

BRIDGING DIVIDES, STRENGTHENING BONDS

A journey through America's culture wars and
a governance roadmap for its business leaders



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background: Business leaders are navigating a complex and volatile environment, with conflict and friction about many social and political issues. And they are doing so across increasingly fragmented and polarized regions, with greater divergence of views and fewer opportunities to connect and agree across lines of difference.

Executive Forum: For the past three years, the *Executive Forum* has convened roundtables of senior business, civic, and thought leaders to explore the range of views on contested issues, broaden the appeal of bridge-building efforts, and model leadership and governance for the present day. The *Executive Forum* is facilitated by Patrick Langrell, director of the Governance and Public Affairs Centre at Australian Catholic University. He has facilitated discussions involving more than 400 CEOs, chairs, and company directors in Australia and the U.S. on the positive role companies can play in addressing polarization and social division.

US Roundtables: In 2025, the *Executive Forum* returned to the U.S., bringing together 50 leaders across the political and ideological spectrum to discuss the positive role various institutions and sectors can play in bridging divides and strengthening civic life and democratic bonds. Dinners were generously hosted by Katherine E. Fleming (president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust) in Los Angeles, Heather Ridout (Australia's Consul General in New York) in New York City, and Peter K. Kilpatrick (president of The Catholic University of America) in Washington, D.C. The September series was a joint initiative carried out in collaboration with Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., president and chief executive officer of SHRM, and SHRM's CEO Academy. SHRM is the largest HR association in the world, and Taylor is a recognized thought leader in workforce expertise and workplace civility.

What's in this paper: This paper analyzes 11 trends explored in the recent U.S. roundtables. Attached to each trend are several questions that a CEO, chair, and board director (or their equivalent) at an organization might ask themselves. Each section has a collection of articles, news, commentary, reports, and studies referenced in the bibliography. The paper can be read from start to finish or by jumping to any section of interest. A list of participants in the U.S. roundtables is also included — affiliations are for identification purposes and do not imply personal or institutional endorsement.

CONTENTS

4	Polarization, Politics, and Public Discourse
6	Diversity Rethink Throughout Business
8	Employee Activism and Disagreement
10	Corporate Restraint and Institutional Neutrality
12	The Crisis and Opportunity Facing Universities
14	The Specter of Political Violence
16	Tug-of-War Over Free Speech
18	Restoring Trust Across News Media
20	Museums and the Roiling History Wars
22	Flashpoints in the Performing Arts
24	Entertainment and Late Night Comedy
26	Participants
28	Bibliography

A photograph of a man and a woman sitting and talking. The man, on the left, has short grey hair and wears glasses and a dark blazer over a light shirt. He is gesturing with his right hand. The woman, on the right, has long dark hair and wears glasses and a light-colored blazer. They are in a room with large windows in the background. The image is overlaid with a dark blue filter.

POLARIZATION, POLITICS AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Civic malaise and the opportunity for political leadership

Gone are the days when polarization was seen as a niche obsession of a few think tank pollsters and only a second-order concern for everyone else. It is now a top concern throughout the U.S., even if few people know what to do about it. There is a growing realization that the negative feelings citizens have toward those they disagree with — a phenomenon known as affective polarization — is contributing directly to democratic backsliding and the bleak outlook that many share about the state of democracy.

Part of the problem here concerns politicians and politics: the current cadre of political leaders and the manner in which contemporary political debate is carried out. A lack of bipartisan efforts and community spirit among political leaders — as well as a highly adversarial and antagonistic approach — continues to hinder bridge-building efforts. Many lament the tendency for congressional representatives to platform their views instead of engaging in the messy legislative work of negotiation and compromise, while public debate is conducted in an increasingly uncivil and attention-grabbing manner, through preferred cable news appearances and “gotcha” clips of congressional interactions orchestrated for virality. Unsurprisingly, a lack of trust in politics and politicians is a big consequence. The low standard of public discourse is shaped by but also helps shape many of the other trends discussed throughout this paper.

