

# Corporate Political Responsibility Taskforce

*Expert Dialogue with Kristin Hansen & Tara Leweling Module #1*

## Hansen & Leweling - Module #1

**Elizabeth Doty:** [00:00:00] Well, hello and welcome to the Erb Institute's Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force Expert Dialogue Series. My name is Elizabeth Doty. I'm the task force director, and I'm delighted to be moderating today's conversation with Kristin Hansen and Tara Leweling. The Corporate Political Responsibility Task Force, or CPRT, is an initiative of the Urban 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 mission is to help companies better align their approach to political influence [00:01:00] 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.

I'm honored to be talking with Two incredible folks who bring depth in academic expertise, government service and business leadership, and now applying that to civic leadership. Our first guest I'll mention is Kristin Hanson, who's the executive director of the Civic Health Project. She is dedicated to accelerating the efforts of academics and practitioners, both.

And there's an important linkage there who are seeking to reduce polarization and improve civil discourse. And I remember when we first met that that was really important that these efforts be grounded in as much research and nuance and understanding as possible to be effective. In addition to that role at the Civic Health Project, Kristin serves on the advisory boards of all sides.

Business for America, and I see [00:02:00] we have Sarah Bonk with us from Business for America, and the Listen First project, and as a year round lecturer in strategic communications at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. So she's super busy we're very glad that she's been able to join us today. Prior to this instantiation of a dynamic career, Kristin was also a senior executive at Intel, and previous to that IBM.

And multiple startup software companies. She has a BA in political science and international and master's in international policy studies and an MBA from Stanford graduate school of business, which we won't hold against you. Yeah. And then Tara is our surprise guest. We had hoped, and then it came together at the last minute.

Tara is the vice president of corporate brand at all state. And that means she leads corporate and financial communications. thought leadership, sustainability reporting, and reputation management, including amplifying Allstate's voice in national dialogues about the role of business in society.

That's a really super job title or description. Partnering with the CEO, the vice chair, [00:03:00] executive leadership team, and presidents of eight different businesses at all different stages of growth, Terra helps Allstate build enduring interactive relationships with stakeholders, and in particular, has a focus on advancing inclusive prosperity and helping individuals and civic groups reach across differences, which will be a big factor in our conversation today.

She's also the executive co sponsor of Allstate's employee resource group for veterans military members, and their families, drawing on her own 22 years of active duty. Service in the U. S. Air Force. Previously, she served as executive director for international policy and programs at J. P. Morgan Chase and was acting senior director.

Listen to this acting senior director for European affairs, as well as the director for NATO and Western Europe at the White House. In the National Security Council. So, today's headlines are personal for Tara, and, and I hope you'll share a little bit about some of how that's affecting your thinking.

And then lastly, I just learned that Tara has [00:04:00] a her bachelor's degree in science and history from the University of Michigan. So, thank you for that, and welcome to to both of you. I am so glad that you're here today.

So, we are really fortunate today to engage our topic. Toxic polarization and how business can help. First, I'd like to turn to you, Kristin, if you would to define this, this idea of toxic polarization what it means, how does it happen? What are you learning from all this, you know, deep dive into the research?

**Kristin Hansen:** Thank you so much for having me here today. It's really a pleasure to be part of this forum. I see some familiar faces on the call today, as well as many new ones. And I wanted to start by saying that. You know, today we're going to have a chance to scratch the surface on this topic. And the purpose is to brainstorm together creative ways that businesses and business leaders can think about being empowered to address a challenge that is only growing in our society today.

I think we're going to largely. Confine our [00:05:00] discussion to talking about toxic polarization in a US context. But for any of you who represent global organizations, global companies, and you have employees and customers around the world, certainly a lot of what we're going to talk about today can be extrapolated out to other societies and to the global markets in which many of us operate.

So Elizabeth posed the question about what is toxic polarization? How do we scope our discussion around that today? Many of you will be familiar with these terms, but let's just spend a minute or two defining terms. Political polarization, in a general sense, can be something that's very benign. It can refer to the fact that people have different points of view on policies, issues.

