Cornell Convenes: Leadership in a Polarized Workplace
October 9, 2024 | New York City

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Cornell SC Johnson College of Business and the Cornell ILR School convened an in-person roundtable of academic and business leaders on October 9, 2024, in New York City. The group consisted of faculty, deans, senior level HR, DEI and talent acquisition professionals who shared an open dialogue about specific workforce management challenges caused by social, political, and other factors. The group related practical methods for addressing issues associated with a more polarized workplace.

The discussion was organized into four subject-focused sessions (listed below), led by academics and corporate leaders with demonstrated experience in workplace culture. Chatham House Rule was waived but our guests agreed to share candid and forthright comments and thoughts. Insights from all participants have been anonymized.

This report provides a brief summary of each session, anonymized quotations or paraphrases of participant insights, and key take-aways from each topic discussion. Thanks to all who attended and so generously shared their time and insight. The hope is that this roundtable will serve as the beginning of a conversation, and that future dialogue will ensue.

AGENDA
Panel 1: Understanding Evolving Employee Expectations
Ariel Avgar, David M. Cohen '73 Professor of Labor Relations, Senior Associate Dean for Outreach and Sponsored Research, Director, Center for Applied Research and Work (CAROW), ILR School
Julie Coffman, Partner and Chief Diversity Officer, Bain & Company
Wendy Boise, Senior Vice President, Global Talent, Learning. Organizational Development, Colgate-Palmolive

Panel 2: Responding to Rising Employee Activism
Jordana Kammerud, SVP & Chief Human Resources Officer, Corning Incorporated
Katrina Nobles, Director of Conflict Programs, Scheinman Institute on Conflict Resolution, ILR School
Övül Sezer, Assistant Professor, Cornell Peter and Stephanie Nolan School of Hotel Administration, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business

Panel 3: Enhancing Workforce Readiness: Putting the Deans on the Hotseat
Alexander Colvin, Martin F. Scheinman '75, MS '76, Professor of Conflict Resolution, Kenneth F. Kahn '69 Dean of the ILR School
Andrew Karolyi, Harold Bierman, Jr. Distinguished Professor of Management, Charles Field Knight Dean of the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business

Panel 4: Preparing the Leaders of the Future
Michelle Duguid, Associate Professor, Associate Dean of Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business
Laura Georgianna, Senior Lecturer, Donald F. Douglas Director of the Roy H. Park Leadership Fellows Program, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business
Robert Gulliver '92, VP, Chief Talent & Diversity Officer, Prudential Financial

GREETINGS

From Andrew Karolyi, Harold Bierman, Jr. Distinguished Professor of Management,
Charles Field Knight Dean of the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business

I am truly grateful for the relationships our college deepens – across Cornell and throughout the industries we serve. As the world changes so very rapidly, we are able to assist each other in seeing and responding as thoughtfully as possible.

Industry voices tell us that there's a growing need for leadership prepared to address complex workplaces. This collaboration with our ILR School colleagues – Brad Bell, Katrina Nobles, Ariel Avgar, and Alex Colvin, in particular -- is an opportunity to work together toward practical understandings and solutions. SC Johnson College faculty Övül Sezer, Laura Georgianna and Michelle Duguid brought guidance and expertise all along the way.

Our goal in this gathering was to share experience and to identify actionable ways to train resilient future leaders. The input gathered is shared discreetly in this report, and it will be brought to educators with discernment and intention.

These are naturally beneficial relationships. We are committed to continuing the conversation as we pursue our work in providing insightful leadership principles to the world of business. Thanks to all who participated, especially for sharing your time and energy so generously.

Sincerely yours,

From Alexander J.S. Colvin Ph.D. '99
Kenneth F. Kahn '69 Dean, Martin F. Scheinman '75, M.S. '76 Professor Cornell ILR School

On behalf of the ILR School, I am pleased and proud to have co-hosted this event with the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business. Thank you to Andrew Karolyi and the SC Johnson College team for their excellent collaboration and partnership. I also thank our attendees for their great energy and honesty.