Cultivating political leadership that can set a better tone and approach, speak to broader constituencies (the “exhausted majority”), and bridge divides is seen as a critical but difficult task. Restoring civil discourse and civic friendship — the ability to see people on the other side of various debates not as enemies but as reasonable people of goodwill who can and often do disagree — as well as recovering the virtues of intellectual humility and tolerance is paramount. Fortunately, most Americans still value connecting across differences even if they are apprehensive about doing so with political differences. Research suggests that by increasing bridge-building opportunities where people with differing views can connect across lines of difference, progress can be made in slowing polarization.

QUESTIONS A CEO, CHAIR, AND BOARD DIRECTOR SHOULD ASK:

- 1. Polarization:** Are we sufficiently informed about polarization in society, as well as how its dynamics might surface within our own organization? What steps can we take to mitigate and reduce polarization within our own sphere of influence? Have we invested in or supported bridge-building initiatives that seek to enhance democratic and civic bonds? How might we do that in areas directly related to our core business?
- 2. Democracy:** Have we devoted some of our strategic thinking to measures that may counteract the increasing fragility of democracy and sustain the foundation of our success? Are we educating ourselves broadly on the spectrum of views that exist surrounding the evolving role of business in society? How are we keeping abreast and ahead of trends to ensure our competitive advantage?
- 3. Civic Engagement:** Are we modeling civility and respect in our communications? Are we cognizant of the differences between our corporate and civic responsibilities? Are our corporate actions enhancing or diminishing the civic participation of our employees and customers, many of whom hold differing views on contested social and political issues?



DIVERSITY RE-THINK THROUGHOUT BUSINESS

*The pendulum swing over inclusion and diversity —
and possible new directions*

What began as a genuine attempt to broaden the workforce umbrella and balance certain identity-based disparities in the talent pipeline evolved over time to include an ever-expanding array of HR initiatives with varying degrees of effectiveness, empirical basis, and ideologically loaded postures (e.g., the concept of white privilege).

At the peak of these efforts, promoting a culture of inclusiveness often ended up discouraging or stigmatizing even reasonable critique, leading many to self-censor themselves and feel like they were in a “walking on eggshells” culture. This vacuum of growing discontent paved the way for an understandable reaction, which has since become more politicized (“wokeism”). With the pendulum now swinging hard in the opposite direction, some have spoken of the overreach of a new “woke right,” which also shuts down debate.

A consensus is emerging around framing diversity as needing to be inclusive of differing and divergent points of view, something underemphasized or neglected in earlier connotations. This aspect of diversity is also increasingly recognized as conducive to company performance. While only a small number of studies have been conducted to show the links between viewpoint or cognitive diversity and company performance, the research is steadily growing, and the anecdotal evidence abounds. Progress here faces fewer political headwinds than other measures of diversity.

Encouraging diverse thinking is not a panacea, however, as it can often cause friction between divergent views, requiring good management that can leverage disagreement toward productive ends. Given the challenge in measuring this type of diversity, as well as the ideological tilt within certain institutions and sectors, efforts to rebalance discourse will likely remain difficult and face resistance in most settings.

QUESTIONS A CEO, CHAIR, AND CHRO/CPO SHOULD ASK:

- 1. Inclusion and Belonging:** Are we ensuring that all employees — regardless of their background or identity — feel included and have opportunities to succeed in the workplace? Do our efforts strengthen an “all of us” sense of belonging and mutual commitment, or do they only speak to individualistic identities?
- 2. HR Practices:** Are we confident that our HR initiatives are grounded on a strong evidence base? And are we willing to entertain feedback and criticism when they arise, including remaining open to adjusting practices if and where appropriate?
- 3. Constructive Dialogue:** Are we able to draw out differing points of view and manage friction toward productive ends? Do our staff need training in active listening, as well as constructive dialogue and disagreement?
- 4. Diverse Viewpoints:** Does our own organization or sector have adequate viewpoint diversity? How do we know that, given the difficulties in measuring it and the risk of confirmation bias? Does insufficient viewpoint diversity expose us to any risks, and would increasing it help us with our work?