Topics. And that's perfectly natural. In fact, desirable in any democratic society that there should be different perspectives and then opportunities to air and address those differences in some kind of a public forum and process. Toxic polarization refers to something very different. [00:06:00] The more academic term for this is affective polarization, and it describes the in which differences of opinion start to harden or curdle into negative.

Attitudes feelings and emotions that people have towards one another so we're basically moving from a thinking to a feeling realm. And as those hostilities or acrimonies between

people build up in a broad sense societally that can have many different adverse outcomes. Impacting personal relationships.

I often will pull audiences and just say how many of you have been personally affected by the deepening political divisions and differences in our country. How many of you have had a family relationship or a personal friendship? Or a work relationship impacted in some way as differences of political opinion have been surfaced and exposed so I'll put it out there as a rhetorical question but it kind of starts at that level, it impacts our personal [00:07:00] relationships in our daily lives.

From there, as we know. Toxic political polarization can make it harder for us to work with one another in decision making and policymaking forums. We certainly see this playing out at the national level in our Congress in many state houses and all the way down to the local level. We're seeing dramas play out in school boards and city councils where the.

The hardening emotional polarization around issues is making it harder and harder for these forms to be productive. And in the worst case, and this is what we hope to avoid. Certainly, we see increasing intensifying propensity towards. Violent expression of differences and of course, you know, that is a realm of activity that we, we must contain that we must minimize within a functioning democratic society, such as ours and so at all these different levels toxic political polarization as opposed to just.

Differences on issues can have adverse consequences. We're going to spend today talking about [00:08:00] translating that into the work context because also within a business, there are different layers to how and where toxic political polarization can show up. It can show up first and foremost, in our work environments within our workforces, we need to be cognizant of that and have plans and ideas for how to address it.

It can show up in the customers and markets that we serve, and then it shows up certainly in the societies in which we operate our businesses. So these are all the different layers and ways in which we need to contemplate the ramifications of toxic polarization from a business perspective.

**Elizabeth Doty:** Thank you very much.

And I appreciate, I mean, we're being very moderated if we talk about it, but it really is heated. Some of our members have talked about fights in employee cafeterias as people were coming back to work, physical physical altercations in the workplace. So it has very vivid consequences that are urgent and intensifying.

Can you share just a [00:09:00] touch more about how it happens and why it's particularly intense now? Is it, is it just our times? Is this human nature? If so, why is it, He did now.

**Kristin Hansen:** Well, and, and as Elizabeth has already touched upon, we're going to use this supply and demand metaphor or framework for talking about toxic polarization and the adverse loop that we can fall into as a society as, as we see happening.

Now, toxic or affective political polarization has certain enduring elements to it that are part of our, our very DNA as humans. Our. Need for validation for belonging are innate groupishness or in a, in a worse manifestation. Our tribalism are strong need to identify and associate with groups and identities that make us feel safe, secure and belonging somewhere.

Okay, so all of those are tendencies that that is humans. We we carry with us to to [00:10:00] 1 extent or another. It's natural. It's human. It's evolutionary. It's all part of the survival mechanisms that are deeply baked and ingrained within us. And again, doesn't have to be adverse in its consequences.

Belonging to groups is an important part of what we do as humans, and we have many ways to identify with groups. Workplaces are certainly one place where we can achieve a sense of identity. Our faith communities, civic institutions, schools, institutes of higher learning are all places where we can go and have our identity affirmed.

One of the challenges societally and why it might be Worse now than as we've observed historically over many decades is through a process called sorting. And many of you, again, will be familiar with this term. It's the tendency for where we gather to start to have affiliation that, that is attached to political leanings.

So through geography, through where we assemble voluntarily, more [00:11:00] and more of the ways in which we group as individuals are starting to have some kind of a Super ideological affiliation with that that's causing us to categorize ourselves more and more into groups or silos, if you will, that have a certain political leaning or affiliation that all of that is what we kind of described as the demand side and I'll I'll hold off.

We'll get a little more into that. But these are the things that innately in us make us tend to want to attach to some sort of identity that validates us. Why we also talk about the supply side to this equation is because those tendencies in us to be groupish, tribal, and to cling to a certain identification can be exploited by those who benefit from highlighting and then exacerbating those tribal affiliations.