Our focus in this event was to engage faculty and corporate partners in frank, face-to-face discussions about workplace divides. Our increasingly complex and dynamic economy and society, which very much includes our continually evolving workplaces and workforces, requires leaders who are expert at communicating through differences while managing multiple priorities. This group shared clear and strong insights, and this report will distill their collective voice.

We are all working with care to develop effective approaches to training skilled and sensitive leaders. Gatherings like this roundtable enable us to expand community and to share best practices.

All my best,

Roundtable participants (Individual and company names withheld):

Managing Director, Human Resources, US Northeast, professional services company
Partner and Chief Diversity Officer, US management consulting firm
Head of HR, Americas & Global, international bank
Chief Human Resources Officer, global business media company
HR Executive, health insurance corporation
Head of Human Resources / Global Head, Human Resources Partnership & Delivery, global bank
Chief Human Resources Officer, global household and consumer products brand
Senior Director of Human Resources, top-tier business school
Chief Human Resources Officer, Ivy-league university
Senior Vice President & Chief Human Resources Officer, global glass and optical technology company
National Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Office, Equity Lead, global consultancy firm
Chief Human Resources Officer, global beauty products company
Senior Vice President, Global Human Resources, global beauty products company
Vice President, Head of Human Resources, global apparent company
Vice President Global HR Business Partner, luxury hotel chain
Vice President, Human Resources, Global Marketing & Customer Experience, hotel group
Head of Talent and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, hotel group
Chief Human Resources Officer, data solutions corporation
Global Head of Human Resources, investment bank
Head of Talent Acquisition, building technology and software services conglomerate
Head of US Financial Advisory HR, global financial services firm
Chief Communications Officer, global travel insurance company
Vice President, Associate Communication and Engagement, hotel and resort chain
Senior Vice President, Head of Global Talent Acquisition, payments technology giant
Associate Partner, global management consulting firm
Director - HR Business Partner Lead, American multinational technology company
Talent Strategy Leader, credit ratings, research, and data firm
Vice President, Chief Talent & Diversity Officer, financial planning firm
Managing Director, Inclusion Strategy Leader, multinational professional services brand
Senior HR Consultant, global group of energy and petrochemical companies
Vice President HR, US Employee Relations, Industrial Relations & Assets, global group of energy and petrochemical companies
Head of Strategic Hiring, Academic Relations & Career Mgt., multinational technology company
Vice President, People Business Partner, global digital payments leader
Executive Vice President, Head of HR, Chief Operating Officer, financial services company

"There are things happening that are impacting the world that can't be solved by government alone. So the role of business in solving the world's problems has also contributed to evolving both expectations. As a business owner, you have to consider your business leadership team, as well as what the employees think about when they see other businesses that are playing on multiple dimensions." - Participant

Panel 1: Understanding Evolving Employee Expectations

- **Ariel Avgar**, David M. Cohen '73 Professor of Labor Relations, Sr. Associate Dean for Outreach and Sponsored Research; Director, Center for Applied Research and Work (CAROW), Cornell ILR School
- **Partner and Chief Diversity Officer**, global management consulting firm
- **SVP, Global Talent,** Learning and Organizational Development, household products company

Panel Summary

The first panel explored the effect of employee expectations on workplace norms. Driven by generational shifts in attitude and priority, these expectations impact organizational policies, leadership approaches, and employer-employee relationships. The panel described younger workers no longer satisfied with purely economic exchanges but seeking input and voice in their organizations; they expect employers to reflect their societal and political values and to accommodate their work-life balance preferences. They are more openly opinionated on social media. They are also less likely to want "the headache" of extra responsibility, although they still express a desire for promotion. This has led companies to increase onboarding training around workplace principles, expectations for professional behavior, and organizational cultural values. In response to conflicting norms and inconsistent post-pandemic work policies, companies have standardized practices to alleviate confusion and ensure fairness by instituting mandatory DE&I and code of conduct training. Companies are offering more mental health support. These efforts reduce the burden on individual managers and better align expectations across the organization.

Overall, the panel underscored that today's workplace must adapt to a more complex set of employee expectations, which include a blend of personal values, societal roles, and increased demand for meaningful employer-employee relationships.

Roundtable Insights

"There are more generations of workers. They turn over faster, but now people live longer, people retire later, so by definition, you have a broader span."

