

The do's and don'ts of employee activism: how organizations respond to voices of difference

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ISBN: 978-1-910025-35-2

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank everyone who has helped us and taken part in this research, particularly the employee activists and leaders we have interviewed.

Our thanks are also extended to the Hult Research Team for their ongoing, excellent support.

Executive Summary

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Employee activism is not only here to stay, it is expected to become a defining feature of the workplace. Leaders and organizations are unlikely to be able to continue to avoid or superficially engage with contentious social and environmental issues. Genuine engagement however requires a fundamental change to the previously unchallenged organizational hierarchy and power structures. It demands dialogic skills which many employees, managers and leaders lack.

This report emphasises eight headlines:

1. The label ‘activism’ is ‘in the eye of the beholder’. Activism includes a vast range of change efforts from the stereotypical public protest and march to the quieter, persistent tempered radicalism conducted privately inside organizations.

What to one person is activism, even rebellion, is, in the eyes of another, an issue of fundamental human rights¹ – something they have no choice but to pursue.

Right now, the terms evoked by the label range from ‘courageous’ to ‘arrogant’, ‘attention-seeking’ to ‘committed’, ‘disruptive’ to ‘engaging’. More generally, the two words most associated with activism, are ‘purpose’ and ‘change’. How you understand the term affects how you act – both as an activist and as a leader.

In this report we propose that activism can be usefully understood as voices of difference that challenge the established status quo as to who gets heard and/or what should be included in the formal organizational agenda.

2. Leaders are often distanced, through their advantaged position, from the experience of others.

This ‘optimism bubble’ can mean leaders underestimate how much issues matter to others and the degree they stay silent, whilst overestimating their own ability to listen and be seen as approachable. As a result, many leaders may be failing to address organizationally relevant activist issues and need to do more work to listen and act than they think.

3. There is no neutral, apolitical stance for an organization to adopt – to imagine there is, is to be ignorant of power and privilege.

Organizations may wish to remain neutral or unideological, but what is seen as ‘apolitical’ benefits some more than others and therefore is inherently political. We may be at a sea-change in how organizations are understood in terms of their remit and range of responsibilities. The taken-for-granted perspective of Milton Friedman and the Chicago School that took hold in the 1970s is being challenged and organizations will increasingly need to express their stance on wider issues.

4. The organization has a range of possible responses from suppression through dialogue and stimulating activism. They may well choose a mixture of all of these. Choices are influenced by how leaders perceive their authority, how concerned they and their stakeholders are about the issue, how they theorise change (consciously or unconsciously), their sense of personal and organizational identity and the surrounding organizational and societal field (this report introduces a mnemonic 'ACTIF' to describe these influences). Few organizations seem to have spent time reflecting, inquiring and purposefully choosing their response – and fewer still continue to learn about the impact of their response.

5. How activists are heard is a function of an organization's existing speak-up and power culture

This research pays particular attention to the role of power in the workplace, seeing it as an inherent part of social relating, and not something that can be set aside. Understanding and working with the specific dynamics of organizational power – and the power of external stakeholders – is core to understanding how activists do and don't influence agendas and priorities.

6. Employee activists have choices around how they seek change, from radical to more tempered action. They make these choices regarding the degree to

which they stay within organizational 'rules of the game' according to how they perceive their authority, how concerned they are about the issue, how they theorise change (consciously or unconsciously), their sense of identity and the surrounding organizational and societal field ('ACTIF').

7. Certain abilities are helpful for employee activists, including political acumen, the desire and ability to listen and personal resilience. The latter is important as speaking up in organizational contexts, going against the grain of received or unchallenged wisdom and seeking change, can have a huge personal toll.

8. Making it safe to explore through dialogue what people mean by and want from activism is a key step for both activists and their organizations. Activism can spiral into confrontation and defensiveness when people arrive with pre-determined positions and with little interest in understanding the lives and insights of others.

For senior leaders it can be hard to engage with activism when it is perceived as simply 'troublemaking' or when they fear embarrassing themselves and others because they are being asked to respond to things that they haven't thought about or have been previously able to overlook. Unpicking their ignorance can be hard to do when they feel under attack.

For activists it can feel brutal to have something that matters to the very core of their being dismissed or considered as something that can be set aside during the working day.

There is no one definition of employee activism and no single organizational response. How activists influence and organizations engage with them is a function of personalities, individual and collective experiences, perceived pressures and an organization's political and speak-up culture.

It is also a matter of how in-touch leaders are with experiences outside of their own, often privileged, perspective.

Context



Context

Over recent years, headlines have illustrated a growing trend of employees speaking up and taking action over social and environmental issues. Susan Fowler's exposure of sexual harassment at Uber;² Wayfair employees pressuring leaders to stop the sales of furniture to US border control (in opposition to US Government policies on the detention of immigrants);³ Microsoft employees demonstrating their dissatisfaction with a weapons technology contract with the US Army;⁴ the Google employee petition calling for a company-wide climate plan.⁵

Assumptions that leaders may have held previously that their organizations were apolitical, that employees shouldn't bring their politics into the workplace or that unions were the only real way to bring up disputes have been challenged by five key influences:

1. The possibilities for individual and collective action via the use of **technology and social media**. Information sharing – factual and fake – has increased dramatically along with possibilities for organizing collective action, such as in the case of #BLM, the Black Lives Matter campaign and #MeToo, the movement against sexual harassment. Activism is being put on the organizational agenda whether employers want it there or not, by sites such as Glassdoor, where current and former employees anonymously review their companies and Organise, which helps employees to 'start, run and win campaigns to change their workplace'.

2. Perceived **lack of action by institutions such as Governments and Trade Unions** on key issues such as climate change and discrimination. For example, the Trump administration withdrew support for efforts relating to climate change. Trade Unions have been in retreat in many parts of the Global North, leaving behind a collective and institutional vacuum regarding issues and concerns which may not be directly in the interests of the organization and its executives. Employees in response have been putting pressure on organizations to fill the void and fulfil social and environmental obligations as well as to recognise that **inaction is as much of a political statement as action**.

3. The increasing **focus on stakeholder value** with ambitions wider than shareholder value and profit. In a bid to attract customers and talented employees, or encouraged by activist leaders, organizations have moved towards 'purpose statements' that expressly commit to values and actions on a societal level. This reflects a sea change, or the beginnings of one, in the ideological thinking about organizations, which have been dominated since the 1970s by Milton Friedman's advocacy of the primary importance of financial returns.

4. The growing presence and influence of **millennials in the workplace**, a demographic who would appear to be associated with different expectations about how they are heard at work. They are reported as having different opinions from previous generations around what should be paid attention to within

the organizational context and what should be part of the employee–employer contract.⁶ While some younger people are opting out of the corporate world altogether, organizations such as One Young World⁷ are seeking to create a movement where young people can marry their desire for a corporate career with their social and environmental activism.

5. An increasing body of work identifying **the performance benefits of workplace diversity**, in terms of gender, ethnicity and mindset (to the extent that the World Economic Forum headlined an article from 29th April 2019: “The business case for diversity in the workplace is now overwhelming”).⁸ Diversity and difference will often result in activism as people have to explore and recast what counts as ‘common sense’.

Whilst there appears to be a rising trend of employee activism and there are certainly many headlines, silence still prevails in many organizations. To speak up, individually and organizationally, is often experienced as too risky and the threat of the ‘cancel culture’, where individuals or groups are swiftly judged on social media platforms and ostracised for their stances, threatens even the most powerful.