And we know this intuitively that different types of conflict on truth entrepreneurs are preying on our tribal sensibilities, bad faith actors who may wish to divide us for the sake of [00:12:00] earning votes, earning our eyeballs, earning our attention, there are there are strong incentives. For many to prey on our tribal instincts to make us feel more divided to make us angry to make us outraged and to heighten those sense of attachment that we may have that could be based on our political or ideological beliefs.

**Elizabeth Doty:** Thank you very much. Later, if we, if we can do it, I want to come back to an example. Because it, I think it's easy for us all to see how those people over there are being manipulated by this phrase conflict entrepreneurs. And I think it'd be helpful if you think about it examples you could see that might be unexpected.

But right now, let me turn to Tara. And I, I think, you know, Kristin has set us up a little bit as to why this affects business, the three layers that she talked through, but also not every business has stepped up to recognize this as a business issue. Can you say why? [00:13:00] You have seen this as a business issue and why you think maybe other businesses should.

**Tara Leweling:** Well, first thank you for having me, especially as a proud Michigan alum. I won't give my class here because I'm past that stage in life where I'm willing to share it. But I would say Kristin's exactly right. When it comes to why business cares about this and the three layers, and we were talking about before we got on the line Elizabeth is that our CEO, for example, talks.

about how business is given a license to operate by society. The reason business can exist is because society allows it to exist. And of course, at least in the United States, we operate

inside a democracy and inside a market based system. So with that license, that society is giving business to operate.

We have certain obligations and certain responsibilities. We need to be connected into society in order to sustain that license in order to be able to operate and be engaged. And that means [00:14:00] being engaged. Making a difference responding to society's ills and responding in a way that's, that's really powerful.

That's, that's one level. And then as Kristin talked about before, it's also the community level. So, national policy as we all know is incredibly complicated. We're a community based company. We have over 9000 agents all over in communities all over America, and they are leaders in their communities they are agents of change and agents of leadership inside of the community they serve.

What we find is communities are grappling with this, and they don't have the luxury of just living with rhetoric and letting it sit right communities are neighbors, sitting with neighbors, it is in order for, for A community to function. They have to wrestle with the issues that divide them. And as community leaders and as people who are [00:15:00] so best accompanied so vested in community.

It's really important to us to look at that. And then the third one, to your point, Kristin is customers. and potential customers. We're the kind of company when customers and consumers are wrestling with something. We don't want to be the company that just sits back and says, Oh, isn't that, isn't that terrible?

And consumers, you're wrestling with it. That's we feel for you. We don't have anything to do about it. Like we want to be a company that shows up and help solve problems, which is why we've been engaged in this space, and we could talk a little bit later about what that what we're actually doing about it.

I will say it's not easy. It requires a lot of conversation internally. It also requires. a lot of conversation, even among our employee base, because we firmly believe we want people to bring their authentic selves to work. That means bringing their identities to work. And as Kristin points out, those [00:16:00] identities may not always be in harmony.

And so being able to create a space where people can operate together execute the mission of the business, do it in a way where people feel valued, but feel they can bring their identities forward is incredibly important to us and we think it makes us Frankly, more productive as a company that we're able to do that.

**Elizabeth Doty:** Very, very interesting. And I, I so appreciate that you're adding another dimension, right? It's not this side or that side, but whether it's toxic or healthy. Kristin, when you were talking about the, the polarization and differences, and now Tara, I hear you talking about that as well as there's a bringing your whole self, having your identities and having that diversity and the ability to respect and celebrate and value that at the same time as making the differences.

the ability to engage those healthy and not to devolve down into the worst of what we can be. Let's turn to how that's hitting our group here.

Guest: Thank you both for your [00:17:00] introduction to the, to these issues. Tara, I have a question for you because you, you just, you just said that you're wrestling with these issues internally at all state while also striving to meet corporate goals.

And that's kind of a microcosm for the country. What can, what can you offer us? What kind of lessons can you offer us so that, you know, maybe we can take that elsewhere?

**Tara Leweling:** Yeah, I can offer a few lessons. We really work hard as a company to encourage leaders to be their authentic selves. bring their identities to work.