Employees are saying, "Wait, we're not sure that that new arrangement from the 90s suits us; we want to revisit some of those expectations."

Organizations and their managers grapple with the fine line between internal discussions and public stances. Clear communications are needed to outline specific employee policies and understandings of company positions on external issues. "We had to be clearer that we are not a company that is going to speak externally on topics. Ten years ago, we would not have had employees demanding a company policy on the Dobbs decision [2022 Supreme Court ruling that overturned Roe v. Wade and Planned Parenthood v. Casey]."

Human Resources practices and tools have been re-designed and expanded, to provide clearer protections, conflict management processes, and leadership training for specific types of conflict and employee social and emotional needs.

Session Takeaways

- Society now expects businesses to address social issues, like climate change and equity crises, which might previously have been seen as governmental concerns. Employees want deeper commitment and alignment with their values, challenging the legacy of a more transactional employer-employee relationship. Organizations increasingly manage both public perception and internal morale with openly expressed internal and external positions.

- Workplace policies must express consistent organizational stances on issues like remote work to reduce confusion and foster fairness across individuals and departments. Clear policies may be resisted at first but create balance and productivity quickly.

- Leadership fatigue has been on the increase. Leaders benefit from training and support structures that help them manage sensitive topics and create inclusive environments without bearing all responsibilities alone. There is a notable general increase in demand for mental health support within organizations.

- **Employers want educators to better prepare graduates for such issues.** Lessons from labor relations, particularly around employee voice and structured conflict resolution, may be useful in non-unionized settings.

Panel 2: Responding to Rising Employee Activism

- **SVP & Chief Human Resources Officer**, multinational technology company
- **Katrina Nobles**, Director of Conflict Programs, Scheinman Institute on Conflict Resolution, ILR School
- **Övül Sezer**, Assistant Professor of Management and Organizations, Cornell Peter and Stephanie Nolan School of Hotel Administration, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business

Panel Summary

This panel zoomed in on the evolving dynamic between employee activism and conflict management in the workplace, where sensitive global issues can overlap with individual expression. Key points included the shift from traditional corporate activism to individual and union-driven activism, and the effects of social media and globalization on these. The conversation also examined the need for proactive policies and training in deep listening and reflective communication, the importance of transparent organizational values, and a structured approach to crisis management.

The Senior Vice President and Chief HRO of a global technology company highlighted how the landscape of employee activism has changed over the last few decades. Where organizations once supported limited specific efforts, they now accommodate activism within structured Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), which often include community-focused initiatives. Both organizations and workers use social media to reflect opinions around values and purpose. The SVP noted that organized labor has leveraged social issues to strengthen support, pointing to recent movements among fast-food and direct-delivery workers seeking fair wages and safe working conditions.

Cornell professors discussed the challenges organizations face in managing conflicts stemming from changing social constructs. Katrina Nobles said that employees' increasing expectations that companies take stances on social issues (a departure from previous decades when personal beliefs were largely kept out of the workplace), can pressure companies to respond in real-time to pressing grievances. Övül Sezer teaches a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) course and sees that students are passionate about social justice but reticent to express opinions openly. She pointed out the risks and challenges for both employees and managers when addressing identity-related grievances, which are often emotionally charged. These discussions can impact relationships and impression management, as individuals worry about being perceived as either troublemakers or problematic. Sezer emphasized the need to establish structured approaches to potential crises, rather than solely focusing on positive DEI initiatives. Nobles emphasized the need for proactive trust-building approaches addressing the nuances of modern workplace conflicts.

Other attendees discussed generational perspectives on company loyalty. One noted that younger employees often focus on the immediate value they derive from a job, rather than a long-term commitment. Another added that knowledge workers have greater leverage in advocating for change, since those positions are abundant.

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The panelists agreed that employee activism is becoming a core aspect of workplace culture, influenced by generational expectations and shifting power dynamics. Organizations face the challenge of balancing structured policies with the need for adaptable, empathetic approaches to handle activism and conflict effectively.

Roundtable Insights

"There was kind of a social contract early on that folks just didn't talk about certain things at work, …(now) we have employees asking for opinions and stances by companies and organizations that maybe weren't asked for as much in, say, the 1990s or even the early 2000s and that can be a bit of a struggle. The other trend that we're seeing…is that organizations and companies aren't necessarily structured to manage some of those issues that come up."

