

Corporate Political Responsibility Taskforce

Expert Dialogue with Bonk & Eidlin

Bonk & Eidlin - Module #3

Elizabeth Doty: Thank you, everyone. Glad you're here. I'm Elizabeth Doty, the director of the Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force at the Erb Institute at the University of Michigan. And I'm delighted Richard Eidlin and Sarah Bonk were our second expert dialogue way back in the day. And now we're back for round two.

The Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force, or CPRT, is an initiative of the Erb Institute. A 25 year long partnership between the Ross School of Business and the School for Environment and Sustainability at the University of Michigan. Led by Managing Director Terry Nelodov and Faculty Director Tom Lyon, the Erb Institute is known for its leadership in three areas.

Teaching and Learning, Business Engagement with groups like the CPRT, and Scholarly and Applied Research. The CPRT's [00:01:00] mission is to help companies better align their approach to political influence with their commitments to purpose and values, sustainability, and stakeholders. As we're seeing, corporate political responsibility is an increasingly pivotal element in managing stakeholder trust, addressing systemic issues, and rebuilding public trust in institutions.

Let me set up a little bit about these talented leaders. Sarah Bonk Bonk is a business leader with 20 years of experience in design technology leadership at Fortune 500 companies, most notably nearly 15 years at Apple. And then this is the pattern somewhere around 2014, she was doing volunteer work.

pro bono work on a nonpartisan political reform campaign and became convinced that business had a role to play in solutions and moving forward. And starting between, I guess, 2014 and 2017 founded Business for America is now the CEO. She'll [00:02:00] say a little bit more about the focus, but the group is really a business group dedicated to mobilizing the business community to help advance popular.

Bipartisan policy, political reforms and technology solutions that strengthen representative democracy. So that's a headline. We'll hear more in just a moment. Bonk, I'm delighted to be able to be in conversation with you, with you once again. Thank you for being here. And then Richard Eidlin, and Richard, I met you about the same time, is the policy director for Business for America, and you'll all see that that's a really important part of their their critical value add as a network and a community.

Richard was the co founder of the American Sustainable Business Council and was vice president for policy, and was very active in identifying the policy priorities and leading state and national campaigns on their sustainability initiatives. for Environment, Tax, Regulatory Reform, Campaign Finance, Economic Development, a whole range of issues.

And that's both the policy side and the [00:03:00] campaigns to get them done and to build to build momentum around those. He was the Business Outreach Director for the Apollo Alliance leading federal and state clean energy and job creation policies Colorado Clean Tech Obama Campaign. He was the co director.

In what was that about 2012? Richard somewhere around there worked with the UN on their environmental program and their environmental finance initiative and has been teaching as adjunct faculty at the University of Denver on environmental policy and sustainability. So we have two really capable, talented, committed.

Leaders who've been on this journey for a while and have a lot to share with us. So Richard, welcome and thank you for for being with us today.

Richard Eidlin: Good. Thanks, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Doty: We are terrible about thinking how the structures of systems. Push us into things. There's a thing called the fundamental attribution error, where everything I do as a result of circumstances and everything they do as a result of their [00:04:00] character, right? As opposed to looking at the circumstances like muddy rules, or as you said, things that push people to extremes.

I'd like to shift to what companies can do externally. That's constructive that plays this role to get at the root causes, including some of these structural things that just put good people in bad, ineffective. Systems or feed distrust.

Sarah Bonk: Well, you know, as we alluded to when it comes to how Business for America operates, that we're oriented around addressing these root causes.

And as a membership organization that, you know, we're looking at a variety of ways to engage businesses because businesses are not monolithic and they, it's really, really very high touch boutique approach. Some businesses will engage in the policy arena. Some will not. So we offer this variety of ways to engage.

Kind of see it as being opportunistic in the positive sense of the word that where there are opportunities to plug businesses in that that's what we're here to do, kind of almost like a concierge figure out what the, what the right mix is and simultaneously that we have our own [00:05:00] initiatives that we like to plug businesses into.

So when it comes to what those initiatives look like, the first kind of bundle of activities has to do with helping companies to engage their employees, and we are looking at helping them to be more civically engaged. Helping to bridge workplace divides and promoting civic knowledge and civic education in the communities where they operate.

So we've got a number of initiatives. It's kind of like on the the C3 side where we are able to plug businesses into some interesting opportunities. We're running some lunch and learns for one of our member companies and that's something we'll be able to offer more broadly on, you know, a series of lunch and learns, whether it's civic engagement.

