

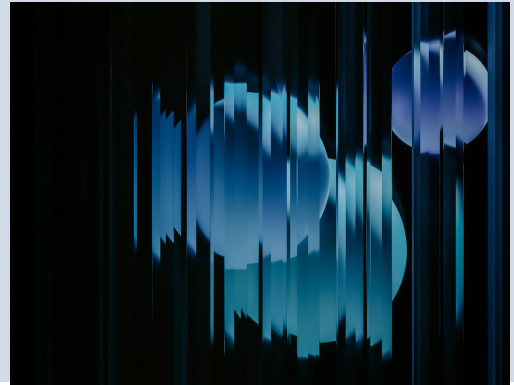


BRAND + REPUTATION | Meeting Recap

Finding the Line: How CHROs Are Navigating Expectations to Speak Out on Social Issues



by
Jena McGregor



6 Min Read

August 8, 2025

It wasn't that long ago that corporate leaders were regularly broadcasting their views on political or social issues—cancelling company events in U.S. states with restrictive transgender rights laws, joining employees at airport protests over travel bans, or using social media as a megaphone to support climate change or LGBTQ rights. Urged on by workers with higher expectations of their employers, more executive leaders found their voice on current events and societal debates.

Today, however, many are taking a much more nuanced approach. What once seemed an attempt at moral clarity now involves increased operational risk. Amid growing global authoritarianism, a political backlash against corporate “wokeness,” and new fears of reputational blowback, many companies are now acting more quietly. They're supporting employees through opt-in programs, editing internal documents with care, and resisting pressure to take public stances that could divide or distract.

At a recent M1 summer gathering, CHROs from a broad cross-section of industries reflected on how their roles, and their companies' public voices, have evolved in an increasingly polarized world. They described a new landscape in which staying silent is not only more common but often viewed as the safest choice. What emerged from those conversations was not only a series of tactical insights, but a striking shift in tone and posture compared to just a few years ago.

1. When crisis is the ‘new normal,’ CHROs must learn to lead through persistent disruption.

CHROs shared that global instability has moved from an occasional disruption to a constant operating condition. One executive described the environment candidly: “It's crisis after crisis and it's really personal as well.” From armed conflict to cultural shifts, these challenges increasingly impact the people agenda, from safety and mental health to employee mobility and performance.

Leaders emphasized the need to stay adaptive in the face of geopolitical events. “With the U.S. administration change and all that's going on, who knows what's

AT A GLANCE:

- The expectation that employers will speak out about social issues is giving way to one of neutrality or even silence in a more polarized world.
- Philanthropy is another way CHROs were having to grapple with navigating polarization, moving from ad hoc giving to more limited, screened recipients.
- Being thoughtful about language and labels, and how they may be interpreted, can add clarity and boundaries on where to engage.

going to happen tomorrow,” one CHRO said. “It all depends on what [policy] comes out and how you have to pivot as a result.”

In addition to managing risk, these crises have put new demands on HR to plan proactively, equipping themselves to respond with agility, consistency, and speed. One CHRO noted they had individual meetings with each of their employee resource groups before announcing any changes to their diversity and inclusion programs to get ahead of concerns. “Essentially our stance was actions matter more than words or terminology.”

2. Find the balance between impartiality, authenticity, and advocacy.

Several CHROs described a growing philosophy of enforced neutrality, particularly in regions with high political polarization. As one put it: “We culturally always hold the middle ground, which is very difficult because in a number of these situations there is no middle ground to hold,” the CHRO said. As a result, “we take a very quiet approach. We don’t react to things.”

Several participants noted that the expectation for companies to speak out about social issues has gone too far, creating a bar in recent years that employers can’t live up to in a polarized world. “I think that as CPOs, we need to reset the conversation with our staff members,” said one CHRO.

One HR leader said that in their organization, “we tell people you can be yourself at work, [but] don’t advocate.” Meanwhile, others said their CEOs have been very clear their expectation is for employees to leave their politics at the door. “Rather than bring your *whole* self to work, it’s bring your *authentic* self to work,” one CHRO said. The organization can honor who employees are without fostering an environment of advocacy.

