

Virtual
Working
Group:

Collective
Action in
Today's
World

Collective Action in Today's World

April 27, 2022

Work life as we know it has changed dramatically over the past two years. A host of factors, including COVID-19; enhanced attention to diversity, equity and inclusion; and increased use of hybrid work models have challenged many longstanding assumptions about the employment relationship. This has led to changes in employee activism as well as their expectations of the employee experience.

Associate Dean Ariel Avgar kicked off the session noting that the collective action conflicts companies are seeing today are different than traditional labor management relations. Traditionally conflict was more of an individual experience between the employee and employer through the union revolving around different internal organizational issues related to relational dynamics, working conditions, policies, and practices. Today we also see collective action around broader, societal issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, climate change, Black Lives Matter, etc. that used to be outside the boundaries of the firm. Avgar has coined these “**Collective Value-Based Conflicts**” and noted that there are four key elements:

1. They are collective – no matter the setting (union or non-union)
2. They involve political and social issues – no longer just about organizational issues
3. They are value related – which poses great difficulty as not all employees hold the same values
4. Employee expectations have changed – they expect the firm to engage in and react to these issues

Given the newness of these conflicts, HR needs to examine their systems and processes for responding to these.

Key themes from the ensuing discussion are noted below.


DISCUSSION TAKEAWAYS

The Rise in Collective Conflict

Companies are seeing a rise in collective value-based conflict in the workplace, and it is difficult to respond to the many different perspectives and opinions. Companies have found success in staying true to their corporate values, culture, and identity in deciding what, when, and how to address these issues. While it’s impossible to please everyone in a conflict, being clear about what a company values and staying true to its culture can create a baseline understanding for employees.

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participants
from
6
CAHRS Companies:

Ecolab
IBM
Johnson & Johnson
Johnson Controls
Shell
Verizon

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Response to Collective Conflict

Anchoring on the corporate values is a common approach but not one that will allay concerns of all. The key then is to allow for open and respectful conversation so that employees from all sides of an issue will be able to voice their thoughts and opinions. Employees are also asking for transparency about how a decision is made and who it impacts from the organization in return.

HR's Role in Collective Conflict

Labor Relations professionals have clear ownership of union-based conflict. HR professionals are best equipped to respond to other conflicts. HR generally is the keeper of the culture, responsible for the employee experience and the systems related to employees. They can also develop the training necessary to equip front line and other managers to deal with conflict as it arises. Organizations can leverage their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) expertise in this arena. For example, while in the past DE&I was about equality in the workplace, it is now more about individualism with equitable treatment. Inclusion can mean being respectful of the many different opinions in the workplace and allowing others to bring their whole selves to work. Similarly, while the types of conflict are new, there are practices and processes in place that may be useful in this new world including co-creation, pay transparency, interest-based bargaining, surveys, and town hall discussions.

This Summary Report was prepared by Ariel Avgar, RuthAnn Rushmer and Beth Flynn-Ferry for participants of "Collective Action in Today's World" Virtual Working Group.

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