A little bit of civics 101 and a little bit of civil dialogue. But the other part is around the public policy arena and, you know, supporting nonpartisan reforms in bipartisan legislation, usually like popular reforms. Like we're not doing things that are not likely to get passed. We're not supporting.

The legislation [00:06:00] that is more messaging bills, we're here to really try to leverage the influence of business to get some of these really great pieces of legislation and other reforms across the finish line. And so I think I would like to hand it to Richard there to talk about some of our current initiatives and things that businesses can participate in specific specifically on policy.

Richard Eidlin: So there's work that we do at the state and at the federal level and. A lot of the work that we focused on over the past several years has been around elections, how they work ensuring that they're safe, accessible and fair and, you know, recognizing that there are improvements that can be made in the way elections are run you know, particularly at the state and local level.

So, in Pennsylvania, just as an example, we've been working on a bill that I think is now dead, but it is a good. case study, nonetheless, of a bipartisan acknowledgement that the system could be improved. [00:07:00] And that is around pre canvassing. So in Pennsylvania, the law is, as in many states, that the ballots can't be processed.

A mail in ballot or, you know, the physical ballot that you drop off can't be scanned by election officials. Until the, the day of the election. So, you know, the polls open maybe at 7 or 8 in the morning. Meanwhile, you have 25, 000 ballots that have been collected and now the scanners are working overtime.

So, it was a very simple procedural improvement that county officials in Pennsylvania were enthusiastic about, but it couldn't get through a fairly partisan legislature. And unfortunately, you know, in most states. Election administration has become very partisan, and there are efforts to improve the way things work.

But you know, we remain optimistic that Democrats and Republicans and independents can come together [00:08:00] in in different states. So then at the federal level, we are focused on a few kind of big ideas. One is this This work around grational modernization. There isn't a piece of legislation per se, but this work stream builds off of a select committee that representative Kilmer and representative Timmons, a Democrat and Republican undertook beginning in 2019 that resulted in a comprehensive review of how Congressional operations could be improved upon everything from hiring to retaining staff to adopting new technology to acknowledging the need for a more inclusive workforce to how legislation gets drafted to having software in, in offices.

That's contemporary. So we are now bringing the private sector into this [00:09:00] conversation and inviting companies. To offer insights from their own best practices in the, in their companies and how those could be translated and used within how congressional offices work and a colleague of ours, Brad Fitch from the Congressional Management Foundation, you know, likes to say that you have 535 small businesses.

Working in the U. S. Congress, because there isn't a lot of uniformity of approach, and that's because that has not been a priority for Congress and the results, you know, from one office to another very dramatically about responsiveness to Congress. To constituents,

Elizabeth Doty: I was honored to be at your strategy session where you debrief this and heard Brad Fitch speak.

And I thought it was very interesting back to the earlier comment that we have very few places where people can do problem solving together. And so some of these have non intuitive benefits. And one of the things I [00:10:00] learned from that was, I think was representative Kilmer had set this up where there was a lot of relationship building and really.

Careful attention to private places to talk about what it's like to be a member of Congress. And so there were ripple effects far beyond modernizing work processes, and that these counterintuitive moves are actually rebuilding some of the government. Civility right and

some of the mutual understanding and shared shared work for the greater good, you know We all hate to hear the ones that didn't get traction.

But do you see value in in the attempts? I know you're not going for messaging bills, but in these other bills where you see possibilities, do you see value in the invisible aspects of these projects and feel free to say no, you know, it really matters that they pass but

Richard Eidlin: No, I I think I, we feel very strongly that working on these initiatives, such as Kilmer's, you know, select committee is important because it [00:11:00] changes the culture.

It changes the way people think about their jobs, and it teaches them some basic skills that they may have forgotten or never had. About collaborating and, you know, not taking things too personally and being able to work across the aisle. The private sector, I think, has a lot to teach elected officials.

You know, being a politician is a highly skilled profession in many cases, you know, it means to be able to navigate complex. Dynamics and work with a variety of viewpoints, but the hyper partisanship we see, you know, is not constructive. So this last example, I wanted to point out touches Elizabeth on what you're speaking of, which is a piece of legislation again, co sponsored by representative Kilmer from Washington state and and Andy Barr from North Carolina.

Who those two gentlemen don't agree on [00:12:00] much of anything, but they do concur that there's a lack of civility within Congress and that there needs to be a recognition that. Our society is fractured. So this is a very modest proposal to provide 25 million dollars for 3 years running to set up a new program within AmeriCorps where they would create an office of civic bridge building.