Key research questions and method



Key research questions and method

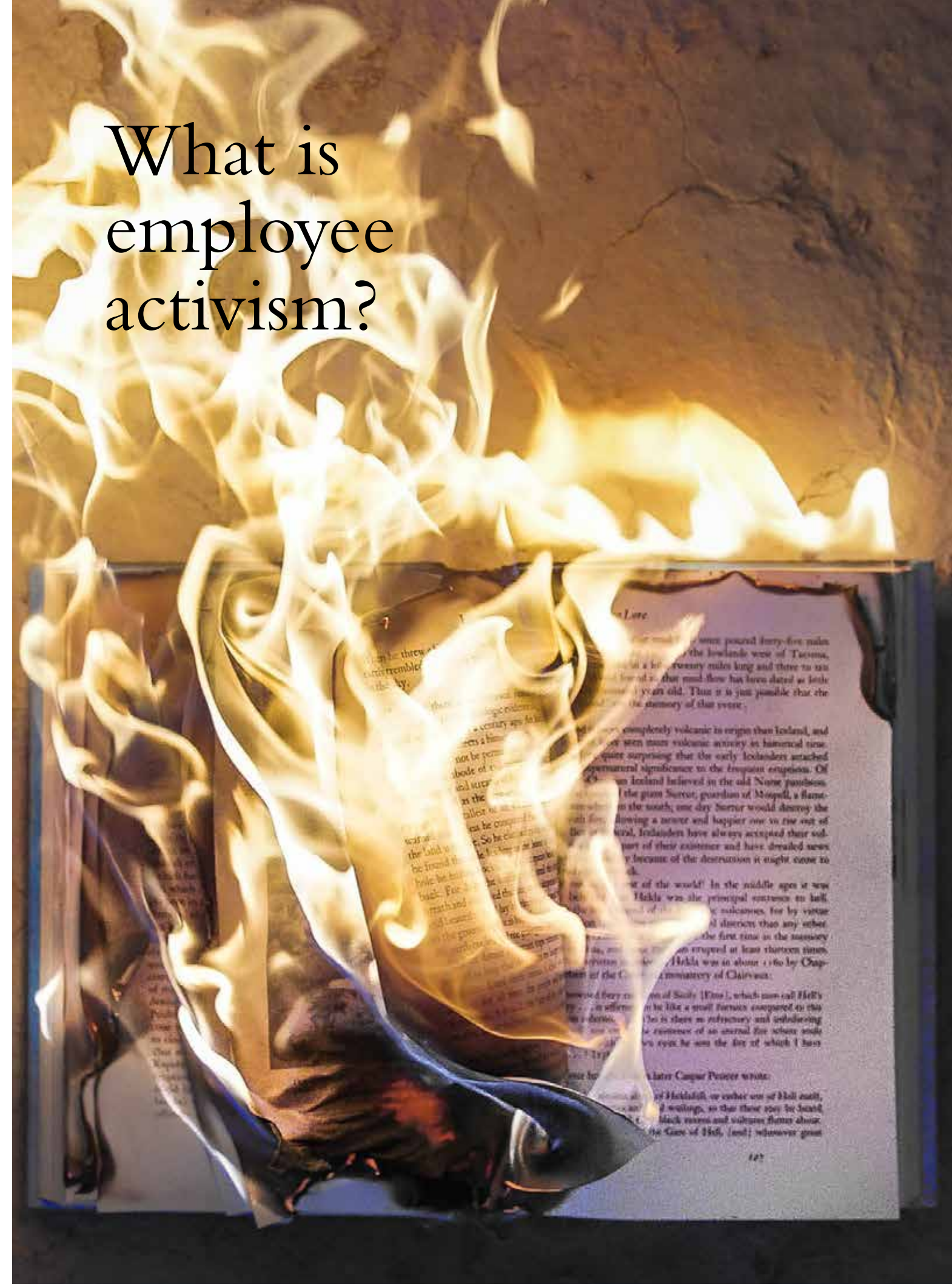
Given this context above and the breadth of influences at work, key questions arise for activists and their organizational leaders:

1. What is employee activism and are we all on the same page when we refer to it?
2. If the pressure of employee activism continues to increase, how should organizations / leaders respond / ready themselves? What is a productive response to activism?
3. What is a productive course of action for employee activists?

This report builds upon our examination of 'Speaking Truth to Power'; a widely publicised,⁹ ongoing study into what gets said and why, what doesn't and who gets heard and who doesn't in the workplace.

Specifically, this report discusses the findings from a multi-method project into the questions above. It focuses on the findings from 62 interviews, co-operative inquiry groups, online inquiries, conference and workshop discussions, participation in polls and surveys by over 1,000 employees and literature review. More detail on each of these can be found in Appendix A.

What is employee activism?



What is employee activism?

A socially constructed term

'Activism' is a socially constructed term with a very wide range of connotations that mixes up both the intention of activism and the way its acts are executed. The phrase conveys trouble, disruption, unpredictability and is often conflated with protest, marches, demonstrations and even violence. However, it also conveys engagement, human rights and agency. Employee activists are perceived as committed and courageous by some and egotistical and attention seeking by others.

Forty-eight responses were made to the question: 'What does activism mean to you?' posed by Megan via Twitter and LinkedIn and asked by John to personal connections. These were analysed and coded, giving the following nine categories embracing a wide range of positive and negative perspectives:

- **Emotional** - Passionate, strong feelings, drive
- **Committed** - Cares, believes, takes action
- **Political** - Revolutionary, radical, social justice
- **Courageous/Tenacious** - Brave, independent, visible
- **Arrogant** - Opinionated, out-of-touch, busy-bodies
- **Disruptive** - Non-conformist, challengers, trouble-makers
- **Attention seeking** - Self-publicity, virtue signalling, going along for the ride
- **Irrelevant** - Ignored, hippy, misfit
- **Engaging** - Changemaker, belief spreader, empowering

A similarly wide range of meanings is shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Figure 1 is the resulting word cloud from a group of 29 participants at The Drucker Forum,¹⁰ who were asked 'What comes to your mind when you hear the term activism?' Figure 2 shows the word cloud from over 300 global, cross-sector workshop participants surveyed in November and December 2020.

Figure 1: What comes to mind when you hear the term activism? The Drucker Forum word cloud

"I call myself an employee activist... it means standing up for the right thing... it also means being rebellious"

"I have an idealised view of an activist... someone that's been arrested several times... Pussy Riot... that's what a proper activist is... so I'm not an activist"



Academic context and definitions

Activist influence draws on a wide range of perspectives. For example, in academic literature, we see employee activism research associated with:

- Organizational voice, how people get silenced and how power shapes who gets heard
- Managerial interest, egotism and capacity to embrace the ‘disruption’ of activism
- How organizations are influenced by their external environment and social media
- How activists create and sustain organizational influence

Our work¹⁴⁻²² sits within the ‘voice’ school, exploring who does and doesn’t get heard and what supports and undermines ‘news of difference’,²³ whether from internal or external voices. Even within ‘voice’ perspectives, views on what should be paid attention to varies enormously, with the ‘IR [Industrial Relations] scholars... criticis[ing] the OB [Organizational Behaviour] voice literature [for]... ignoring mechanisms of employee representation... and for focusing on just individual-level discretionary voice behaviour... [meanwhile] IR voice researchers... have shown less regard for understanding the relational aspects of voice.’²⁴

Activist influence is not only about voice and being heard, it is also about how power imbalance silences employees.²⁵ Speaking and listening always happen in a context of power,²⁶ “where it is neither good nor bad, but... an ever-present feature of human organizing”²⁷ and where “power imbalance in organizational roles is perhaps the most important factor that makes employee silence such a common experience”.²⁸ This is reinforced through ‘spirals of silence’,²⁹ where someone’s “willingness to express opinions is influenced... by... what they perceive to be the prevailing ‘climate of opinion’”.³⁰

Managerial support plays its role. For managers to be open to hearing disruptive messages they need to “perceive [they have] sufficient control over their environment to effect change and favour long-term thinking”.³¹ Where managers are driven by short term rewards and are rotated around an organization, there will be little support for agendas which play out over the long term. There is also the matter of ego, with “managers discouraging voice... to protect their fragile egos from... criticism”.³²

The climate of opinion at work reflects wider society and the dominant political views of those who work in and lead an organization, with “power imbalances based on social identity... imported into the workplace from society”.³³ A society which in practice tolerates racism and sexism (and all forms of rankism),³⁴ as many do, will undermine the implementation of ‘zero tolerance’ programmes inside organizations, because the workplace experience doesn’t fit with what people experience outside work.