A man in a dark suit and light shirt is seated at a desk, gesturing with his hands while speaking to another person whose back is to the camera. The scene is dimly lit, with a laptop and papers on the desk. The entire image has a dark blue overlay.

EMPLOYEE ACTIVISM AND DISAGREEMENT

The 'Get back to work' shift

While it was common throughout the 2010s to emphasize employees bringing their “full selves” to work, in an increasingly polarized and politicized environment, it is now preferred that employees simply bring their “best selves” to work. The line is drawn at discussion or actions that distract or detract from the core business. CEOs are also beginning to clamp down on employee sociopolitical activism, especially as it has become clear that the loudest views are rarely representative of all employees or the country at large. As employers are tightening their financial belts under constrained economic conditions, employees are being encouraged to return to the office and focus on work.

Previous mechanisms for channeling discussion and debate surrounding contested social and political issues — such as Slack channels, employee resource groups, and internal community meetings — have also proven difficult to manage. Business leaders who set clear boundaries and expectations between work and issues beyond the workplace several years ago, which were widely criticized as being unrealistic and heavy-handed at the time, are now quietly perceived to be prescient. The jury is still out on the best means to channel internal debate on controversial issues outside the company. Most think it will depend on the type of organization, the appropriateness of doing so in relation to core work focus, and the ability to manage debate productively.

There is also growing awareness of how a set of distorting dynamics regularly pushes organizations toward adopting tribal identities of either the left or right in ways that often undermine the organization’s capacity to serve the broader community. For example, social media has been criticized for structurally distorting our sense of what issues are important and what concerns are held by the general public when it over-represents the prominence of the most divisive issues that are often of minor importance to the majority.

QUESTIONS A CEO, CHAIR, AND CHRO/CPO SHOULD ASK:

1. **Guidelines and Expectations:** Do we have clear, consistently applied guidelines and expectations regarding respectful conduct, political speech, protest, and debate over nonwork issues? What about things said on social media, both during and outside of work time?
2. **Discussion and Debate:** If an aspect of our work is directly related to a contested issue, do we have appropriate mechanisms and capabilities for channeling discussion and debate? Are we capitalizing on the benefits of viewpoint diversity in such instances to enhance our work? After allowing for disagreement, once a decision is made, are staff capable of committing?
3. **Civility and Respect:** Have we cultivated an organizational culture that emphasizes civility and considers mutual respect non-negotiable, especially when opinions clash? Have we created opportunities for employees to connect across teams, backgrounds, and beliefs?
4. **Feedback and Consultation:** What is our process for handling stakeholder pressure on our company to take a stance on a contested issue? Do we have broad enough research or feedback loops to ensure we have accurate gauges of sentiment and are not misled by polarized debates that are of interest to small minorities? Are we clear enough in our own mission and strategy that we can withstand attacks on social media that represent small numbers and could push us into conflict or accepting of a false binary around an issue? Do we have ways of soliciting the views of the larger majority within stakeholder groups, who are not as highly engaged on political and social issues or on social media?



CORPORATE RESTRAINT AND INSTITUTIONAL NEUTRALITY

Avoiding entanglement in contested social and political issues

Most companies realize there is little to be gained and much to be lost in getting entangled in issues that lack social consensus. Even standard marketing campaigns — such as actress Sydney Sweeney’s jeans ad campaign for American Eagle and Cracker Barrel’s logo redesign — are no longer safe and are increasingly leveraged by the far left or far right as examples of structural racism or wokeism. Not long ago, such controversies would have been settled by a company issuing a statement signaling support for one side or another, whereas the default now is to avoid politicization altogether by any means necessary.

Despite difficulties over distinguishing when and where companies ought to engage, the clear shift is toward a general position of restraint and neutrality in the face of deepening social divides. Higher education has frequently adopted this approach, although even where it has, considerable debate and institutional variation remains. In the face of the current strong federal pressure over normal university affairs, even a restrained and neutral approach does not provide all the answers, nor does it suit every situation.

