

RICHARD: Once upon a time not too long ago, business leaders had to answer mainly to shareholders. Now it's stakeholders, including owners and investors, but also employees, customers, vendors, and the community at large. It's a minefield out there for corporate leaders and boards. How can they be an authentic voice and help contribute to common ground? We discuss. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. In this episode, we learn more about the increasing challenges faced by corporate leaders, how they deal with political, social, and cultural polarization. We get tips on how leaders can respond in a caring and genuine way.

RICHARD: Our guest is Davia Temin, a highly regarded marketing and reputation strategist, crisis manager, and communications coach. Davia advises companies and their boards around the world and runs the first Temin and Company.

ASHLEY: Davia, first, thanks so much for coming on Let's Find Common Ground. We're really pleased to have you.

DAVIA: It's my pleasure to be here. Thank you.

ASHLEY: First, let's look at the growing challenges that companies are facing these days. We know America's deeply divided. Is business, especially big business, facing a really different political and cultural landscape today than it did a decade ago, say?

DAVIA: I think that the landscape is almost unrecognizable for businesses these days versus 10 years ago. Why? Because the internet has not only had an equalizing and sometimes unintended effect for individual citizens, it has also had an effect for corporations. The individual's voice can be, in many ways, be amplified to reach many in ways that we never could do that before. This is all over the individual's voice being raised up. At the same time, for corporations, their voice has gotten personalized. So no more is a real brand voice. People talk about the brand attributes of a company and what the brand messages are, all very professional, and that still goes on, of course. But it is beginning to double down on its personality, and we're starting to attribute personalities to companies and brands. Now, some of that may be true. Chick-fil-A has an overwhelming way of thinking. So does Disney, so do many others. But other companies that really didn't have that way, they are being called upon to display almost personal characteristics of what they like and don't like, what they stand for and don't stand for. So this conversation is going on within companies and within corporate boards.

RICHARD: And this is going on at a time when the country is more divided than it's been in living memory.

DAVIA: That's right. So we have a cacophony, and more than that, we have companies being called upon by all of their constituents to say something, do something, stand for something, and they're probably asking for all kinds of different things of the same company.

ASHLEY: It's tricky because one section of employees may want you to stand for one thing, but if you do that, then you're potentially alienating a whole other set.

DAVIA: Exactly because we're now talking about stakeholder capitalism versus shareholder capitalism. The definition of shareholder capitalism is quite narrow. It is about the company taking care of those people who invest in it by buying shares. Today, with stakeholder

capitalism, people have talked about the multiplicity of audiences that every single corporation or company serves. That's not just the investors. It's employees. It's vendors. It's potential employees. It's the community. It is other, bigger issues. So, today, these calls are coming on to companies. Companies are being called on to do all kinds of things. So this makes companies need to sit back and evaluate almost through their own corporate psychoanalysis. Who am I? What do I stand for? What are my goals? Are these the noble goals that I have promised to people. How do I make money while, at the same time, holding on to these? Because, remember, we've been in a very strong business environment until the past couple of years, and now we're going into something very different. So there are all of these competing values and competing goals that they've got, and some of them are going to have to go, and we're seeing the tussle going on right now.

RICHARD: You've said that crisis has turned chronic for most corporate boards today as they face a wide variety of global issues. Do they have to stand for something and speak in ways that they really weren't expected to until quite recently?

DAVIA: Yes, they're being called upon to do that right now, to stand for something. But what you see is people making strong stands on... would I say politically correct issues? Probably, even somewhat "woke" issues, somewhat. But they fall back from taking controversial views that might alienate half of their shareholders or their customers versus appealing to the other half. So what you see is people making choices and standing for things that, by whatever algorithm they figure it out, are very popular with their customer base, but they fall back from doing anything that won't be.

ASHLEY: To what extent does social media play into all this? Has that made things more hazardous for businesses.

DAVIA: Oh, yes, it has. Such a good question. And companies are figuring out everybody talks about transparency, everybody talks about how you don't want to have opacity, you want authenticity -- these are words, and unless you live them in a way that the populace agrees with, they could actually backfire on you, and they could backfire on companies. We see how it has backfired on Disney from one stand. We see on Hobby Lobby has backfired on another way. We're seeing a lot of this, and we're talking about the politicization of corporate America.

RICHARD: What you're describing sounds like a minefield for corporate leaders with a lot of potential pitfalls. As a crisis, risk, and marketing consultant, you're often called on to help out in times of crisis. What advice do you give to boards and CEOs?

DAVIA: Well, it's interesting because I'm also trained as a psychologist. So, when I made a joke about corporate psychoanalysis, it wasn't a complete joke. When individuals try to find out who they are, what they stand for, who they want to be, what their legacy is going to be when they pass, that's a certain kind of work. But companies are needing and C-suite leaders are needing to figure that out, too. There have been so many crisis upon crisis upon crisis, and there are going to continue to be. These leaders are exhausted. They're finding that they need new kinds of talents to bring into the C-suite. They're finding that they need new talents, and they don't actually know, if anyone does, how to read the zeitgeist of the populace, and because of social media, that's changing all the time. So that means, instead of just responding to calls on you, you've got to affirmatively think of who you are. But I'll tell you, the proof point is going to come if we get a recession, and then we'll see what has staying power and what doesn't.