Which is not to say that organizations cannot create a specific climate of opinion.³⁵ For example, an organization supporting liberal views might “see more interdependence [between] individuals and groups [while a] conservative [tends] to see a given actor... as more independent of [their] environment”,³⁶ which might explain “why some organizations are inherently closed to activists... while others are more willing to... engage”.³⁷

In terms of what activists do within organizations, the rise of employee networks, or business resource groups, is an area given significant attention in academic literature. These forums bring together employees with similar characteristics or affinities in order to influence organizational decisions. Such networks need committed activists who acquire legitimacy by “balance[ing] their activist agenda with the need to contribute to the organization”³⁸ either through “small wins”³⁹ or “tempered radicalism”.⁴⁰ As these groups seek more formal recognition, they need to accommodate the organizational agenda while still holding to their own interests.

Social media plays an important role in employee activism. “Boycotts against organizations are nothing new. But thanks to technology, it’s easier for employees, investors, donors and customers to engage in social movements aimed at companies [who]... are finding themselves dragged into... debates they might prefer to avoid”.⁴¹

In summary, organizations have always had to choose how to be part of their external environment: “The world changes, and business has to change as well. Companies that fail to reflect the social values and priorities of their workforce and their customers are unlikely to thrive... Smart companies will enable their employees to help guide them”.⁴²

This research report contributes to this increasingly dynamic debate in academic and practitioner literature through empirically examining the social construction of ‘activism’, the consequences of the label ‘activist’ and the choices both activists and organizational leaders make with regards to their response. Building on the territory summarised above, we begin this report by suggesting employee activism be regarded as voices of difference that challenge existing patterns of power.



The employee activist response

The employee activist response

Why and how do employee activists choose how to act?

Whilst activism still retains the images of protest and even violence in some people's minds, it is also associated with the Meyerson and Scully term 'tempered radicalism'.⁴³ This typically refers to change taking place within existing structures and cultural norms in an organization, which, nevertheless, is regarded as challenging those norms. It involves modifying how taken for granted rules and regulations are applied in the moment of their application (a description which fits well with Anthony Giddens structuration theory,⁴⁴ where it is at the point of application of established rules and protocols that they are either reinforced through repetition or changed by not being applied in the same way as before).

For example, several of our interviewees set up and led employee network groups or told us stories of times where they had spoken up to challenge the assumptions of leaders. These activities were often seen as risky or being 'on the edge' of what was considered as acceptable let alone career enhancing.

Interestingly, many interviewees who might consider themselves tempered radicals spoke apologetically about 'not going on marches' or 'not being proper activists'. They worried that they were perceived as a 'sell out' to those who fulfilled the more stereotypical activist profile – and sometimes hankered to be standing with the 'real' activist out there on the street, rather than cutting deals and compromises with their colleagues inside their offices and workplaces.

This poses the question: Why and how do employee activists choose their response?

In terms of why our interviewees decided to be activists, the desire to build and belong to a lasting community was the main driver. Strong secondary motivators were to make a difference (drive change), live true to long held activist habits and to 'do the right thing':

1. 27 (44%) spoke to their desire to unite, build and maintain connections with others. They discussed groups they have set up, networks they have created and relationships they have nurtured.
2. 17 (27%) identified the desire to drive change and influence people and policy.
3. 16 (26%) talked to their childhood and formative years in giving them a taste for and habit for activism.
4. 13 (21%) were explicitly motivated by the need to do the right thing and act with integrity.
5. Other motivators included the desire to give a voice to others (8/13%) and to raise awareness so others could act (7/11%).

"My calling is... to help create fair spaces, fit for the human spirit... be the voice that says: 'There is another way'"

"I decided to stay within the company and see what change I could drive... [I could see how we could] drive and influence change at top management"

'Textile artistry by craftivist Kathleen King entitled 'I can't breathe'. Kathleen explains 'This work expresses my feeling of disquiet at the pervasive, insidious nature of racism in our society. I choose the colours of the KKK emblem: a black ground with bright red seed pods of the poisonous Alum Lily, and a white hood. The piece is repeatedly stitched through with "I can't breathe", faint enough so that it only becomes visible on closer inspection. I wanted this work to grow in sinister quality as we pay closer attention. Much as racism does.'

Whilst a clear ‘why’ drove the desire to act, other factors influenced the nature of that action and where it sat on a spectrum from conservative (behaving according to existing norms), through tempered (moderate disruption to norms) to radical (fundamentally challenging norms).

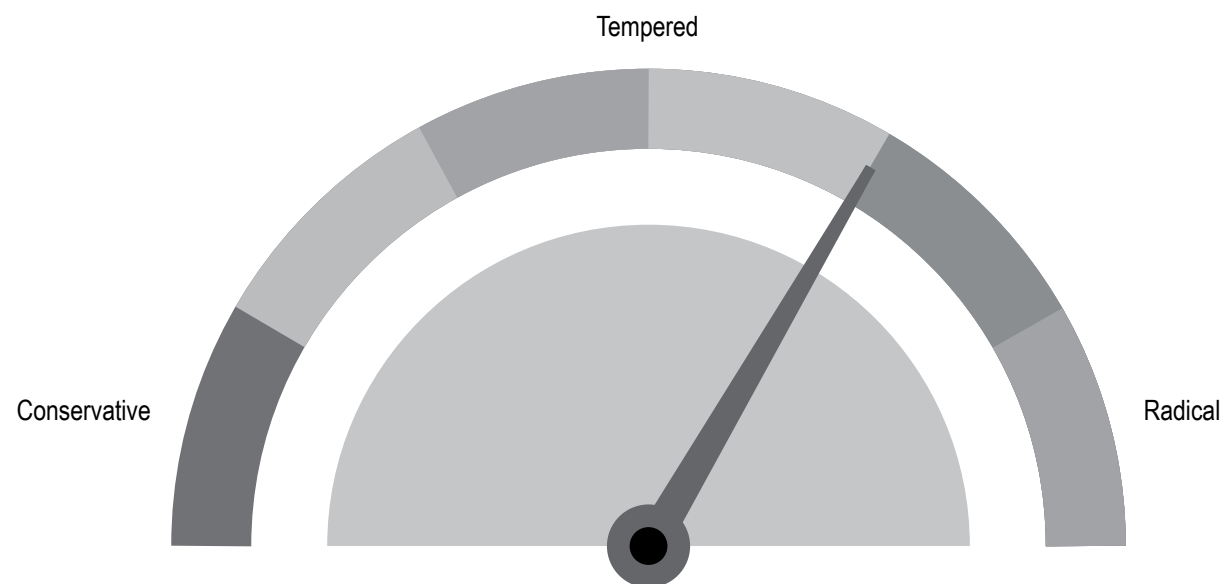
A model we have developed through our interviews which lists five key drivers, is detailed below under the mnemonic ‘ACTIF’. We observed that some activists regularly consider the following questions and carefully make their choices, whilst others may make these unconsciously and with little reflection:

1. Authority:

- a. What power do I have / am I perceived to have in ‘the system’?
- b. What resources are therefore available to me?
- c. When I speak up, is my individual voice usually heard and can I influence this way, or must I join with other voices?

2. Concern:

- a. Does the issue *really* matter to me?
- b. What risks am I therefore prepared to take?
- c. How much energy do I have for this over and above the other things in my life?