Institutions across other sectors, including the arts, tech, finance, and news, have begun to formally adopt explicit and implicit variations of a more restrained approach at the governance level. Those institutions that did so after undergoing comprehensive governance reviews found it easier to navigate and handle ongoing events, whereas others that adopted this approach in the wake of a particular controversy or due to pressure on specific issues often faced charges of hypocrisy.

QUESTIONS A CEO, CHAIR, AND BOARD DIRECTOR SHOULD ASK:

- 1. Engagement:** Have we distinguished necessary engagement with contested issues directly related to our core business from those that are not directly related and involve unnecessary entanglement? Where we must engage because our work is directly related to a contested issue, have we sought out independent and critical feedback in advance from people who think differently?
- 2. Policy and Process:** Have we considered the upsides and downsides of adopting a position of restraint or neutrality when it comes to contested issues not directly related to our core business? Have we undergone a formal review process to ascertain all relevant considerations and viewpoints to inform such a decision? How are similar institutions in our sector approaching this? If we have decided not to adopt a position of restraint or neutrality, what will be the process used going forward to determine when, where, and how to engage with issues not directly related to our core business? Are we comfortable with the precedent and expectation this will establish for taking public stances going forward? And has this process been sufficiently stress-tested under various scenarios to mitigate criticism and backlash?
- 3. Stakeholder Analysis:** How will our position be perceived by different stakeholders? Are we able to articulate our position in a coherent and consistent fashion? Have we considered the widest range of constituencies to whom we are responsible, as a means of preventing small vocal groups having excessive influence? Have we empowered our employees to become more active and effective citizens who can use their own voices as individuals?



THE CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY FACING UNIVERSITIES

Building cultures of open inquiry and constructive dialogue

Universities face an unprecedented wave of challenges, some warranted and others less so. Many are wondering whether universities have undermined their educational mission and jeopardized the public's trust. Some of the concerns here are that universities have coddled students from difficult ideas ("safe spaces") made certain groups feel unwelcome, and allowed ideological monocultures to develop unchecked within the academy. Although many are uncomfortable with the heavy-handed approach being used by the Trump administration, most recognize the very real crisis of trust and the need to reform. Central to that effort is an honest account of where things have gone wrong and a renewed effort to think through how universities can facilitate constructive engagement between differing points of view and strengthen civic debate.

To that end, various approaches are being developed to build cultures of open inquiry and to improve constructive dialogue. These include abandoning diversity statements – perceived by some as ideological litmus tests unrelated to scholarship – in favor of civility essays, evaluating the ideological balance between and within disciplines, practicing affirmative action for conservative academics, revising curricula, new investments in overlooked fields and subfields, stewarding bridge-building initiatives and funds from the top and aligned with bottom-up student driven networks, reforms to the Ph.D. admissions process with a view to broadening the pipeline for the next generation of academics, inviting controversial speakers to speak on campus, training in constructive dialogue efforts, the establishment of civics centers and schools of civic thought, and sober self-appraisals of academia's cultural norms.

To some in the academy, however, the idea of "viewpoint diversity" is still suspect and the term itself polarizing. The concern here is that it is tantamount to inviting the government inside as an ideological auditor — a Trojan horse risking further politicization. To offset this, advocates of viewpoint diversity would do well to affirm their commitment to it as a means of fostering cultures of genuine dialogue and the free exchange of ideas, rather than stifling left-leaning thought.

Many universities are reviewing their "time, manner, and place" restrictions on expressive student conduct and ensuring their universal and content-neutral application. Many think that the tone needs to be set from the top and that leadership needs to strongly enforce compliance with norms and expectations, with no exceptions — no matter the viewpoint being shared.