We also encourage, frankly people to be involved in their communities and if they want to, to be involved in the political process. Now, it, it does hit a door at some point inside the company. We don't want people advocating for, for example, particular candidates, right? But we want people to be able to feel like they can. They can be in their community and offering a point of view that that allows them to [00:18:00] really fully participate in civic life.

What that translates though, inside the company is we've, we focus a lot on education. This year is a midterm year, we will bring in speakers to help, help employees feel educated. We invite all sides into the company to if they want to come speak to our employee base. When there's a general election.

We bring in a lot of speakers, people like the cook report and others to just help our employees feel better informed so that they can make decisions aligned with their values aligned with where they're thinking, but they that we as a company are helping them become civically engaged we, we have a big get out the vote drive.

With every election. We encourage employees to be a part of that. We encourage employees if they want you to volunteer at the polling place, provide the opportunity to have that be paid by the company while they're doing that [00:19:00] volunteer work at the polling place. And so really trying to enable that.

Richness and we focus a lot on inclusive in our system. We call it inclusive diversity and equity because we feel you can't have inclusion without diversity. You can't have diversity without inclusion. So we call it inclusive diversity and equity. And we have really empowered Elizabeth mentioned I'm one of the sponsors for our veterans group.

veteran employees, military members, their families. But we have 11 employee resource groups inside of the company of all sorts of affiliations and identities. And we really encourage them to bring forth programming that prevents multiple points of view. We just are obviously wrapping up black history month.

Our our working group focused on African American employees did phenomenal work of bringing in many different points of view about The state of the African American community today. We're transitioning into women's history month, and our group that's focused [00:20:00] on executive women are doing the same thing and have a whole slew of programming that they're making available to all All all staters, but from a community centric point of view and representing many points of view inside that community.

So we're really trying to make it a place where you can learn, and then take that learning into your community and participate faithfully in your in civic life.

Guest: If I may ask one one follow up. I'm really curious how you handled masking at the office and what what issues may have come up with that.

**Tara Leweling:** Yes. So we have a masking policy at the office. We have a fairly conservative approach to the pandemic. So we have, for the most part, not been in the office since March of 2020. We had a few weeks where we were back in the office last summer, and a few weeks where we were back in the office in November.



But we've also made a decision as a [00:21:00] company to be very digital forward. So we think, going forward, we will probably have 70 percent of our workforce working from home on a permanent basis. And so for us, it's, it's a different dynamic when you make decisions like that at scale. We will, we have required masking in the office.

It's essentially we we adhere to local standards, but we also have criteria, very science based criteria around community transmission, ICU beds and things like that as we make decisions about whether people are going to go into the office at all. So we've, we've tried to partner with medical experts.

And also bring those medical experts in so employees can learn from them as well and understand a very that we're taking a very science based approach to these issues to protect them and protect communities that they live in.

Guest: Has there been any resistance to that effort?

**Tara Leweling:** For the most part, we haven't had a lot of challenges around it.

At the same time [00:22:00] our offices have not been open that much in the past two years, given our given our standards around community transmission and ICU beds and the like. So we'll, we'll see how it plays out in the coming, in the coming year is more people are heading back to the office.

Guest: Thank you.

**Tara Leweling:** Thank you.

**Elizabeth Doty:** And I hear you emphasizing the opportunities for education and engagement with the, with the facts to weigh. Abby, do you want to chime in with your, with your question? Sure.

Guest 2: So I know, Kristin, you were talking about toxic political polarization a little bit and I was just wondering if you see this more common in like younger generations or is it like more Common in like older generations, or I guess like, how does that play out?

**Kristin Hansen:** I appreciate you asking the age dimension. I wanted to start by, you know, describing a little bit of my own journey of understanding toxic political polarization. When I came into this work, not so very many years ago, it was a more [00:23:00] simplistic perspective that I held about The division being essentially a, a red blue divide or a Democrat Republican type of divide.