3. Theory of change:

- a. How do I think change happens? Through fight, unconventional means, or political manoeuvring?
- b. Do I believe that tempered ‘micro-activism’ (i.e. small actions that moderately challenge systems) is more productive than radical ‘macro-activism’ (i.e. larger scale, fundamental, obvious challenges)?
- c. Can my agency make a difference?
- d. Will it make most difference inside my organization or outside of it, via my role as a consumer / shareholder / citizen / political party member?

4. Identity:

- a. Do I regard myself as an activist?
- b. Would I like this label to be applied to me?
- c. What has my upbringing taught me? Am I from an ‘activist family’?
- d. Is the issue under consideration the sort of thing I want to be associated with?

5. Field:

- a. What has happened / is happening globally, locally and organizationally that influences me in the moment and may trigger me to act? For example, high profile campaigns (such as #BLM), national history (for example, union influence in the U.K., apartheid in South Africa) and organizational context (for example the Google walkouts⁴⁵ or the high profile blog by Brian Armstrong, the CEO of Coinbase).⁴⁶
- b. Is activism becoming more or less acceptable in my workplace?

“In the context of the workplace... I need to consider what is the right thing to do, what my role is and how I can shape the... community I live in”

“I was a senior director... you can get away with stuff... I knew loads of people”

“What are the advantages I have? ... my skin colour... a supportive family... if I act wisely, I can be a force for good in the world”

“I grew up in a household... of... activists and feminists so I guess for me it was normal”

What helps ‘productive’ employee activism?

If activism is in the eye of the beholder, so is its value and its most ‘productive’ strategies. Having said that, in our interviews certain capacities and resources were commonly mentioned as aiding the employee activist agenda. Seeking to be inclusive rather than accusatory and having one’s agenda/ concerns taken seriously over the long term by an organization’s leadership and its planning process featured strongly. Activism, according to our interviewees, also has to be personally and institutionally authentic. It shows up in:

1. **Curiosity** – listening to and valuing difference, in order to understand.
2. **Acting collectively and relationally** – building allies, relationships and groups. Nearly all our interviewees identified the need for activists to speak with an inclusive voice, rather than an accusatory/critical one and work with the intention of finding a common, unifying principle as a starting point.
3. **Political acumen** – understanding others’ power, connections and agendas.
4. **Supportive leadership** – nearly three quarters of interviewees mentioned the importance of having leaders who recognised the value of activist agendas or were activists themselves and would therefore listen and respond to their concerns.

5. **Being included in an organization’s strategic plan** – the activist agenda is then made visibly significant which helps unite an organization around it. In particular, interviewees mentioned supporting staff to have the freedom to act as activists. This is discussed further in the section on leader / organizational response.
6. **Possessing data / evidence** – the ability to back up a ‘business case’ for action, thereby ‘speaking the language’ of senior leaders.
7. **Low ego** – driven by outcomes on the issues, rather than the need to be recognised and rewarded individually.
8. **‘Passionate not angry’** – showing emotion and being authentic, but not being angry, which was seen as counter-productive.
9. **High resilience** – persistence, the ability to take setbacks, patience, a high tolerance for conflict and not taking others’ disagreement personally.
10. **Engaging and attention-grabbing** – effective use of stories, capturing attention and energy in novel ways and spotting ‘lucky’ opportunities for action.
11. **Organizational and procedural rigour** – following up on ‘spectaculars’ and opportune moments.

“...It’s taken... my entire adult life to realise that if you ever want to stand up for people, you have to understand their perspective... not come at allyship [so] it makes you feel good”

What are the employee activist traps?

Our interviewees and inquiry groups also referred to several ‘traps’, both in terms of the enactment of activism in the workplace and in terms of the personal toll that activism can take.

Challenges arising in relation to gaining traction in the organizational system, in many ways the antithesis of the list on the previous page, included:

1. **Acting as a lone voice** rather than being connected with others.
2. **‘In-fighting’** between ‘proper’ activist protesters and insider ‘sell-outs’ who may seek the same outcomes but disagree on the best route for influencing change.
3. **Inability to listen / be curious** about ‘the other’. Without listening to different perspectives, it becomes impossible to speak to others’ agendas.

4. **Inappropriate balance between ‘tempered’ and ‘radical’**. On the one hand, if actions are too tempered, too ‘light’, they may be unnoticed and inconsequential. On the other hand, too radical and the employee activist risks being ejected from the organization – an issue if change needs to be influenced from within.

“So you are... radical. But you temper that so that you meet the system you’re in... where they can hear you”

“Politics is hard... just saying the world is burning will stop half the world listening... [you] need to present a positive vision”

The organizational / leader response to employee activism

More personal 'traps' were spoken about including:

1. **Reputational risk.** Over a third of our interviewees spoke of barriers being put in place by managers to their activism. This included unfair treatment, being bullied, over-looked or side-lined. At the extreme an activist may experience being 'cancelled' or ostracized.⁴⁷
2. **Balancing the day-job and activism.** Interviewees highlighted the struggle activists face to meet expectations in their day-to-day job, with the additional workload of being an activist. They have to find a balance, so employers don't have a reason to let them go.
3. **Burnout.** Some interviewees spoke of the mental health and wellbeing toll of their commitments to activism. Some had experiences of fatigue and stress as a result of months and years of 'challenging the norm' which rendered them unable to work effectively for a period of time.
4. **Having a 'thin skin'.** Being an activist almost inevitably involves, intentionally or unintentionally, provoking others who may then retaliate. If this retaliation is taken personally, then not only might the activist eventually burnout, but they may also act in ways that are unhelpful to their cause.

5. **Resentment.** Many of our interviewees had influenced significant change in their organizations, however they were often not recognised or rewarded personally for taking a stand. Coping without this extrinsic reward was regarded as an important ability.

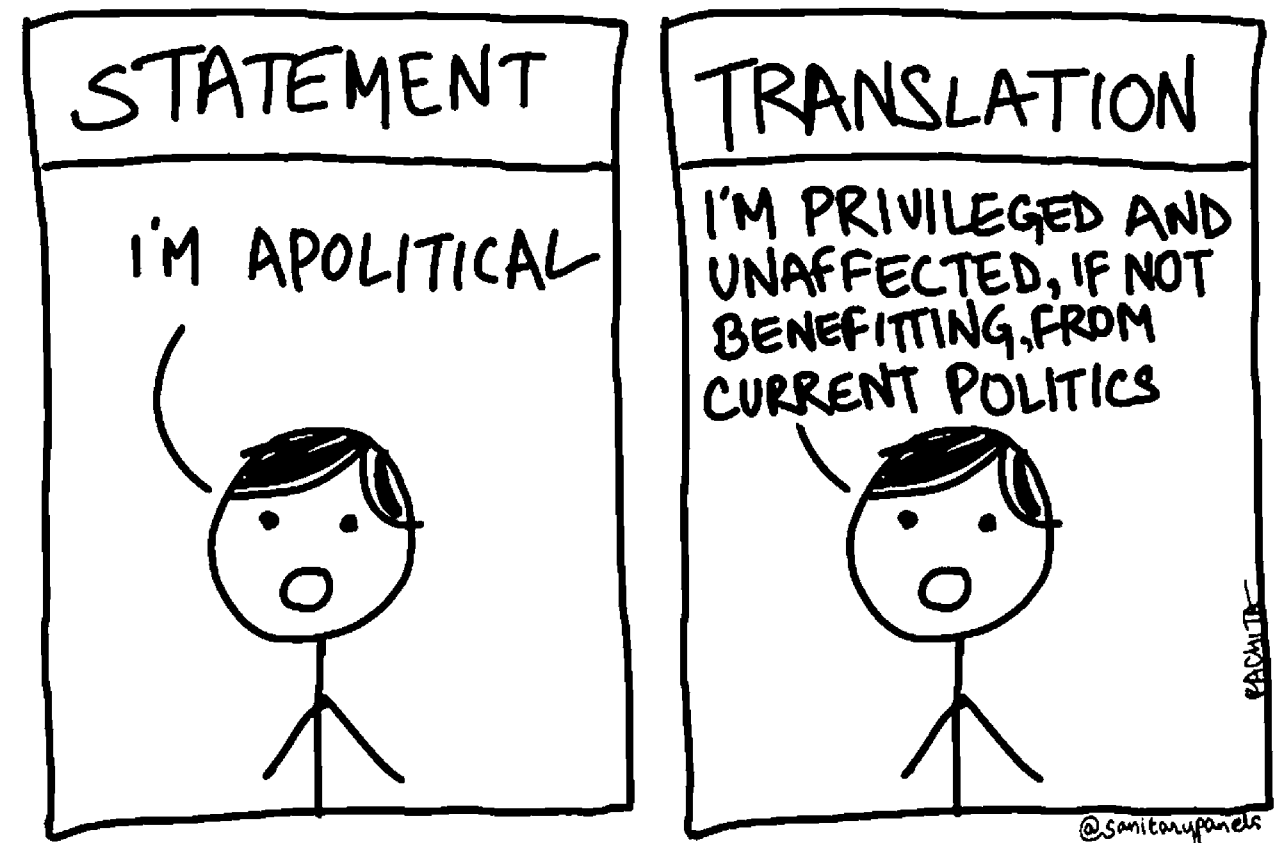
"You can raise visibility... [but] you're still going to be fired.... All the good employees who did the walkout... none of them work for [the company] anymore"