QUESTIONS A UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT, CHAIR, AND TRUSTEE SHOULD ASK:

- 1. Taking Stock:** Have we taken stock of our policies, programs and priorities to consider where a broader range of views could add intellectual life and vitality? Is there a real or perceived lack of ideological or viewpoint diversity at the university, faculty, school, or department level? Do we have a holistic way to assess this? Are we comfortable with the balance and can we defend it if asked? If a problematic imbalance exists, can we identify realistic opportunities for ameliorating it? How can we achieve that without compromising open inquiry and academic freedom?
- 2. University Culture:** Have we done enough to cultivate a university culture where differing points of view can be constructively engaged in pursuit of the truth? Has the tone been set from the top? Do our policies, hiring practices, classroom norms, and event decisions support a culture where respectful and robust debate is valued? Has handling difference and disagreement been emphasized as a contemporary leadership skill? Are students and faculty confident they can question orthodoxies without self-censoring or fearing further ostracism and retaliation?
- 3. Policies and Processes:** Are our policies and processes for handling student expression and norms around conduct fit for purpose in polarized times or do they need to be reviewed? Are violations handled swiftly and fairly in a manner that communicates a consistent approach across the institution?



THE SPECTER OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Disagreement leads to demonizing and dehumanizing

Following the horrific assassination of Charlie Kirk, the U.S. lurched into heated debate over political violence. Public discourse focused on the ideological motivations behind the attack and whether the left or right is more to blame in general for political violence. Soon after, a wave of reprisals took place against those who condoned or celebrated the assassination, leading people to be fired or disciplined. To many, the moment seemed reminiscent of the sweeping events in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder in 2020.

Sentiments such as “Thoughts and prayers” and exhortations that such acts “should never happen again” seemed to simply highlight the country's impotence as it descended to ever deeper levels of affective polarization and partisan animosity. At this watershed moment, a consensus and a question emerged: Something is seriously wrong, and is there broad enough will to stop this terrible spiral?

The widespread shock and grief spurred discussion about the broader cultural dynamics that lead to political violence. The conflation of even moderate speech with violence if the wrong opinions are expressed is thought to have contributed to the increased acceptance of violence to silence speakers who go against progressive orthodoxies. To many, Kirk's killing was not to be understood as an isolated incident, but as a “culmination of a shift from disagreeing, to demonizing and dehumanizing.” Spurred on by the mature response of Utah Gov. Spencer Cox, others have taken up the mantle of a renewed commitment to robust and respectful debate.

QUESTIONS A CEO, CHAIR, AND BOARD DIRECTOR SHOULD ASK:

1. **Preparedness:** Are we proactively protecting our people, assets, and operations from the risk of politically motivated violence or unrest? Do we have threat assessments and crisis response plans?
2. **Employee Expression:** How are we managing internal discourse and employee expression in a way that promotes safety, inclusion, and resilience without stifling free speech? Are we able to consistently enforce the inappropriateness of certain actions irrespective of the ideological viewpoint?
3. **Communications:** When and where are we communicating with employees or the public about external contested events or issues? Are we conscious of the precedent set and expectations for commenting again in the future?
4. **Civic Engagement:** Are we engaging responsibly with the public — through our communications, lobbying, and platform choices — in ways that reduce polarization and build trust across divides? What are we doing to strengthen civic trust, democratic norms, and conflict de-escalation in society?



TUG-OF-WAR OVER FREE SPEECH

Fear of censorship and the revival of cancel culture

The tug-of-war over free speech continues between the left and right. Each side takes turns defending it via their own cause célèbre, before justifying censorship of the other side as combating “hate speech.” Each side’s impassioned advocacy offering only dispiriting evidence for Nat Hentoff’s 1992 book, *Free Speech for Me — but Not for Thee*. The partisan tendency to call out censorship when coming from the other side and to filter out similar examples of overreach from your own side remains strong across the political spectrum, mirroring the similar ideological blind spots in debates over the motivations behind political violence and which worldview is more to blame.

Developing a principled, rather than partisan, argument for free speech that cuts both ways seems even further from reach and is inescapably intertwined with political dynamics. Credibility would be gained were both sides more willing to support examples of free speech they disagreed with and admonish attempts from their own sides to suppress it.