ASHLEY: When you go into a company, what are your guiding principles when it comes to credibility and transparency?

DAVIA: I think you have to be careful about promising transparency. In some ways, you can't be transparent about everything. You can't be transparent about HIPAA. If you're in medicine, you can't be transparent about FERPA, which is for higher education, privacy act. There are many things that you can't divulge, and, frankly, there are probably many things that you shouldn't divulge. So there needs to be a philosophy of what we say and making sure we do what we say. But at some point, I want to write a little treatise in praise of opacity. That's the one thing that I would say.

RICHARD: I love that phrase, "in praise of opacity," so I do hope you write that, Davia. Let's turn from transparency to credibility. What are your thoughts about that, when corporations do speak out?

DAVIA: Credibility is critical. What I don't do is put over stuff on the public. What I don't do is attack others and try to bring them down, and you'd be surprised how many people who have my title and theirs would do these kinds of nefarious things. You can't do it. It's really simple. It's a litmus test. Everybody can have their own litmus test, but I think that if you're communicating with the public and you're doing that wholeheartedly, you have part of a public trust. I think that is a higher calling than just marketing your brand, and I personally believe you can do both, and if you do it with the highest level of integrity, you can actually market your brand better. I think people pick up integrity, and I think people pick up credibility. We're talking about trustworthiness. Now, every time I call a customer service who has promised that, "We're here for our customers, and we're here to help our customers," and they're nowhere to be found, they never respond, and they never fix anything, credibility is hurt. Trust in that organization and all organizations is hurt, and I promise you, that's going to happen more and more as we go into a recession. It's already happened because of the pandemic. People will use any excuse to degrade customer service.

RICHARD: How does that speak to our guiding principles here at Let's Find Common Ground? In this time of division, can companies work on this?

DAVIA: Yes, I think they can, and different groups of corporate leaders do try to do this. But to get to common ground, everybody's got to give a little bit. So do I think it's possible? Yes. Would I be doing what I do if not? No, I wouldn't. However, it is easy to idealize freedom of speech and common ground and think that it means what you want it to mean. So a lot of people today, I would say, say they are for freedom of speech, but what they really mean is they're for freedom of their own speech, and they want people who disagree with them to be quiet. Not the same thing. So building that respect for freedom of speech, building that respect for common ground means, I believe, honoring the differences as well as just persuading somebody to think the way that I do.

ASHLEY: Your mention of common ground made me think of this. You alluded to this a little earlier, the Disney case. Disney got into a lot of trouble in Florida after its statements on LGBTQ rights and the so-called Don't Say Gay Act, which bans classroom discussion through younger children of gender orientation and sexual identity. Disney originally tried to tread in the middle by saying... the CEO said, "We live these values through our work, and we're not going to say anything about this bill," and it backfired massively on Disney. So, on the one hand, Disney and companies like it are facing pressure from employees to take a stand on something like that,

and then they face political hazards when they do that. So, in that kind of situation, what advice would you give?

DAVIA: I think it is very helpful for corporate boards, for C-suites to understand their corporate personality. I'm saying that different from a brand. That is, essentially what I help them do, is figure that out and then live closer to it. We know that, for human beings, if you figure out who you are, what your identity is, who you seek to be, the closer you live to what you think is your ideal, the happier you're going to be as a human being. I think that there's going to be a growing need for companies, corporations, colleges and universities, organizations to understand their organizational personality more, what they stand for more, what they seek to stand for, and what they don't seek to stand for. And that probably is where we're going to have to start. And you know what? Just like finding out your own identity can be very uncomfortable, this can be very uncomfortable, too, but I think that probably, in the end, satisfying and important.

ASHLEY: We're speaking with Davia Temin on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. So, Ashley, we've had a pretty interesting range of responses to our Listener's Survey from Common Ground Committee. Thank you to those who have filled out the form or left audio messages. Keep them coming.

ASHLEY: Yeah. One listener told us he listens to our podcast because he wants to see people who are trying to heal situations and not just throw gasoline on the fire, and that's going on so much right now.

RICHARD: Another listener wants more dialogue and maybe some conflict on the show. One suggestion was to have a Socialist on with a Libertarian.

ASHLEY: We're listening carefully, and we'll consider everything you suggest. Fill out our Listener's Survey at the website, commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

RICHARD: And now let's get back to our interview with Davia Temin.

ASHLEY: Speaking of some of the challenges that famous brands have faced recently, the Supreme Court decision overturning women's right to abortion, that has been really tricky for corporate leaders to navigate. Can you talk about that for a minute? In what ways?