"You need to show a squeaky-clean LinkedIn, scrub your social media so that you don't appear to be the rabble rouser"

"Initially... the body language was good [from my boss]: "I hear you. I hear you." ... What it actually meant was she started to talk about me behind my back"

"I'm really having conversations with myself... how many years can I do this? Because it's so emotional... you are challenging all of the time"

"All these initiatives I've driven in the last four years... all we've achieved convincing people not as passionate as me... I'm exhausted and I haven't had so much recognition"



The organizational / leader response to employee activism

Why and how does the leader / organization choose their response?

The response to employee activism from individual leaders is often inconsistent, let alone from an organization over time. Here we identify a taxonomy of responses along a spectrum from non-existent to stimulating activism that we have observed and that our interviewees have described:

1. **Non-existent** (or ‘Activism? What activism?’) – Employee activism is not on the leadership agenda. A CEO we interviewed in the retail industry greeted our questions on employee activism with complete bafflement. It was a term and a subject which he and the Board simply had not considered.

2. **Suppression** (or ‘Expel it before it spreads’) – Activists are threatened if they continue to raise issues or employees are told that activist issues are only to be pursued ‘outside’ of the organization. Cathay Pacific threatened to (and did) sack employees who spoke out in favour of Hong Kong rights and freedoms.⁴⁸ Coinbase CEO, Brian Armstrong, stated in a blog that he wished all employees to be ‘laser focused on its mission’, that they should not ‘engage in broader societal issues when they’re unrelated to our core mission’ and that employees that wished to be at ‘an activism focused’ company would be helped to move elsewhere.⁴⁹

3. **Facadism** (or ‘Let’s just say the right thing’) – Leaders state that they are interested in activist issues and that they care about them however this is a façade and there is no real commitment to action. Statements appear to be superficial and following trends rather than any authentic interest. Kroger, USA’s largest chain of grocery stores, was accused of such pretence – or as we coin it ‘facadism’ – when they publicly professed support for #BLM but then asked employees to remove #BLM pins from their uniforms claiming customers ‘found them offensive’.⁵⁰

4. **Defensive engagement** (or ‘What do the lawyers say?’) – Leaders engage with employee activists, however this is begrudging and driven by the feeling that they must rather than want to. An interviewee in the investment community spoke of the attitude around gender diversity, namely a “we’ve already got one” response when it came to appointing people from ‘minority’ groups. In one University setting, a long running case of misogyny was finally addressed, but went hand in hand with a desire to let the person in question leave with their head held high.

5. **Dialogic engagement** (or ‘Let’s sit down, talk and learn’) – Open dialogue is proactively sought and there is an acceptance that this will mean surfacing difficult issues, multiple conflicting perspectives and the need to share decision making with employees. Salesforce is reported to have proactively set

up a new role overseeing the ethical and humane use of technology, and engaging employees in conversation, after they petitioned to end the company’s contract with the US Customs and Border Protection agency.⁵¹

6. **Stimulate activism** (or ‘Let’s be the activist!’) – Employees are expected to take part in activism inside and outside the organization. They are given support to do so and recognised favourably in relation to their activist activities. Patagonia for example provides up to two months paid leave to employees for internships at environmental organizations of their choice.⁵²

At the Drucker Forum in October 2020, 77 participants (global, cross-sector and senior level) were asked to describe their organizational response along these six categories and the results are shown in Figure 3. Figure 4 shows the results from 321 participants at the Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) Annual Conference, November 2020 (predominantly UK based HR population, cross-sector and cross-hierarchy). Figure 5 shows the results from 304 respondents to a survey in November and December 2020 (global, cross-sector and mid-senior level) and Figure 6 shows 392 responses from senior leaders inside one global organization in the service sector.