Fears of a revisionary continuation of “cancel culture” are now commonplace. Once a critique from classical liberals and conservatives in the face of progressive silencing, it is a phenomenon returning now under the guise of ‘accountability’ or “consequence culture.” Along with the ubiquity of social media, the influence of influencers, and the mob mentality, campaigns can quickly snowball in response to statements and place significant pressure on individuals and institutions.

QUESTIONS A CEO, CHAIR, AND BOARD DIRECTOR SHOULD ASK:

- 1. Respect and Collaboration:** Depending on the type of institution and appropriate forums for discussion, have we cultivated an environment that is genuinely respectful of a diverse range of views? Do our employees understand that their job will often involve working constructively with and for people who come from different ideological backgrounds and worldviews?
- 2. Rights and Responsibilities:** Do our employees know their differing rights and responsibilities inside and outside the workplace? Are they aware of how in a heightened and politicized atmosphere, actions can unintentionally affect the reputation and standing of the company? Should we be educating our employees about the importance of civic and respectful engagement beyond work?
- 3. Policies and Processes:** Are we confident that our policy and processes for handling complaints and correction of staff is fit for purpose in polarized times? Can we explain our decisions in reference to existing procedures consistently applied, rather than external pressure or campaigns?
- 4. Free Speech:** Are we sufficiently aware of our own bias when it comes to free speech? Are we regularly placing ourselves in other people’s shoes to see how they might perceive things? Are we finding ways to model this and support — where appropriate — people’s right to express their views, especially on issues where we may vigorously disagree with their viewpoint?



RESTORING TRUST ACROSS NEWS MEDIA

Reducing bias and increasing the diversity of views

Legacy news face enormous challenges: covering the news of the day and recovering trust, all while adjusting their capabilities to meet a fluid and cutthroat commercial environment. In polarized societies, two overlapping challenges emerge concerning the internal operations and business model: 1) the ideological slant of staff and risk of bias, and 2) the commercial, social, and political imperatives that can drive an adversarial approach to news delivery.

Although the first is an oft-heard critique from right-leaning figures toward certain mainstream media outlets, it is increasingly expressed by media figures across the ideological spectrum. The concerns here is that while aiming to reach all Americans, most news media employees skew to the left, express their opinion too readily in the news, and operate out of ideological siloes removed from broader community views. A similar criticism is levelled toward right-leaning news outlets, but in the latter's case, they tend to openly acknowledge their conservative foundations. Either way, there is growing concern about media echo chambers and a partisan sorting of organizations and audiences into red news and blue news, red facts and blue facts.

The second challenge is the result of an interplay between a subscription-based, metric-focused model that relies on engaging specific audiences, the preference most people have for news that reinforces their own worldview, and the relentless political criticism that can engender a bunker-like mentality among besieged news entities. Because of the need to attract viewers, an entertainment-style delivery of news dominates. This prioritizes adversarial and confrontational discussion over measured, even-handed contributions, emphasizing disagreement over points of agreement. As such, viewers are left with a greater sense of division and a weaker sense of any shared common ground.

Many wonder whether these internal business dynamics are only making polarization worse by exacerbating underlying divisions. If so, can anything be done about it? A variety of actions are being explored to rebalance the ideological tilt, reduce bias, and lower the temperature: launching new shows that address polarization or demonstrate constructive and respectful dialogue across divides, committing to greater diversity of perspectives in existing programming, demarcating news and opinion, hiring ombudsmen to monitor bias, introducing AI-powered measures to locate where an article may fall on the political spectrum ("bias meters"), appointing an editor-in-chief who signals a clear new direction, encouraging news consumption from a wider array of sources, reducing media position-taking on elections, and adding layers of editorial review in the story sign-off process.

