other parties, create a list of potential actions the organization could take when an issue arises. Again, it is important to take meaningful action beyond words.

Reflection questions:

- What can the organization do to make a difference?
- How can success be measured?
- Is this issue beyond the scope of what the organization can achieve?
- Is there an external organization that could be partnered with for more meaningful impact?

Conclusion

The key things to remember when deciding when and how to respond are to listen to those affected, do the internal work first, and take meaningful action that aligns with your organization's culture, mission, and strategy. The issues receiving a response and the type of response differ depending on the organization, its values and purpose, its employees' diversity, and the organization's capacity to act.

As organizations are increasingly urged to take a public stance on social issues, we hope this toolkit has given you the tools required to tailor your strategy and responses to your organization.

References

1. History & inception, me too., n.d.

2. George Floyd Protests: A Timeline, The New York Times, 2021.

3. Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide, Human Rights Watch, 2020.

4. COVID-19 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide, World Health Organization, 2022.

5. Inequality in the time of COVID-19, International Monetary Fund, 2021.

6. The Shadow Pandemic: How the Covid-19 Crisis is Exacerbating Gender Inequality, United Nations Foundation, 2020.

7. Covid-19 and Inequality, Institute for Policy Studies, n.d.

8. Grief, sorrow after discovery of 215 bodies, unmarked graves at former B.C. residential school site, Global News, 2021.

9. Muslim family in Canada killed in 'premeditated' truck attack, BBC News, 2021.

10. Key Insights on Diversity & Inclusion, HRPA & Diversio, 2020.

11. Key Insights on Diversity & Inclusion, HRPA & Diversio, 2020.

12. Why Engaging with Social and Political Issues Is a Non-Negotiable for Your Employee Value Proposition, Gartner, 2022.

13. The labour force in Canada and its regions, Statistics Canada, 2019.

14. Labour force characteristics by sex and detailed age group, annual, Statistics Canada, 2021.

15. Canada 2020 and Beyond, Environics Analytics, 2020.

16. Aboriginal identity population is growing in Canada. Here's why: APTN News, 2019.

17. 2016 Employment Equity Data Report, Statistics Canada, 2021.

18. Why Engaging with Social and Political Issues Is a Non-Negotiable for Your Employee Value Proposition, Gartner, 2022.

19. Corporate Advocacy of Social Issues Can Drive Employee Engagement, Gartner, 2019.

20. The racial reckoning in women's media, Vox, 2020.

21. Refinery29 Editor Resigns After Former Employees Describe 'Toxic Culture', The New York Times, 2020.

22. Nike's Risky Stand on Kaepernick Was a Win, Bloomberg, 2019.

23. Nike's Risky Stand on Kaepernick Was a Win, Bloomberg, 2019.

24. Phil Knight on the Controversial Kaepernick Ad and Nike's Never-Give-Up Attitude, Insights by Stanford Business, 2019.

25. Netflix employees stage a trans solidarity walkout, pose list of demands, TechCrunch+, 2021.

26. Netflix Defends Chappelle Special in Memo, Suspends Employees, Bloomberg, 2021.

27. Netflix Issues Statement About Trans Employee Walkout: "We Have Much More Work To Do", Deadline, 2021.