"This is a new expectation of society, about values, purpose, that you have a point of view, etcetera. And so honestly, the rubrics to manage it become more complex, because, as an institution in HR, at a long-standing company…you have to have multiple lenses to think about these issues. Now activism is showing up where we're encouraging it, in some sense, amongst ERGs. So there's a plank in their strategy, usually about some form of community activism."

"…as a corporation, we ultimately decided that we would not be making a statement, but that we would be preparing managers with proactive EAP support and a statement they could make to their employees who came to them to say, 'Hey, I'm really upset about this and why is the company not saying something?' "

Session Takeaways

- HR teams and leaders must view issues through multiple lenses. Today, employees expect their workplaces to support social causes and community activism, often through ERG-led initiatives.
- Discussions around identity and values can be deeply personal, leading to emotionally loaded conversations. Both employees and managers face risks related to impression management and relationship dynamics when navigating these sensitive topics.

- Rubrics or frameworks for decision-making on social and political issues are essential, as are pro-active trust-building HR policies, and preparation for addressing conflicts tied to values, identity, and current events.

- The demand for social change within the workplace isn't temporary. Organizations need to set clear expectations for employees and integrate strategies for ongoing discussions into long-term planning.

Panel 3: Enhancing Workforce Readiness: Putting the Deans on the Hotseat

- **Alexander Colvin**, Scheinman Professor of Conflict Resolution, Kenneth F. Kahn '69 Dean of the Cornell ILR School
- **Andrew Karolyi,** Bierman Distinguished Professor of Management, Charles Field Knight Dean of the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business

Panel Summary
Deans Alexander Colvin and Andrew Karolyi addressed corporate HR leaders' questions and comments about equipping students with essential skills for managing in a polarized workplace. The first questioner asked how the ILR School and the SC Johnson College specifically focus on preparing students to transition from a campus setting, where free speech is encouraged, to a workplace where multiple views are accommodated. Both schools provide leadership training through immersions, internships, and simulations in a variety of non-academic settings. These experiences provide immense value and leadership training, as students "work directly with role models...they are actually seeing the day to day, and getting to understand what work looks like, and to learn career stories." However, intensive training is resource-heavy and not feasible for all subjects, institutions, or students. New workers need more training. The group discussed the growing need to integrate leadership competencies development into core academic programs, blending advanced knowledge and expertise with "culture-driven performance leadership" skills such as empathy, trust-building, and inclusivity, within a respectful, engaged disagreement.

The panel addressed the impact of generative AI on education. Rather than banning AI, both deans suggested incorporating these tools into learning while guiding students on their appropriate uses and limitations. Dean Colvin recommended a balanced approach, advising faculty to clearly outline AI usage expectations in course syllabi and to teach students how to critically evaluate information sources. Karolyi described a tiered and nuanced approach, restricting AI in foundational courses to solidify core skills, then gradually introducing AI in intermediate courses, and finally encouraging advanced exploration of AI in specialized courses.

All present agreed on the need to develop resilient, adaptable leaders who can engage effectively across differing perspectives, in many settings. This focus on real-world readiness, critical thinking, and culture-driven leadership will better prepare students to meet the demands of an increasingly polarized and technologically advanced workplace.

Roundtable Insights
"We need to build this resilience to the diversity of views that they clearly have, innately have, based on places from where they come, the identities that social identities that they bring to their experiences. You know there are fundamental disagreements. We need to build greater resilience and strengthen the muscles to be able to hear the other view and listen to it, and actively not just listen to it, but **hear it**."

Consider leadership as a mindset, not a destination: "What are the things that we can be doing upon entry to the workforce, to say you are a leader in your own right? Title aside, how do you show up and live that every day? So

that when that promotion happens, it feels natural and like a no-brainer, and it feels like something that we could do after we build that approach to work, and work in a great structure in a systemic way."

"American business schools tend to produce beautiful sheep, consultants and investment bankers, and then they all aspire to be CEOs, but they don't have the skills to be CEOs. Part of that is the dirty old secret that **being CEO is 80% managing people…** as you become more senior, it's less about the technical skills and more about the leadership skills. So business schools actually don't produce, in my view, great leaders, and part of that is the curriculum component of their ability to navigate through complex organizations."