QUESTIONS A CEO, EDITOR, AND BOARD DIRECTOR SHOULD ASK:

- 1. Ideological Slant:** Do we lean in a particular ideological direction? How do our staff composition, editorial stances, and programming affect our ability to engage broader community views?
- 2. Diverse Viewpoints:** Do we have sufficient voices across the ideological spectrum represented? Are our news and opinion departments aware of their functions and clear boundaries? Are we able to capitalize on diverse viewpoints to enhance our respective offerings?
- 3. Truth and Facts:** Are we realistic about reaching consensus about certain concepts - truth, facts, misinformation, disinformation - and are we conscious of how even these terms can be value-laden and subject to reasonable disagreement?
- 4. Adversarial Approach:** To what extent do our news programs rely on an adversarial or combative approach to contested issues? Have we explored the viability of a different approach? If such programs are riskier commercially, is there still a case for their continuance?



MUSEUMS AND THE ROILING HISTORY WARS

Telling the national story

As the U.S. approaches its 250th anniversary, cultural institutions face conflicting and divergent views about how to portray the past. With heightened pressure on museums to correct for a perceived imbalance in the telling of the national story, stewards of these institutions grapple with how to reach all Americans.

At the crux of the critique is whether there has been a recent overemphasis on America's flaws and an underemphasis on America's virtues, a tendency to portray the country's story as a source of shame rather than as one of pride.

With heightened focus on the Smithsonian Institution, museums throughout the sector are keen to avoid entanglement in the culture wars while still maintaining their artistic license. This is leading to a "less is more" approach when it comes to narrative explanations, allowing for more individual interpretation, and an increased emphasis on museums as a civil space that engages all viewpoints.

The Trump administration prefers accounts of U.S. history that don't contain what it deems ideologically driven or divisive content. However, the administration's insistence that museums provide only unifying accounts of history faces similar critiques of being just as ideologically motivated as the approach it seeks to replace.

QUESTIONS A CEO, MUSEUM DIRECTOR, AND CURATOR SHOULD ASK:

1. **Review:** Have we reviewed the language and framing in our exhibits, collections, and programs? Has this been carried out by a group of people with sufficiently broad and sympathetic understanding of the spectrum of views that exist in the community at large?
2. **Feedback:** Are there processes for soliciting feedback from visitors and making revisions or course correcting where appropriate? Do we have the right mechanisms in place for picking up on cues as to whether content is too skewed in one direction or another?
3. **Engagement:** Are we actively promoting museums as a civil space that welcomes a broad range of viewpoints? And for exhibits which have a clear perspective on contested issues, are we confident that it actually allows for constructive engagement with alternative points of view? Have we cultivated shared spaces for people to sensibly discuss and question topics?
4. **Ideological Slant:** Could the balance of our institution's collections be perceived to be tilted in any particular ideological direction? And if so, are we comfortable with that? If not, could additional reflection about future programs and exhibits help reduce that perception and potential bias?
5. **Trigger Warnings:** Do we have notices or trigger warnings about contents in our collection? Are we sure that the evidence base around this practice brings the benefits we seek? Are we aware of how such language can subtly signal an institutional and values-based position?



FLASHPOINTS IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

*Balancing freedom of expression with growing concerns
about context and consequences*

Arguably, no other field experiences as many controversies over freedom of expression than the cultural and creative sector, with no settled view about how to avoid or resolve them when they occur. Although many may take issue with an individual artist's point of view on a contested issue, few dispute the right of artists to express their view directly through their art form or performance.

Of particular concern, however, are the increasing number of instances where the view being expressed takes place with only tenuous links to the actual art form or performance setting. The key questions here are 1) whether artists may share their views on contested issues, and whether this distracts from the occasion and other collaborators; and 2) whether there are instead reasonable guardrails that performing arts institutions ought to establish in such cases. A related challenge is 3) whether artists and performing arts bodies must always, when pressured, share their personal or institutional views on contested issues.