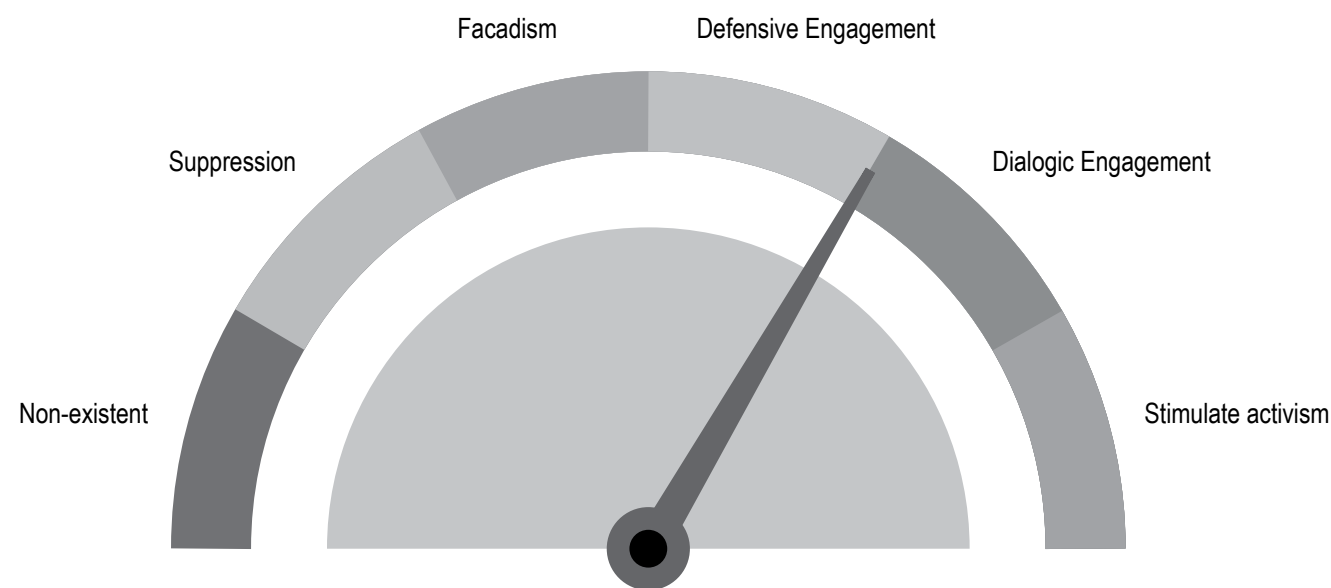


Figure 3: Describing organizational response: The Drucker Forum results

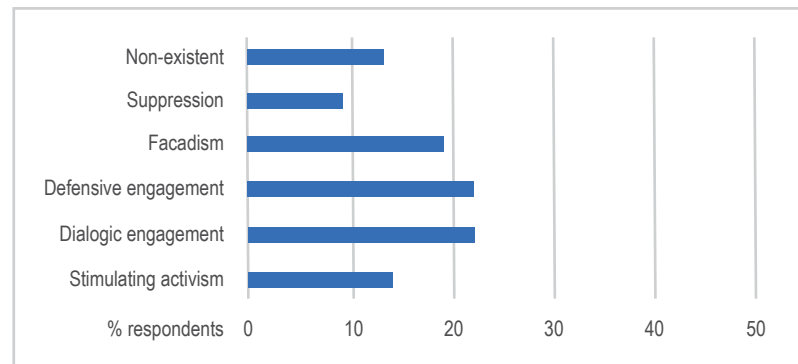


Figure 4: Describing organizational response: CIPD results

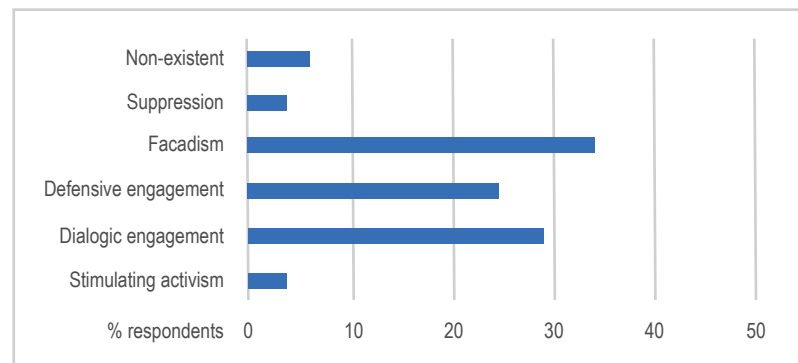


Figure 5: Describing organizational response: Survey respondents

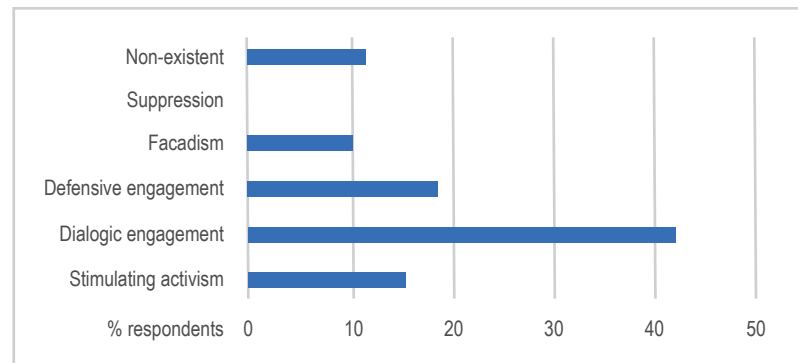
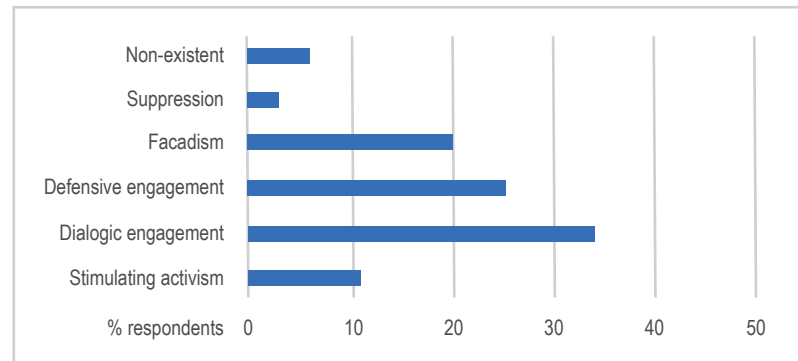


Figure 6: Describing organizational response: Global firm in the service sector



We see a wide range of responses from these results with an emphasis on facadism and both defensive and dialogic engagement. It is worth noting however, that Drucker Forum, workshop groups and the global service organization are likely comprised of relatively senior participants compared to CIPD. As such and as described previously in this report and others, it is possible that their perspective is somewhat optimistic: what they perceive as engagement may not be perceived as such by more junior employees or those taking a stand on activist issues. This relationship between perceptions of organizational response and seniority is an ongoing research inquiry.

How leaders choose their response to activism is influenced by several factors and we again use the framework 'ACTIF' to detail five of these:

1. Authority:

- a. What power do I have / am I perceived to have in 'the system'?
- b. How is power seen to be distributed? Is power predominantly seen and accepted to be held by senior leaders or is power increasingly seen to be in the hands of other stakeholders, including employees (for example technology workers with rare skills that are essential to the business)?
- c. How does power get exercised? Is it predominantly exercised over others to direct their actions or more *with* others to increase the voice of others?²⁵³

2. Concern:

- a. Does the issue matter to me as a leader or for stakeholders?
- b. Am I aware of whether it matters to others, or blind to it?
- c. What risks will I therefore take to pursue it as part of the leadership agenda?
- d. What societal and environmental habits is the organization endorsing through our action *or inaction*? Are we comfortable with that?
- e. Can we live with taking different stands in different geographic and social contexts?

3. Theory of Change:

- a. How do I think change happens and how do I perceive the organization?
- b. Am I guided by an ontological view that preferences individual agency, cause and effect processes, the organization as a separate entity and the possibility of determining what is 'in' and what is 'outside' the strategic agenda?
- c. Or do I believe change occurs socially and dynamically, that the organization is interdependent and interrelated with society and the environment and that change occurs through socially constructed perceptions of power and influence?
- d. In other words, do I see the organization as separate and apart from societal issues or as an integral aspect and reflection of them?

4. **Identity:**

- a. Do I regard myself as an activist leader?
- b. Is the issue under consideration the sort of thing I or my organization want to be associated with?
- c. Do I see my organization as a political entity?
- d. Is it shareholder value led, or does it follow (genuinely) a wider stakeholder agenda?
- e. What role do we see ourselves taking in society and with stakeholders? Active i.e. leading emerging community/political debates, or passive i.e. looking to preserve the status quo and stay out of issues traditionally seen as nothing to do with the organization?
- f. Do we see ourselves as rule takers or rule makers?

5. **Field:**

- a. What has happened / is happening globally, locally, organizationally that influences the organizational agenda in the moment? For example, high profile campaigns (such as #BLM), national history (for example, union influence in the U.K., apartheid in South Africa) and organizational context (for example the Google walkouts⁵⁴ or the high profile blog by Brian Armstrong, the CEO of Coinbase⁵⁵).
- b. Which direction is 'activism' taking? Do we expect that we will have to pay attention to activists in the future?

What helps 'productive' responses to employee activism?

Again, we note the subjectivity of the term 'productive' here and recognise that **some leaders may believe that suppressing the activist voice is the most productive course of action, where others reach for dialogue.**

Having said this, our interviewees and our wider research point towards some key ideas:

1. Encouraging and supporting thriving **employee network groups** / business resource groups. These are communities of individuals with shared characteristics and / or interests. For example, many interviewees have networks for women, LGBTQi and BAME employees. Some have environmentally focused groups. These networks were described by some as helping to develop organizational resilience through mirroring external societal perspectives. In this way they are seen as the organization's 'antennae' keeping leadership teams aware of the changing 'outside' world, *if* they are genuinely heard and have real influence on perceptions and decisions.