Take-aways
- Curricular training would benefit from a renewed focus on "people skills" leadership competencies.
- Increased training with AI, to promote discernment, is necessary. Discussed disinformation and artificial intelligence.
- "History matters, in preparing students for multiple possibilities."

Panel 4: Preparing the Leaders of the Future

Michelle Duguid, Associate Professor, Associate Dean of Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business
Laura Georgianna, Senior Lecturer, Donald F. Douglas Director of the Roy H. Park Leadership Fellows Program, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business
Vice-President, Chief Talent & Diversity Officer, Global financial and insurance firm

Panel Summary
This panel addressed foundational competencies for effective leadership within organizations. The educators emphasized the value of comprehensive research-based leadership frameworks to develop and inform behaviors, attitudes, and practices. The group touched on the challenges of integrating these frameworks into diverse organizational structures and on the role of corporate values in shaping leadership behavior.

The Four C's Framework is useful in business education:
- **Character** focuses on integrity, ethics, authenticity, and humility
- **Cognition** involves strategic thinking, critical thinking, perspective-taking, and an impact mindset, which considers the broader effects of organizational decisions.
- **Connection** recognizes and maximizes the unique contributions of individuals within the organization;
- **Courage** involves vision and the ability to have difficult conversations and handle ambiguity.

A panelist shared a leadership framework being used in his global financial business, which focuses on **behaviors** like caring for customers and employees while driving business results and considering external perspectives. Others mentioned leveraging technology like AI for coaching and focusing on values-based awareness of broader impact.

Metrics such as 360 assessments and inclusive leadership evaluations were mentioned as tools for identifying and developing leadership potential. The discussion also touched on the challenges of integrating leadership frameworks into diverse organizational structures and the role of corporate values in shaping leadership behavior. One panelist brought his experience from the sports world into his current position, instituting coaching frameworks and partnering efforts, leveraging them with AI to upskill leaders.

An academic asked the employers where they're "giving people opportunities to stretch and try to utilize new leadership skills with support structure and coaching." Team building experiences show individuals how their own self-leadership affects team competency.

Roundtable Insights
"The way that we think about humility is a willingness to grow right, to recognize that maybe how I see things today with new information, by hearing other perspectives, I'm not going to be so wedded in my sort of past ideology that I'm not willing to learn something new…As leaders, we need to be willing to engage in those conversations…"

"With the MBA students, we start from a place of reflection. None of them are blank slates when they arrive; they've all been leading in some way, shape or form. So we asked them all to do a 360 assessment based on this model with their former employer prior to joining us, so that we have a baseline point: where are your strengths that you want to continue to develop, and where could you use your two years with us to grow and push yourself? And then let's put you in a highly diverse team that is coming from a lot of different backgrounds and perspectives and experiences, and take moments to pause and say, 'Okay, how is this going? What's working? What's not working? What do you have to change about the way that you're working together to increase your effectiveness...'"

"How do they balance advocacy, their point of view, with inquiry of others? How are how well are they able to take disparate ideas that are coming from multiple members of a team and help to integrate those and move the move forward in a sort of action-oriented sort of way? So we are assessing, how much do they create space for voices that may or may not be being heard by the rest of the group."

Take-Aways
- The panel discussed the development of leadership skills within organizations, emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive leadership frameworks balancing business results with employee care,
- Leaders must demonstrate character, strategic thinking, and the ability to handle uncertainty, ambiguity, and emotions. They must master behaviors like caring for customers and employees while driving business results and considering external perspectives.
- Metrics such as 360 assessments and inclusive leadership evaluations are among the tools for identifying and developing leadership potential.
- Leadership training systems are most beneficial when available during hiring and development.

A closing insight:
> "To be truly visionary and to see future possibilities for our organizations that do not exist today is taking a step out of your comfort zone. Whether you are the CEO or you are a manager of a team of five people, to be able to have a vision for how your contribution, the impact that you would have, could be something different than it is today, and to mobilize that and make that happen is a key piece of being courageous." -- Participant