In the performing arts world, there is a tendency to see any instance of free expression — irrespective of the time, manner, or place — as one where the importance of the expression overrides every other consideration. This includes considerations about the freedom of expression of the producers as well as other artists engaged in the performance, and the views of audience members and donors who feel that the occasion has been co-opted for an unrelated cause. Here the debate is between those who see no boundaries limiting freedom of expression and those who think it is important to establish some responsibilities lest the expression distract or detract from the art itself and damage the institution involved in sustaining it. On the third challenge, there is mounting pressure on artists to express the “right” views in a variety of forums or risk being cancelled. The sector's concern is that short of any consensus about how to achieve the right balance on these fronts, it is only a matter of time before another artist or cultural institution is embroiled in another controversy.

QUESTIONS A CEO, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, AND BOARD DIRECTOR SHOULD ASK:

1. **Artistic Expression:** Have we developed a position on whether artists may express their views on contested issues in situations where there is not a strong link to the art form or performance setting? Have our expectations been clearly communicated and accepted by all who collaborate with us? Are we acting consistently in our responses to these issues when they arise, regardless of the viewpoint being shared?
2. **Company Expression:** Have we developed a position on whether our performing arts company will take a public stance on an unrelated contested issue? Is our institutional approach consistent with the approach we have established with artists and performers? Are we confident that our settled approach will not distract or detract from our focus on artistic excellence?
3. **Free Expression:** Do our artists and performers understand that free expression also applies to views they disagree with? Are they willing to defend the rights of fellow artists and performers to express different views? And are they still willing to work, create, collaborate, and perform alongside fellow artists with whom they disagree?
4. **Programming:** Does our programming have an ideological tilt, and are we comfortable with it? Are we aware of the effects it may have on those who choose to collaborate with or donate to us, and who attend our shows? Could we attract a broader audience by expanding our offerings while also increasing understanding for differing worldviews? Should our focus be on creating visionary works that speak to fundamental human issues that appeal to all?



ENTERTAINMENT AND LATE-NIGHT COMEDY

No laughing matter in Hollywood

While recent public attention has focused on the ousting of certain late-night comedians, the informal political pressure exerted on media organizations to influence content (“jawboning”), and concerns over censorship and free speech, an underexplored phenomenon has been the increased politicization and leftward shift within the entertainment industry over the last decade.

While comedy has always made fun of the powers that be, some perceive a noticeable shift from broad-based apolitical humor that had mass appeal — poking both sides, so to speak — to political satire and quasi-journalistic hectoring from a consistently progressive direction. Arguably, this has narrowed the audience for late-night television and potentially created a vacuum, leading to the rise of similarly partisan right-leaning comedians, mostly dominant in podcasts (the “manosphere”).

What remains unclear is whether these shifts are due to commercial imperatives and market forces or whether they are the result of the internal dynamics of elite-driven culture within the entertainment industry. This mirrors a similar conversation quietly underway within Hollywood about “whether the liberal pendulum swung too far in an industry aimed at serving all of America,” as Sharon Waxman writes, and what a better way to course correct might be. With the entertainment industry still reeling from the pandemic, strikes, and job cuts — not to mention increased competition from the streaming and digital giants — many wonder whether leaning further into liberal bona fides at a time of social unrest is worth braving another political storm.

QUESTIONS AN ENTERTAINMENT EXECUTIVE AND BOARD DIRECTOR SHOULD ASK:

1. **Audience:** Are we sufficiently aware of the upsides and downsides — commercially, socially, and politically — of entertainment that is aimed at specific audiences holding similar worldviews? Are we able to analyze the pros and cons as objectively as we can, leaving aside our own ideological preferences and biases? Do any of our programs alienate or disparage segments of the broader population?
2. **Variety:** Do we have enough variety in our programming to appeal to broader audiences? Should we be more creative and imaginative across the board about how to expand our offerings in a polarized age? Given the politicized landscape, what long-term steps could be taken to engender a less polarizing and broad-based approach to humor? How can the comedic and talent pipelines be adjusted to develop this while still leaving ample room for more partisan approaches?
3. **Creative Leadership:** Are our entertainers, actors, and production teams aware of the positive role they can play in modeling a form of cultural leadership that bridges divides? Can the creative skill set be deployed to develop stories and narratives that explore contested issues in nuanced ways?

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