"A sense of being taken seriously, being valued... all my direct supervisors have taken me seriously even when I don't take myself [seriously]"

2. Having executive level conversations around the response to activism and referring to these in **the strategic plan**. Nearly half our interviewees saw this as important for both the activist and the organization. It meant the possibility of initiating conversations and reflection on activist issues and potentially uniting an organization around a collective position (rather than waiting for the issue to hit the headlines and initiate a panicked response).

"In the last couple of years [the company's] increased its... acknowledgement [of a more socially activist agenda]... for staff retention, company reputation... it's important to create an organization where people want to work"

3. **To meet 'voices of difference' requires leaders to step out of 'autopilot' and their 'optimism bubble'**. It requires them to be more mindful, by which we mean more compassionate, curious and 'meta-aware' (the ability to hold awareness from multiple perspectives).⁵⁶ Productive responses to activism therefore rely on **reflective space** in which to consider responses. This quality of space for reflection however seems in short supply as leaders are pulled towards popular, quick fixes and the promise of easy solutions.

4. Training and facilitating **'conversational habits'** which are more tolerant, indeed more encouraging of differing perspectives. Nurturing inquiry skills to the same extent as advocacy skills enables employees and leaders to be more curious and confident to open up contentious areas. In no way is this suggested as an easy route – but some we spoke with felt it was more sustainable and ethical to approach difference proactively than to attempt to suppress it. This also requires leaders to be prepared to share information regarding challenges and difficult choices and the data on those, so that decision making can also be transparent and shared.

5. **Persistence, consistency and coherence** are vital. Habits do not take root or change overnight. Creating and sustaining an environment of listening and dialogue means sticking to a course of action, a way of being, for the long term – and noticing when inconsistencies arise. In one organization the credibility of the CEOs commitment to supporting international 'climate strikes' was compromised by their refusal to accept the pressures this put line managers under. The CEO supported staff taking time out to join the strikes, but still expected managers to maintain performance through the strikes.

6. **Recruitment and promotion are where intentions are tested.** Bringing in and sustaining different voices and perspectives doesn't happen by accident; they can be designed in.⁵⁷ It is often where the reality of an organization's attitude to activism is most clearly seen. Work by Murray Edwards College at Cambridge University highlights how gender bias continues to play out,⁵⁸ while research by The Diversity Practice provides a global perspective of the experiences of Black, Asian and ethnically diverse women leaders.⁵⁹

What are the leader / organizational activism traps?

When activists and leaders (and activist leaders) spoke to us about times where they felt they or their organization had failed in their response, the following traps emerged:

1. **Blindness** or the leaders' 'optimism bubble'. This means leaders believe 'everything is fine'. It is preserved through a lack of diversity of mind at the top coupled with a lack of awareness that 'what is activism to one person is another person's human rights' (Ruchika Tulshyan).⁶⁰ Blindness is apparent in organizations with a lack of strategy on activism and with those who fail to anticipate activist needs (or only deal with specific 'stories of the moment').
2. **Believing inaction is apolitical.** Leaders such as Brian Armstrong at Coinbase have implied that the organization is not the place to discuss wider social and environmental concerns and that to act would be political. Several leaders we have spoken to, in response to questions regarding their diversity and inclusion practices, have argued that their organizations are 'meritocracies' as a way of excusing a lack of direct action. This denies the presence of unconscious bias, wider societal discrimination and structural disparities that exist for those with 'labels' that convey lower levels of status and voice. These responses fail to see that inaction is not neutral – it is also a political statement and stance.

3. **Failing to practice what you preach.** The 'facadism' response was broadly regarded as a poor strategy which would be found out and exposed rapidly via social media by employees, consumers and investors alike. Facadism might be intentional from the start (i.e. there is no intention of undertaking meaningful action), or there may be some positive intent but a lack of real commitment to spend the time and resources to ensure action.
4. **Falling victim to the 'cancel culture'. It may be hard for organizations to stay on the fence but dangerous to get off it.** Leaders and organizations risk having support withdrawn completely by consumers, investors or employees if they comment on controversial issues. Similarly, opening up dialogue inside the organization is risky if the threat of being misinterpreted, making a mistake, or being disagreed with is likely to lead to dire consequences.

Summary and concluding remarks

5. **One-track mind.** Organizations that are motivated by and measure only profit, risk disenchanting stakeholders. They also fail to acknowledge growing research that suggests that addressing and measuring the response to wider social and environmental issues that stakeholders care about, is likely to lead to greater profits in the future.⁶¹

6. **Rush to quick fixes.** Many managers and leaders (and human beings in general) are uncomfortable with ambiguity and seek quick solutions. This is especially the case in organizations where the ability to offer fixes that are seen to solve issues quickly is rewarded. This tendency means tough conversations are avoided for fear of surfacing or working with conflict and difference that is deemed volatile and unmanageable.



Summary and concluding remarks

Employee activism is a phenomenon now spotlighted as a major area of focus for organizations, particularly as “the organization’s ‘brand’ with workers is inextricably linked with its ‘brand’ with customers, society and other stakeholders”.⁶² It has, in the past, been silenced by advantaged leaders expelling conversation on these issues and stifled by burgeoning bureaucratic regimes of measurement and scrutiny that leave employees resigned to the path of least resistance (perhaps also the path of least fulfilment). **Employees have felt, and many still do feel, powerless, despite the language of empowerment**, which arrives with many strings and taken for granted assumptions about how people are to use the power (temporarily) granted to them.

However, changes in the use of technology and social media to share information and garner support, the influence of millennials, compelling research studies and a growing trend in organizational ‘purpose’ or mission statements, are rising to the challenge posed by a perceived decline in institutional influence on social and environmental issues.

It seems likely that employees will increasingly wish to hold conversations in a way that influences action on a wider range of social and environmental issues in the workplace. Managers and leaders are likely to wish to respond effectively.

This research report highlights several key aspects in this debate:

1. **The label ‘activism’ matters and is in the ‘eye of the beholder’.** It is construed in positive and negative ways that impact how activists and the activist agenda is heard in organizations and by individual leaders.
2. **Leaders are often in an ‘optimism bubble’ and may suffer ‘advantage blindness’** which reduces the likelihood of them inviting discussions on activist issues or truly seeking to understand and act on them.
3. **The organization has a range of responses from suppression through dialogue and stimulating activism** depending on their perceptions of several factors (‘ACTIF’). However, there is no ‘neutral’ stance. To not act is as political a statement as action.
4. **Employee activists have choices** around how they seek change, from radical to more tempered action and are similarly influenced by ‘ACTIF’ factors.
5. **Certain abilities are helpful for employee activists**, including political acumen, the desire and ability to listen and personal resilience. The latter is important as speaking up in organizational contexts and seeking change can have a huge personal toll.

For both activists and their organizations, a key challenge and opportunity appears to be in **dialogue**. Dialogue here is meant far more expansively than it is usually referred to in organizations (where it is often a shorthand for ‘conversation’ or ‘debate’).⁶³ **Dialogue requires participants to be prepared – indeed to expect and to seek to have their minds changed.** As such it demands stepping into the unknown, sharing power and engaging with conflicting perspectives. Traditionally, we are not invited, ‘trained’ or rewarded for doing this – **a traditional hierarchical, directive, advocative, ‘make things certain and controllable’ approach has firmly taken root. Conflict in many organizations is seen to be negative.**

So, we must learn to unlearn. Paul Polman at The Drucker Forum⁶⁴ invited leaders to be able to see their work as stewardship and intergenerational, involving the balancing of multiple priorities (not just shareholder value). This requires leaders to understand their organization and the people who work in it as part of society, with all its messy inter-dependencies and contradictions, rather than independent entities apart from the wider world.

Indeed, to separate (as this report has done in places) leadership and activism is unhelpful and even dangerous. **It is perhaps time to see leadership as activism**, the capacity to engage with and seek out ‘news of difference’⁶⁵ which may well challenge the status quo and all who are invested in it.

