



# *From intelligence to fluency:*

A new mandate for building  
stakeholder value

by Jerilan Greene and Ben Kalevitch

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The universe of stakeholders affecting any organization is wider and more demanding than in recent years, especially as more corporations aim to balance economic uncertainty with the rising expectations of leadership on social, political and environmental issues. In this complex environment, for organizations to manage risk, it's essential to develop a deep and actionable understanding of both internal and external stakeholders. Yet many struggle to prioritize multi-stakeholder intelligence as an investment in brand growth and protection.

For leaders and board members, today's business landscape presents new demands.

# 55%

*of U.S. consumers said they had taken action to oppose or support a company based on its positions or actions*

Think about the latest corporate crisis or misstep in your industry. Deeper and more proactive insights and planning on a particular set of stakeholder groups might have averted a crisis. The impact of a cyber incident, a misstatement, a boycott or even misalignment with regulators. In fact, according to a recent poll by The Weber Shandwick Collective, 55% of U.S. consumers said they had taken action to oppose or support a company based on its positions or actions – and 44% said they had boycotted a company.

In a world where intangibles represent most company valuations and stakeholders are connected, polarized and organized to advocate for their interests, reputational risk or a sustained fall in share price can happen in an instant – and over an expanded period. Aware of this reality, leaders are looking for help. According to another recent poll from the Collective, less than half feel equipped to lead in areas such as political and social issues (49%), geopolitical issues (47%) and climate change (45%). Either way, executive teams need enterprise-wide intelligence across multiple stakeholders to strengthen decisions, strategy and daily operations. At the same time, boards of directors need the capability to foresee stakeholder-related risks and opportunities to build greater resiliency into their businesses, intangible assets and relationships.

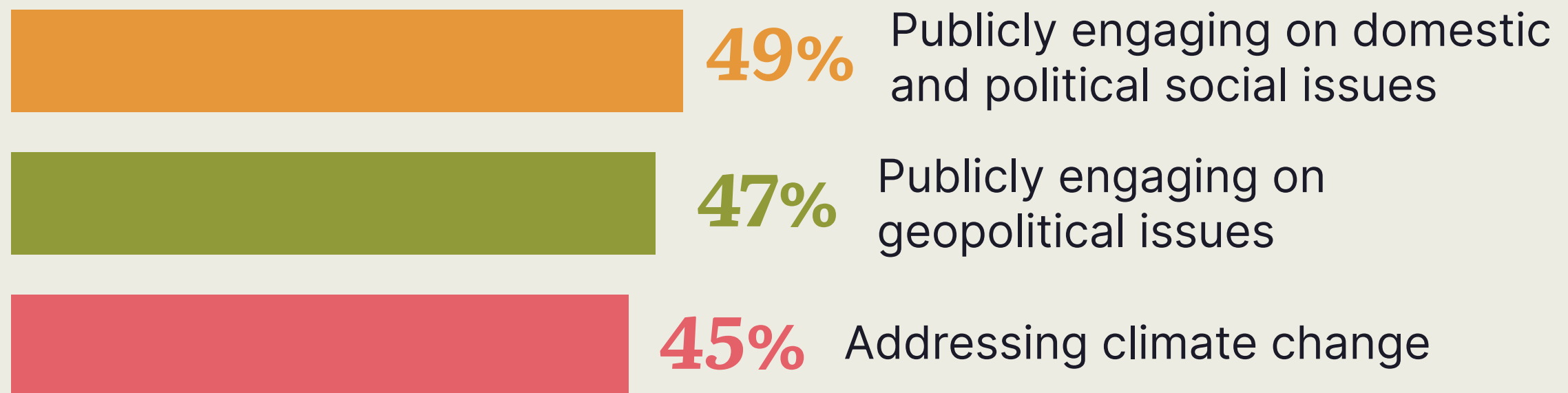
## *From intelligence to fluency*

Fortunately, there are a plethora of analytics and artificial intelligence tools to discern the perceptions and behaviors of an organization's most business-critical groups. But when a new decision or crisis emerges, ad hoc insights about your business' stakeholders are just a starting place. True fluency with your stakeholders can be a game-changer.

### *Stakeholder fluency:*

the enterprise capability to understand and engage an organization's relevant stakeholders and to use stakeholder insights systematically in decisions that grow and protect brand performance and reputation.