The monies would be distributed to not for profits who work in the civic building. Building space, this would be a way in which to address some of the polarization and divisiveness in the country. So now that we have a new speaker of the house, who by the way, was a co founder of something called the Honor and Civility Caucus in 2017, you know, maybe, maybe there is some more bandwidth and interest in this idea of bridging these these divides.

Elizabeth Doty: I think [00:13:00] in some ways. There's a new level of value that I'm appreciating in your work, which is identifying those procedural things with boring sounding names. I'm sorry, that could have high leverage and bringing those two people. And the other thing that's standing out to me is the surprise and I have found this myself in the congressional office.

I think it's business comes to speak about pro societal objectives that they have a shared interest in there's a business aspect, but that it's not particular to their business it's a shared benefit. Let's turn it now Henry if you could, questions from the pre questions from the group or from your own.

From your own thinking.

Henry: We have a question from Michael Koenig about third rail issues.

Michael Koenig: We keep just acknowledging that there are the third rail issues out there and that there's very few safe issues that businesses feel safe. To address, you know, the civic education, like you talked about. Encouraging people to vote, maybe volunteer to be [00:14:00] poll workers, things like that.

I just made the editorial comment that it's sad that somewhere along the way voting and democracy have become polarizing topics. And so I just wondered if you see any signs. Of pulling those back to getting those. Back to being safe topics and and things that maybe businesses might be more willing or some businesses might be more willing to engage.

And Richard, you sort of started to answer that with some of the policy issues. You just highlighted. I gave the example of maybe getting Washington based businesses to talk more openly about. The voting by mail and how it's done in their state and their employees, and they, as a company feel very comfortable and confident with the safety and security of of that.

You know, I don't know if that's a good example or not

Sarah Bonk: to address kind of like, you know, part of the question is, you know. Is, is democracy is voting a safe issue when it comes to, [00:15:00] you know, asking your employees to vote, doing kind of the get out register to vote, get out the vote stuff. I would say that feels pretty safe and we don't, you know, this is all subjective but haven't seen really anybody pulling back from that if anything I think that field continues to grow, and we partnered with time to vote and civic alliance they're continuing to scale.

And they're been very intentional, especially, you know, time to vote when they launched that was started by Patagonia, PayPal and Levi Strauss companies we think of as progressive. And yet when they created this time to vote organization and ask companies to make this commitment to make sure their employees could vote.

One of their very first partners lined up was Walmart so that they would have that credibility and saying this isn't about trying to get certain people elected. It's just about trying to get Americans to be more civically engaged and show up at the polls and have a voice participate as we really need more Americans to do so.

In that regard, I think things are very successful again, like continuing to scale when it comes to public policy around this stuff. You know, the opposite, I would say, is very much [00:16:00] true because of the backlash in part. These continue to be hyper polarizing wedge issues, and we're really striving in Pennsylvania.

We've had luck where, you know, even though some of these issues haven't passed, there has been bipartisanship around them. That is where we love to lean in and, you know, our support has definitely been appreciated, but we certainly are. They're hearing and seeing in other states, think about like Coca Cola and Delta in Georgia back in the day saying like, like, we're just going to get out of this.

It seemed like something we should be able to agree on, but it has become much, much too hot of a potato.

Elizabeth Doty: I just heard someone say that get out the vote is equated with pro reproductive rights. So there's some things that way. One thing that I have found interesting, there's some research for more in common in their most recent data that says that that complex messaging where you combine the potential objection and the intent of the action together in the same message.

You know, it's important that we make [00:17:00] sure our elections have high integrity and get people to vote that that is reassuring and well and trusted across ideology, ideological divides. And then the other one was I just had a group of people look at an intent to fund election administration, depending on who the company is.

And I think there's a huge gap if I can editorialize for a moment. There's a huge gap where companies are not explicit about their intent to have it benefit everyone. And that could be helpful. We had Chick fil A and Apple funding election administration and people have had different reactions. And if you don't explain the intent,

I invite you to go to the CPRT website. Make sure you're on the mailing list for these. If you're a guest this time, we will be updating our resource list in the next three to four weeks. We've got a research assistant working on a fantastic upgrade to the [00:18:00] library. Go to BFA's website. Always interesting things there and and campaigns you can learn about.

And then if you would like to be part of a conversation, Where companies work across issues and across industries and sectors around what are those principles and how do you apply them to complex issues, please reach out to me and we'll talk about the CPR task force and you can see our contact information on the right there.

Thank you, Bonk and Richard. Thank you very much for sharing your lessons on this journey. I know you are very rigorous about continually testing things, seeing how they work and, and threading the needle. I think some people would like you to be more controversial. Some people like you to be less and you have really been learning as you go.

And I appreciate your sharing that with this community.