We end with a final pair of linked questions for the reader: **If you embraced the notion of leader as activist, disruptor in chief, what difference would that make to how you lead?** And if you see the role of leader as being to sustain your organizations distance from wider social and political concerns, how do you ensure your distance is not itself seen as an ‘anti-activism’ form of activism?

Leadership is becoming a more explicitly political/ideological act. We would argue that it has always been so, but whilst in the past its politics/ideology have often been disappeared, in the future it may be forced into the light.

Appendices

An illustration on a blue background. A large hand in a red sleeve holds a smartphone. The phone screen shows a social media interface with a video player, a heart icon, a thumbs-up icon, and a sad face icon. The video player has a '0:00' timer. Around the phone, several stylized human figures in various colors are dancing or celebrating. In the bottom left, there are yellow lightning bolts and a large yellow emoji with a wide smile and tongue sticking out.

Appendices

Appendix A: Method

The findings in this report are based on:

1. Sixty-two semi-structured **interviews** conducted by Professor Megan Reitz and John Higgins with activists and organizational leaders. Interviewees were drawn from a wide range of industries including healthcare, retail, manufacturing, academia, charity and public sector, across the globe including Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. Interviews were either recorded and transcribed, or detailed interview notes were shared with the interviewee and agreed. Transcripts and notes were securely transferred to qualitative analysis software Dedoose, where they were coded thematically. Codes were grouped into categories which were organized under six key questions responding to our research objectives. Further detail on the interview and coding can be found in Appendix C.
2. Data drawn from **co-operative inquiry groups** including a long-standing inquiry group focused on speaking truth to power, a global bank study conducted over four months in 2020 and several group inquiries with activists, leaders and academics.
3. **On-line inquiry** with Twitter and LinkedIn connections.
4. **Conference and workshop participation**, including discussions and polling data (gathered from a total of 398 participants) collected at The Drucker Forum, October 2020⁶⁶ and the Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) Annual Conference, November 2020⁶⁷, 303 participants in 6 workshop groups (global, cross-sector, cross-hierarchy), in November and December 2020 and 392 senior leaders at a global services organization surveyed in November 2020.
5. **Literature review** of academic and practitioner publications.

Appendix B: Interview guide

Interviews were semi-structured. The following questions guided our conversations:

1. How do your political and social beliefs/priorities/perspectives/values play out in your work? What external events and movements are on your agenda e.g. #MeToo, Climate change?
2. What types of activism have you and others in your organization been involved in and what were you hoping to achieve?
3. To what extent are leaders you engage with wanting and needing to listen to employees' opinions on organizational responses to societal and political issues? Is pressure to do this increasing?
 - a. What external events and movements are on the agenda of organizations you engage with e.g. #MeToo, Climate change?
 - b. What are your expectations of these organizations in terms of their response to social and political issues in the world?
 - c. Are these realistic? What tensions do you think these organizations face that prevents them taking a stand / altering what they do?
 - d. Who listens? Who doesn't? What forums are used?
 - e. What has been the response to this? What have you achieved?
4. How does it feel to be an activist in the workplace, trying to be heard but also perhaps facing the risks of speaking up? What is most tricky? What isn't?
 - a. What do you most fear around speaking up?
 - b. What makes you think that could happen?
 - c. What makes you speak up anyway?
5. How do you (and how can others) speak up in a way that is most likely to be heard and make a valued difference to the organizational agenda?
 - a. What is specific to items on the 'activist' agenda that make them more difficult to speak about than more traditional, organizational-centric items?
 - b. Have you experienced 'facadism' (where leaders say the right words and go through the motions while only engaging superficially with the matter being presented)?
6. How can leaders and managers create the environment in which employees can speak up, feel heard and know that they influence choices?
7. Where do you see the trend for employee activism headed? What might encourage it? What might stifle it?
8. Who do you know that works in this area – either as an academic / facilitator or as a leader / activist employee that might be willing to speak with us?

Appendix C: Qualitative analysis process

Sixty-two verbatim transcripts and/or detailed notes were securely transferred to qualitative analysis software Dedoose. Each transcript was initially inductively coded using thematic analysis.⁶⁸ These initial codes were then grouped into categories of shared meaning, comprising overarching codes and sub-codes.

All codes were accompanied by numerical data to encapsulate their prevalence across the data set. Information was collected on the number of times a concept was coded across the entire dataset, as well as the number of interviews in which a concept was discussed. With both we were able to determine how common each concept was across the dataset and make a judgement about whether they were important for the majority or minority.

Following the natural flow of the interviews and the emergent themes from the early coding, categories were grouped under six key questions, namely:

1. What is activism?
2. What issues are people bringing forward?
3. What motivates people to be activists?
4. What are the main challenges of activism in the workplace?
5. What are the implications/consequences of bringing activism to the workplace?
6. How can activism be enabled and enacted in the workplace?

An example of this break down and presentation of data is shown in Table 1.

A full overview of the codes and sub-codes, the prevalence of each and exemplar quotes are available on request. Please contact research@ashridge.hult.edu

About the Authors

Table 1: Extract of coding table

3. What motivates people to be activists?			
Code	No. of occasions	Description	Exemplar quotes
To unite/ build connections	50(27)	Most interviewees spoke about their desire to unite people and the importance of being able to build and maintain connections as key motivators. They discussed groups they have set up, networks they have created and relationships they have nurtured.	<p>“Yeah, exactly. And really just getting enough of a core group together, so that they understand. They’re not alone. And I think that feeling of being alone is too much to bear to come out and speak out”</p> <p>“The core message – as a person you need to truly believe in achieving sustainable social change... [and you] need to create and maintain alliances between different groups while respecting their differences... need to be aware this is hard work and [we’ll] need to learn together how to do things”</p> <p>“I hope you’ve heard how important Inquiring Conversations and Deliberative Democracy are to me... this is what 2020 means to me. They are two forms or manifestations of one process – the process of people coming together to collaborate and deliberate”</p>
To drive change and influence	28(17)	Secondly, the desire to drive change and influence people and policy was a popular reason people pursued activism in the workplace and elsewhere.	<p>“But my driver is absolutely understanding how we can improve things for everyone.”</p> <p>“I worked on my purpose... [which is to] inspire fierce courage [in people] to let their light shine... as an individual, as an organization, as a leader... let this light shine with no apology... my calling is to help change people and the organizations they work for, for good... to help create fair spaces, fit for the human spirit... [my calling is to] be that catalyst for change, disrupt the ways we think about how we engage with anything different... be the voice that says: “There is another way””</p> <p>“I decided to stay within the company and see what change I could drive internally... a few days back from [event] we met with the CEO... [he wanted to know] what we could bring, what we wanted to change, what we passionate about... his door was open to us and to me... the open-ness of the CEO, [I could see how we could] drive and influence change at top management”</p>



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Megan is Professor of Leadership and Dialogue at Hult Ashridge Executive Education, where she speaks, researches, consults and supervises on the intersection of leadership, change, dialogue and mindfulness. She is on the Thinkers50 radar of global business thinkers and is ranked in HR Magazine’s Most Influential Thinkers listing. She has written *Dialogue in Organizations* (2015) and co-authored *Mind Time* (2018) and *Speak Up* (2019). She is mother to two wonderful daughters who test her regularly on her powers of mindfulness and dialogue.



John Higgins

John is a researcher, tutor and coach specialising in how people use and abuse power at all levels in the workplace and society. He is widely published and has written and researched extensively alongside the faculty and students of the Hult Ashridge Executive Doctorate and Masters in Organizational Change. His work is greatly informed by a long-term personal engagement in Jungian psychoanalysis and the experiences of his wife and daughters living in a gendered world. He is Research Director at The Right Conversation and Research Partner at GameShift.



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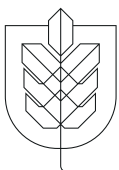
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