DAVIA: Yes, I can, of course. I'm of the generation, when I was a kid, I fought for women's right to choose. It was choice then. We've now gone a step further. We've had the conversation redefined yet again away from choice and toward abortion. I'm not sure anybody is for abortion. I think many, many of us are for choice. So, for me, it is particularly sad that whole new groups and new generations of young people are going to have to figure this thing out again and go through that again. Is this causing great difficulty for corporations? You bet. There's been a new, almost corporate work of art that has developed, which is the corporate letter to all employees, the all-employee letter about something horrific that has happened in the world, whether it is the many letters that had to come out about COVID, whether it was about the killing of George Floyd. Again and again, there have been things to decry. Now what you see is that the easiest ones for companies to attack, to write are the ones that are clearly heinous and that everybody would say they are heinous. It's really hard to say you shouldn't write a letter about Columbine, for example, about a school shooting. That's easy. That's turned into an art form. I could dictate one to you right now. I've written so many of them for organizations. However, when it gets to

be things that are more nuanced, far more controversial. What I'm finding is that a lot of companies are deciding not to do that because they would just raise consternation among all their stakeholders. They don't want to do that.

RICHARD: What about corporate responses following the overturning of Roe v. Wade and the impact on female employees.

DAVIA: Those, I see more companies actually maybe changing their policies but doing that quietly, and there's some of that going on.

RICHARD: Changing their healthcare policies?

DAVIA: Yeah, yeah.

RICHARD: But doing it quietly because we've had, for instance, reports that Conservatives in Republican-controlled states have threatened to pull contracts from businesses that they see as "helping" women terminate pregnancies.

DAVIA: You bet, you bet.

RICHARD: Yet corporations are major donors to political campaigns on both sides of the aisle. There's one example of pressure from activists aimed at business leaders. It's come from Color of Change, which is a racial justice group that issued a statement recently demanding that companies stop funding politicians who restrict women's access to abortions. Do statements like that force a reckoning for corporate leaders? Do you think there will be changes when it comes to political donations?

DAVIA: Oh, what a good question. I think it's both. I think we've gotten too demanding on one hand, and people don't like to be demanded of. That's certainly in college campuses. You know, we have our list of demands, we have our list of whatever, and everybody's dealing with the lists of demands. I think, one, we need to be careful about what we demand. On the other hand, I don't think we want to mute our own outrage too much because then it's a slam dunk. The things that we don't want to happen will. So where can we find common ground? Is it around what is decent? Is it around what is kind? Is it around what is compassionate even to people who we don't agree with? People maybe aren't going to church in the same way that they used to. Maybe meditation takes its place. But should we not be trying to figure out what that common ground is that we used to get from religion but maybe we need to get from a secular society now?

RICHARD: We've been talking mostly about public-facing issues, about how the company faces the public square, but what about internally, in the workforce? Employees, especially young employees, are increasingly demanding that the companies they work for stand for values they believe in. Talk about that.

DAVIA: Young people, especially in a lot of the elite colleges, etc., they have their demands. They know what they want, and it generally has more to do with current events and things that are top-of-mind right now, and probably liberal versus conservative, in many ways. They deserve to be heard, but they can take that and run with it. So there's a line between deserving to be heard and entitled to have whatever you want all the time.

ASHLEY: It's interesting because not all people in their 20s are liberal, and we just don't hear so much about that group. I don't know if it's just that they don't post as much on social media or if it's just not reported.

DAVIA: Or they just don't speak up that much, period. I'm from the Midwest, and I'm quite Midwestern in many, many different ways. You don't make a fuss. But I think young people have discovered their voice. Now it is conceivable that, as we get into tighter monetary situations, they're going to find some limits, as well.

ASHLEY: Talk about that because we've learned that economic growth really is slowing down. The U.S. might even be in recession already. Talk about the connection between that and the actions of employees.

DAVIA: Think about how the Great Resignation has come about. Now you've got all these people who, because there were so many jobs going unfilled, they felt that they could get jobs any time they wanted, they could resign, they could resign for six months or a year, whatever, then come back making more money. My book, this is entitlement. Now, come a recession, jobs dry up.

ASHLEY: Does that mean that there may be fewer demands on companies as companies have the upper hand in the economy?

DAVIA: Conceivably. I don't know because it depends on what has gotten ingrained into our culture, where the culture wars go. But I think it always helps to be more thoughtful than knee-jerk. There are things that are worth standing up for in this world, and we all have different lists, but don't do it with your eyes closed.

RICHARD: That's a great way to end, that it's always better to be more thoughtful than knee-jerk. That's also the case with finding common ground, isn't it? You've spoken briefly about this, the need to stand up for your values in a positive way.

DAVIA: Yeah. I think that's the only way we get anywhere, and maybe it's two steps forward, one step back, but I would put compassion and kindness from one human being to another, from one group of human beings to another at the top of pile. We all prioritize our values differently, thinking through what our value system and then articulating that, and, if needed, fighting for that. That's, I think, the value of a grownup individual and a grownup organization. That does seem to me to have something to do with common ground.

ASHLEY: Davia Temin, thank you so much for coming on Let's Find Common Ground today.

DAVIA: It's a delight to be here. Thank you for having me.

RICHARD: Marketing and reputation strategist, crisis manager, and communications coach Davia Temin.

ASHLEY: Let's Find Common Ground is produced for Common Ground Committee. We have a broad range of audio, visual, blogs, and more at our website, commongroundcommittee.org.

RICHARD: And there's also our Listener's Survey. Give us feedback, compliments, and criticism. The website again is commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.