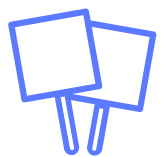
# % of leaders who feel equipped to lead



Every day, news reports highlight situations where stakeholder fluency could improve decisions – and it is not hard to imagine more:



A high-profile activist investor opposes a more aggressive sustainability target on the heels of a company's recent environmental accident. An unexpected and vocal group of employees and customers emerge to advocate for an alternative proposal.



An international retail company facing stiff competition and expanding into new markets attracts ongoing media scrutiny and employee protests because of the political profile of new investors. Considering the rising concern, some local regulators start to delay permit licenses and renewals.



An industrial manufacturer normally regarded as an employer of choice makes a cost-saving move to close a plant that would significantly impact the local economy and community. Prolonged union negotiations inspire new demands from non-union employees and related legislation in entirely different markets.



Executives in Marketing, Finance and Government Affairs never reached an agreement on the latest initiative to aggressively defend market share with a controversial customer segment, while there are employee groups who are equally pleased and dismayed by the initiative, each group citing different values as support for their position.

## The challenges for fluency

One of the initial challenges to creating greater stakeholder fluency in an organization is bringing greater visibility to siloed pockets of critical knowledge.

Typically, marketing knows the voice of the customer. Investor relations and finance have close knowledge and relationships with each analyst and investor. The public affairs team works closely with governments and policy influencers, while the public relations team works with media and social media influencers. And HR has the view on what employees truly think, while the sustainability team owns the materiality assessment on



environmental, social and governance aspects of the business.

Different functional owners with a distinctly unclear, siloed or misaligned view of who their organization's true stakeholders and influential segments are in a changing landscape can wreak havoc on a company's top and bottom line. Unfortunately, until there is a situation or crisis that demands it, rarely are these various insights systematically integrated into an enterprise view to inform corporate strategy or manage a multi-faceted crisis.

## A continuum of capability

Stakeholder fluency is not simply intelligence. It's an organizational capability like customer engagement, innovation and agility. As such, it requires the right systems, processes, governance and culture to get it right. Most companies are currently in the first three stages of a continuum, with very few having made the investments required to move all the way to full fluency. Here's what those stages may look like:

### Lost in a minefield

- Reactive stance toward stakeholder issues.
- Very little to no stakeholder data used in decisions.

### House of siloed intelligence

- Data on stakeholder concerns or reactions resides in information silos, not shared across functions.
- Fragmented understanding of key stakeholders unlikely to inform enterprise decisions.



### Organized but unaware

- Values stakeholder input on some issues.
- Uses rudimentary tools or information on few stakeholders
- Analysis is not consistently actionable.

### Stakeholder fluent

- Using intelligence on multiple stakeholders for business operations and strategic foresight.
- Clear accountabilities to champion and govern stakeholder perspective into business decisions.
- Systematic stakeholder inquisitiveness and intelligence-gathering.

From	To
Ad hoc	Systematic
Functional or business silos	Enterprise-wide
Fragmented analysis	Interconnected analysis
Single stakeholder	Multiple stakeholders
Reactively gathered	Proactively developed
Anecdotal and qualitative	Qualitative, quantitative, AI-supported

## The road to fluency

Becoming fluent in any new process takes time. Here are a few starting points for creating a culture and capability to balance and engage the interests of your most important stakeholders:

- Identify and prioritize the stakeholder groups that are most business-critical, including those linked to fast-moving social and environmental issues
- Distill vital insights from multiple stakeholders into a single enterprise view and relative to the most pressing risks, decisions or issues in your business.
- Implement or develop a real-time, always-on intelligence capability.
- Formally integrate multi-stakeholder intelligence into annual strategic planning, Board updates, risk management, crisis preparedness, consumer segmentation and marketing planning.

- Establish accountabilities by engaging executive and business unit leaders to define and champion stakeholder fluency for your company and as strategic and urgent decisions emerge.

Stakeholder fluency is a system and a way of thinking to drive outcomes and alignment across a company – not just one stakeholder group. Much like fluency in a language, fluency with your stakeholders supercharges a company's ability to see, articulate and anticipate scenarios and pursue possibilities that create competitive advantage.

Jerilan Greene is a C-Suite Advisor within The Weber Shandwick Collective, Founder and CEO of leadership advisory firm New Capacity Partners and former Yum! Brands Chief Communications and Public Affairs Officer and Yum! Foundation Chairman and CEO.

Ben Kalevitch is managing director of Myriant by United Minds – a management consultancy that applies a stakeholder lens to business decisions, leveraging industry exclusive, AI-backed analytics and insights to help leaders address issues and opportunities.