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Key Takeaways:

- There is no one perfect approach to navigating these challenges—the organizations participating in this working group session had their own unique methods that fit their needs.
- Various employees and constituent groups within the company have the potential to offer valuable inputs for navigating these challenges.
- Organizations need to provide employees with the tools and resources needed to express their views respectfully while establishing clear guidelines to prevent potential conflicts.
- It is critical to equip managers with the necessary training and resources to navigate emotionally charged scenarios effectively.
- There is a need to intensify efforts in establishing formal systems to address such challenges for organizations.
- HR professionals need evolving skills like data literacy, storytelling, and agility to navigate uncertainties and drive organizational decisions.

The world today is increasingly polarized, with divisions running deep on a variety of fronts - political, social, and cultural. This polarization presents unique challenges for Human Resources (HR) in organizations worldwide. These divisions have profound impacts on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), employee relations, and organizational culture.

The recent supreme court decision on DEI efforts in higher education has had a ripple effect in corporate America. Organizations are grappling with how to protect these initiatives and whether repositioning them could mitigate the backlash. Moreover, global political tensions and domestic polarization, notably in American politics, further complicate corporate responses. Rising employee activism, particularly around issues like climate action, adds another layer of complexity, questioning leaders' preparedness to effectively address these concerns.

CAHRS organized a working group session to address these challenges, where CAHRS members convened to discuss concerns and exchange best practices. The key themes that emerged from this session include:

Managing Employee Expectations

The polarization is impacting organizations and their workforces in various ways. While some conservative corporate leaders refrain from collaborating with certain institutions due to disagreement on approaches to current issues, others remain hesitant to vocalize company-wide messaging. Inconsistent communication from leaders further complicate matters. Younger employees often expect their workplaces to serve as communities that address broader societal issues. However, organizations struggle with balancing this expectation while avoiding overtly political stances that may not represent all stakeholders. They also face challenges in managing

growing tensions that exist among factions of the frontline workforce, leading to limited discussions of these issues to avoid potential conflicts.

There is increasing pressure on employers to fill the gaps left by government, spiritual, and other community institutions. However, it's challenging for organizations to fill these spaces. While some organizations can take a stand and be vocal about certain issues, larger organizations find it difficult due to their diverse employee and customer bases.

Focus on Equity over Diversity

There is a shift in focus from diversity to equity. While organizations are not shying away from addressing diversity internally, they are altering the way they approach the conversation. Diversity has taken on negative connotations and has become a trigger word. The way organizations talk about these issues is changing. They are cautious about setting aspirational goals for representation and are grappling with the question of whether they want to maintain the status quo or be changemakers. The more accepted approach is to address inclusion and equity.

Establishing Guidelines for Employee Expression

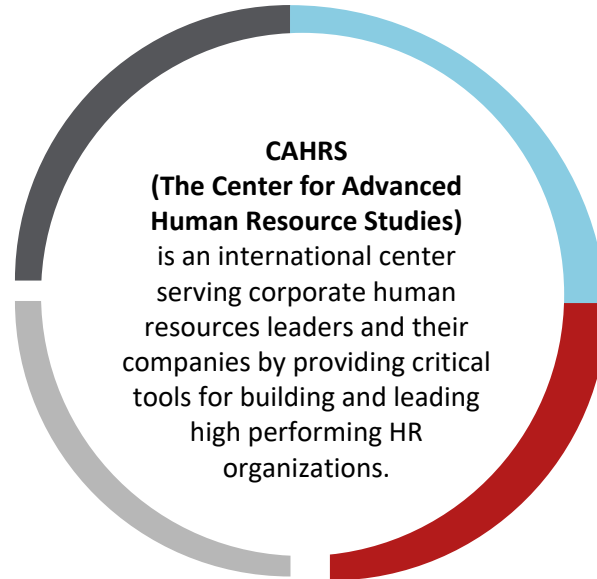
Organizations find themselves struggling to establish guidelines for employees to express their views on polarizing issues without causing offense or necessitating disciplinary action. Concerns emerge about actions that could potentially offend others' sentiments and the need to establish clear boundaries. For instance, if a member of the hiring team shares their personal views on LinkedIn, it could inadvertently reflect the company's stance when interacting with prospective employees. While some actions may be subtle, others can be quite overt, prompting a need for careful consideration and guidance. Organizations have been addressing these issues on an ad-hoc basis but are now seeking to establish more systematic approaches.

Many organizations have established cross-functional response teams, comprising DEI, Communications, Environmental Health & Safety, Legal, and HR leaders, to effectively manage urgent situations and conduct reviews. The teams may also include business leaders who represent different segments of the workforce. These collaborations aim at ensuring alignment while being authentic in addressing employee concerns. There is however, a need to ramp up these efforts.

Empowering Managers, HR, and Affinity Groups

Employers recognize the need to provide managers with tools to navigate emotionally charged scenarios effectively. They are leveraging resources focused on employee wellness during turbulent times but acknowledge gaps in providing managers with tools needed during emotionally charged scenarios. Further education for HR and business managers on these issues is deemed essential, involving demystifying legislation and sharing insights on issues that are bubbling up. Understanding Gen Z's expectations from employers is also deemed crucial for future engagement strategies.

Religious affinity groups are not encouraged in many organizations, but non-denominational spiritual groups or other existing affinity groups have the potential to lead more meaningful discussions. Moreover, there's a growing emphasis on holiday observance and time off, with some organizations introducing floating holidays and additional vacation days.



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