And even in the place that I was working at the time, Intel corporation, that red blue dynamic was playing out in some interesting ways. There was a, a pretty eventful week where our, our CEO at the time went and did a photo op in the white house with Donald Trump and how that landed or was received in the, in Intel campus in San Jose, California versus Chandler, Arizona versus Hillsboro, Oregon, you know, it's very distinct.

And that was sort of a hint or a harbinger of a more complex understanding of how divisions social divisions can show up. These divisions aren't as simple as how people categorized by political party affiliation right. Some of our deepest divisions and how we fail to understand each other. for having me.

Can be based on geography. Do you live in a rural area or an urban area? How does that impact [00:24:00] your your perspective on issues and policies? How old are you? Age is a really important fault line for how we interpret it. issues. And so, you know, I know you were

asking a slightly different question, Abby, about whether older or younger people are more toxically polarized.

At least I think that was the, the crux of your question. But it's sort of interesting to explore this dynamic of whether we as younger and older people are actually polarized from one another because our age creates one of those wedges or social divisions that makes it hard for us to understand each other.

So for me, at least, and I wanted to kind of tie this back to all state, you know, thinking about how toxic division or polarization shows up in our country or in a company. It's important to think about all these different ways in which ideologically driven conflict can show up in a workplace setting or in our customer base, and it could be around political party affiliation.

It could be around [00:25:00] geography. It could be around age. These are all dimensions to consider if you want to try to inquire, analyze, diagnose how these divisions might be showing up inside of your company.

**Elizabeth Doty:** Great. Thank you, Kristin. And a good segue there. And also, I really appreciate the fact that you went on that journey, right, and asked the questions instead of writing people off.

How, what is driving this? And we always learn something that way.

If you would like to explore this in the private group that we do with our, with our students. Task Force members, please reach out to me, Tom Lyon, or Terry Nelodob at the email addresses below. We are right in the process of drafting principles around corporate political responsibility. In addition, you can go to our website to learn about upcoming expert dialogues.

In March, we have Khalil Bird, KB, who will be talking about the governance challenges that boards face in acting on corporate political responsibility and whether there are legal issues [00:26:00] in supporting or safeguarding against systemic threats as well as businesses role in structural or democracy reform.

Then we also have a resource listings that's continually updated. So if you've been there, I encourage you to go back our incredible student assistants that continually update that the civic alliance playbook is there. And then you can also sign up for updates and news. We're going to have a special event on April 6th with former chief justice Leo Strine and Dorothy Lund on political spending.

And whether it's bad for business that will be a special event out of our normal series. And then the main link I have here is the civic health site that Kristin has. And there'll be pointers there to many others. And let me now turn it to you all, maybe 30 seconds. One thing that you would encourage let's say a government affairs officer to do in their companies that could business have a positive impact in turning down the heat on toxic polarization.

**Kristin Hansen:** I guess this is a chance for me to plug some pending legislation. It's so hot off the presses. I kind of need to, to look it up as I'm as I'm [00:27:00] speaking about it here, but it's called Building Civic Bridges Act and Representative Kilmer, who has been one of the chairs of the bipartisan select committee for the modernization of Congress, is one of many, many sponsors behind this pending legislation.



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So I would ask you to just pay attention to the Building Civic Bridges Act, which is squarely focused on bringing the heat down addressing toxic polarization in the country and strengthening social cohesion across the U. S. So that would be my parting thought.

**Elizabeth Doty:** Wonderful. Thank you so much. Much appreciated.

And we'll follow that through. And I'm sure other folks at Business for America will have it also at bfa. us. We'll have updates on legislation as well. Tara, can I ask you the parting action?

**Tara Leweling:** Sure. The, the parting action is I would encourage [00:28:00] in part, cause this is led by Aspen, which is based in DC for people to join one of our beggar better arguments seminars.

or potentially even a better, the better arguments ambassadors cohort. It's incumbent upon policy professionals to really think about how they have impact on all sides of society. And this, I think, provides tools to help people better think this.

**Elizabeth Doty:** Yeah, incredible. That's great. Thank you so much. And thank you for what you're doing.

And for continuing to practice and for sharing what you've learned with us today. This was really valuable. I'm so glad you were here. Thank you.

**Kristin Hansen:** Thanks to all of you. Thank you so much.