“Where is our moral leadership in this moment? How can we back off from these sorts of things?”

- CHRO attendee of a recent M1 meeting

3. Don’t forget there’s a moral dilemma to staying ‘under the radar.’

Despite the practicalities of staying quiet, the choice to remain neutral prompted a discussion about moral responsibilities and ethical leadership, with some leaders acknowledging the emotional toll or expressing discomfort. “We’re sitting around this table talking about hiding simple practices of non-discrimination and fair treatment,” one CHRO said.

The tension between ethical values and business preservation was palpable throughout the discussion, revealing how silence, while often strategic, carries its

own risks. Amid a growing narrative in the U.S. in recent decades that people can't trust the government, business leaders often jumped in to suggest the private sector could be trusted instead, one CHRO noted. "Now we are where we are and we are backing off from playing the role we said we would play. We fanned the flames of diluting trust in the institutions," the CHRO said.

As stewards of corporate culture and coaches to executive leaders, how to navigate this perilous moment remains a question one CHRO said they were really struggling with. "Where is our moral leadership in this moment? How can we back off from these sorts of things?"

4. Adapt internal tools and programs to avoid taking sides.

CHROs emphasized the increasing difficulty of addressing employee needs during politically charged events without alienating parts of the workforce or offending external parties. "You can't solve for society conflict every time," said one CHRO.

One strategy shared in the meeting focused on communicating to employees that even if the company doesn't speak out, it wants to protect individual workers. "One of the things we did [after policy changes around abortion or trans rights] was say we will add to our benefits for your well-being as an employee. ... But we're not going to openly talk about it because that's not our job. We are obligated toward you, but we are not obligated toward fighting against the administration."

Philanthropic giving strategies were another place CHROs were having to grapple with a way to navigate polarization. When expectations for contributions to all kinds of nonprofit organizations began getting out of hand, one CHRO said their organization stopped making ad hoc contributions by request, and instead shared a smaller list of organizations, already screened to meet its standards. They offered to make 2-for-1 donations to organizations on the list.

5. Language has an outsized impact when neutrality matters.

Several leaders pointed to how much difference language can make in guiding their approach. One CHRO shared the strategy of shifting the word "purpose" to the word "mission" in company materials to help shift the expectations of where and how often the company was asked to engage. "When we [used] 'purpose,' it was 'well, if you're purpose-driven then you have to be acting here, you have to be acting there.' There's only so much you can play in the societal space."

Meanwhile, others said keeping the focus on actions rather than more general terms like "purpose" or "values" helped clarify what should actually prompt their companies to engage. "We talk a lot about our 'value behaviors' as opposed to 'values,' " one CHRO said. "I know that's just language, but I think it's quite different because you can talk about behaviors with far more neutrality." As another CHRO put it: "Companies have to say what they stand for and the behaviors [they] expect. But I can't tell somebody what their personal values are."

Being thoughtful about language and labels, and how they can be interpreted, may add clarity and boundaries on where to engage. Rather than declare allegiance to a side in a divisive issue, the goal is to uphold a code of conduct rooted in shared

values, a reframing that encourages employees to focus on universal behaviors—respect, empathy, responsibility—rather than individual belief systems.

6. Don't forget the performance impact of too much silence—or of taking sides.

The role of the CHRO in shaping how organizations handle divisive political and societal topics has never been more complex, or more critical. The challenge is how to speak up without speaking out too loudly, CHROs said. Organizations must still have values—but find ways to reinforce them in ways that preserve unity, minimize backlash, and keep moving the culture forward.

Still, one participant warned that remaining too silent could have consequences that go beyond brand reputation or external pressure. It can impact performance, too. “I think this is more than just a morality or an ethics or a political topic. It's really a performance topic,” the attendee said. “If someone can't show up and be themselves, they cannot show up in psychological safety. The research is absolutely crystal clear. ... Do you want your people to be able to perform their best? Then they need to have psychological safety.”