

Americans Averse to Discussing Hot-Button Issues, Says New Report **Growing Need For Businesses, One of Few Places Where Civility Remains, to Step Up and Be Part of Solution**

NEW YORK, Oct. 6, 2020 /PRNewswire/ -- A coalition of business and academic interests today released a report that provides alarming new data from a [Morning Consult](#) study that shows Americans' deteriorating abilities to discuss difficult issues.

The report, called The Dialogue Project, also covers promising initiatives from the business world and recommendations from prominent CEOs and other thought leaders to kick start initiatives that bridge the communications gap.

[The Dialogue Project](#) describes an America that seems to get angrier and more polarized by the day, bruised this year by a pandemic, the eruption of a movement to address racial and social justice and an anxiety-ridden presidential election.

Based on a survey of 5,000 adults in five countries (Brazil, Germany, India, the U.S. and the UK), the new survey findings show:

- While having respectful conversations with those of differing opinions is seen as a significant problem across the world, the issue is especially acute in the U.S. (57%), Brazil (64%) and India (49%).
- In the U.S., more than three fourths (82%) of respondents said people need to be more respectful when talking with those who hold opposing views, but only half said they would spend more time doing so.
- Many more women than men (63% to 51%) in the U.S. see the inability to engage in respectful dialogue as a serious problem.
- Rural U.S. residents (72%) said they were more comfortable talking with other people who have different perspectives than urbanites (58%) and suburbanites (61%).

These survey results anchor the premise of the nonpartisan Dialogue Project: to explore what business can do to improve civil discourse and reduce toxic polarization.

"We must find a way to break out of the paralysis of tribal politics, information bubbles, suspicion and incivility in which we find ourselves," says Bob Feldman, the communications executive who founded the Dialogue Project last October. "American business is one of the few places where people from different nationalities, religions, political beliefs often encounter others with differing opinions. The success a number of businesses have had in helping employees and communities discuss difficult issues is intriguing and shines a light on how these initiatives provide potential solutions."

Stepping Into the Void: Case Examples

The report describes more than two dozen programs offered by businesses, nonprofits and universities, often in collaboration. These programs give people the skills and often, the forum, to have difficult, civil conversations to manage disagreement, and achieve consensus and progress. Many of these initiatives can be readily adopted by other organizations and used for community, neighborhood and in-home discussions. Two such cases:

- The Better Arguments Project is a national civic initiative launched by the Aspen Institute, in conjunction with Allstate and Facing History and Ourselves, a global education program. Participants gather in cities to hear speakers on a controversial topic and then move into smaller groups. Before starting the conversation, they pledge to respect five core principles of productive discussion: 1) take winning off the table, 2) be present and listen to learn, 3) connect and respect, 4) be honest and welcome honesty from others, and 5) make space for new ideas and room to transform.
- At General Mills, the Courageous Conversations series, now in its fifth year, demonstrates that people are willing to talk about tough topics if they feel heard and respected. During a Courageous Conversation event, General Mills employees gather to listen to a speaker and then break into tables of ten. Each table is assigned an employee-facilitator who is trained to keep the discussion both respectful and on point. The first Courageous Conversation attracted only 30 participants. Now, the conversations attracts as many as 3,000 employees and are conducted online. Employees report "bringing home" the techniques learned through Courageous Conversations to smaller gatherings and even to family dinners.

Stepping Into the Void: Executive Perspectives

The new report also features original articles from 20 prominent leaders of businesses, universities and other organizations, with insights on issues ranging from civility as a competitive advantage to ways to bridge the digital divide. Some key excerpts:

- *Doug McMillon, CEO of Walmart*: "Especially recently, we have seen companies like ours – those with cultures built on collaboration and sharing ideas – come together with a shared mission. We all agree that that the strength of our businesses is dependent on a healthy workforce. That's why the 181 companies that form the Business Roundtable joined to adopt a new Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation, one that declares we should not just serve shareholders, but also deliver value to our customers, associates, suppliers, communities and the planet. These stakeholders are the heart of our business and it's possible for us to serve, listen to and care for all of them – not one or the other."
- *Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors*: "Discord and divisiveness are not new conditions in America. But the degree to

which this country is divided and polarized today is unprecedented. Even the global COVID-19 pandemic hasn't united us. Then the world saw the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, and a dialogue about systemic racism in this country rose to the forefront, as the streets filled with nightly protests and rallies. And still, rather than unite in the fight to purge our nation of racism and injustice, we remain divided. There may not be a precise roadmap to repairing the divide our country is experiencing, but listening is an important step. Listening leads to awareness, and as I told the team at General Motors: awareness leads to dialogue, dialogue leads to understanding, and understanding leads to change."

- *Jamie Dimon, CEO of JP Morgan Chase:* "For too long, too many have fought to use regulation and legislation to further their interests without appropriate regard for the needs of the country. Plain and simple, this is a collective failure to put the needs of society ahead of our personal, parochial and partisan interests. If we do not fix these problems, America's moral, economic and military dominance may cease to exist."
- *Gary Kelly, CEO of Southwest Airlines:* "It's not always easy to try and understand another perspective, but we must. It challenges us, and it also opens our minds and our hearts. We have to listen to one another to achieve understanding."

About The Dialogue Project

The Dialogue Project was conceived by Bob Feldman, vice chair of global consulting firm ICF Next, who believes business needs to take a more active role in solving societal problems, including paralyzing polarization. He quickly gained the support and participation of companies and organizations including Google, Chevron, Bristol Myers Squibb, Southwest Airlines and Chick-fil-A. (See full list below.) This effort comes on the heels of The Business Roundtable acknowledging in 2019 that business must be more purpose-driven and have consideration for the impact of its work on multiple stakeholders.

Methodology

Integral to The Dialogue Project, [Morning Consult](#) conducted an online survey between July 5-July 6, 2020 among a sample of 1,000 adults per country in the U.S., UK, India, Brazil and Germany. The data was weighted to approximate a target sample of adults in each country based on age, gender, educational attainment, race and region. Results from the full survey have a margin of error of plus or minus 1%. Results from each country has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1%. Results were segmented by demographics such as gender, age, political affiliation and ideology, community status, employment categories, and marital status.

Participating Organizations

- **Title Sponsors:** University of Southern California, Institute for Public Relations, ICF Next
- **Sponsors:** Google, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, Chevron, Southwest Airlines, Corteva, California Resources Corporation, Chick-fil-A, Arthur W. Page Society
- **Participants:** AARP, Abridge, Allstate, American University, Business For America, California Resources Corporation, Center for Study of Liberty, Civic Health Project, Coop & the Enigma Museum, Cortico, Open Mind Project, Essential Partners, General Mills, General Motors, Gettysburg College, Institute for Political Innovation, Johnson & Johnson, JPMorgan Chase, K1 , Leadership Now, Listen First Project, Lloyds, MIT, Pfizer, Presidential Leadership Scholars Program, Spaceship Media, Southern Company Gas, The University of North Carolina, Tesco, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Walmart

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