

# THE BUSINESS CASE FOR CIVICS EDUCATION

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**CAROLYN CAWLEY**  
**PRESIDENT**  
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Over the past year, we've talked to hundreds of people about the state of our democracy. Many are doing important work to ensure the next generation is better informed than the last. This includes innovators in and out of the classroom, from teachers who inspire children to businesses and nonprofits helping their stakeholders, including employees, make sense of the world.

There are many reasons to be optimistic about the potential for improved civic health in America, but the reality of our current situation is quite bleak. Far too many of our fellow citizens are uninformed and unengaged. For decades, every measure of civic knowledge has been in the danger zone, including the "Nation's Report Card," which has consistently shown that eighth-graders lack basic proficiency in civics.

You can see the consequences across society. The United States is polarized, and civil dialogue is notably absent from far too many of our conversations. At the same time, Americans have less faith in the institutions that are supposed to serve them.

These are complicated, systemic problems that have been decades in the making. But we believe civics education is an essential part of the solution, as it offers the ability to provide young people with the knowledge, skills, and disposition they need in order to be engaged citizens in a democracy. We also believe businesses have an important role to play as communities search for the best ways to educate and engage their young people.

The evidence is clear: Informed and active citizens make for a strong country, a strong economy, and a strong workforce. Our continued prosperity depends on the strength of all three, and so does the long-term health of America's economy.

Where could we be as a country if every American possessed the knowledge to recognize what unites us and to understand what divides us? We must give Americans the vocabulary and the resources to bridge both basic and complex philosophical divides. Citizens who feel tied together by a greater purpose produce more secure families, communities, and businesses.

Civics education is not just an essential part of America's social fabric—it's also a vital part of assuring our country continues to flourish.

Employers are uniquely positioned to help ensure that the next generation of Americans are equipped to play a productive role in civic life. Business leaders can bring a powerful voice to this discussion by sharing knowledge and prioritizing civic education of all forms in communities across the nation.

This report is the first step in our efforts to make the business case for civics. I hope that after reading, you'll agree this is a challenge worth undertaking.

We may all come from different industries, backgrounds, and ideologies. But together, we have a shared interest in our country's well-being. As you read, I invite you to think about America's next generation. Before young citizens become tomorrow's leaders, let's find new, creative ways to ensure the next generation is more knowledgeable about, more productively engaged in, and more hopeful about our democracy.

# THE BUSINESS CASE FOR CIVICS EDUCATION

## INTRODUCTION

Civics sounds old-fashioned, but it might be the antidote to some of the biggest challenges organizations are facing in the 21st century. Nearly a decade ago, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor warned of a civics education crisis in our country. Since then, we've seen further deterioration. Polarization and incivility are driving wedges between people at a time when the benefits of a quality civics education, which gives young people the knowledge, skills, and disposition to be successful citizens, have never been more valued by employers. "It is ironic that at precisely the moments when civility is needed most, it seems to be valued the least," says United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz.

Corporations are increasingly embracing how powerful "enlightened self-interest," as Benjamin Franklin called it, can be as they create deeper linkages with their employees, customers, and suppliers and the communities they operate in. Civics knowledge is an important aspect of this effort. "We must listen to one another, learn from one another, and be able to engage with one another productively in order to drive collective success," says Stanley Bergman, the chairman and CEO of Henry Schein Inc., who immigrated to the U.S. in 1976 from South Africa. "Civics knowledge provides the basis for respectful behavior because it teaches the importance of applying individual talents on behalf of the common good."

In fact, current and future work is requiring more and more that employees have knowledge of economic and political processes; skill in understanding presentations in a range of media; the ability to work cooperatively with others, especially those from diverse backgrounds; and "positive attitudes about working hard, obeying the law and engaging in discussion that leads to innovative and effective civic action in the community."<sup>1</sup>

But preparedness for what is needed is lacking. Consider that only 39% of Americans were able to name all three branches of the federal government in a 2019 survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center. Indeed, the state of civic engagement concerns Allstate Chairman and CEO Tom Wilson. "Many people do not know how our government works, which leads to confusion on political outcomes and, ultimately, distrust in the system," he says.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Collaborative and other 21st century skills needed in the workplace increasingly feed off the respectful behavior that civics education encourages when it comes to civil discourse and compromise.
- Corporations have become refuges of civility since they bring people of all races, religions, and ages together everyday and depend on them to work collaboratively towards shared goals and outcomes.
- There is a budding movement in the nation among businesses, nonprofit foundations, and educational institutions to provide more and more experiential ways to teach civics as a supplement to middle and high school efforts.

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“Typically, **GDP is highest in countries that have the most stable political systems.** So it’s important never to take our political system for granted, and that means—among many other things—we need to ensure **strong civics programs** in our schools,” says David A. Moss, the Paul Whiton Cherinton Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School.

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According to “Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools,” a 2011 report published by the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics and the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, there is also a strong link between civic learning and the workforce challenges of tomorrow. “There is considerable overlap between the skills acquired as part of civic learning and the skills required in employment,” the report states. “So, students receiving high-quality civic learning score higher on a broad range of 21st-century competencies than those without.”

In many ways, employers are ahead of the civil discourse curve. They have had to be, since workplaces are the one place where all races, religions, and ages congregate and need to get along. “For corporations to be successful, to be global, to serve truly diverse customer segments, they actually have to be able to get a diverse array of people to work collaboratively and toward shared goals,” says BET Networks President Scott Mills, adding that business has made massive investments “in creating healthy inclusive environments.”

This report will examine the state of civics knowledge in the U.S. and why improving it is so important to our macroeconomic well-being. More education is one part of the issue, but so is increasing the level of respect that people have for disparate views, compromise, and each other.

“It’s a combination of knowledge of relevant facts and having the skills necessary for using and interpreting those facts effectively,” says Michael Delli Carpini, professor of

communication and former dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. “You can’t effectively engage with others on public issues of the day without some agreement on what the facts are, or without the ability to think, talk, and listen in an informed and civil—even if passionate—way. These are skills one learns that need to be taught.”

### **Refuges from Incivility**

Civics, according to Merriam-Webster, is a social science dealing with the rights and duties of citizens. But the reach of civics, and of the discourse skills that result from instruction of it, is long and wide. “There are times when the global discourse has really negative impacts on the ability to conduct business in certain places and to plan business in certain places,” says BET’s Mills. “We’ve got a lot of stimulus in the U.S. economy, between the ultra-low interest rates and the effect of tax reform. But if this economy backs up, the impact of this discourse will simply be magnified.”

Respondents to an annual survey conducted by public relations agency Weber Shandwick view the U.S. as having a real issue when it comes to civility. Ever since Weber Shandwick, in partnership with Powell Tate and KRC Research, started doing its annual Civility in America survey in 2010, at least 65% of respondents have felt there’s a civility problem in the nation (in 2019, the figure was 68%).

Yet workplaces have become places of refuge. Some 89% of the Weber Shandwick survey respondents who work with others describe their place of employment as very or somewhat civil.

Just as encouraging is that 23% in the most recent survey said they personally experienced incivility at a past or present job, down from 43% in 2011.

“Corporations have understood that if you’re going to bring people together in close quarters and try to get them to work collaboratively toward shared goals and outcomes, you need to create an environment and create expectations about how people are going to comport themselves to allow people to flourish in those environments,” Mills asserts. In this vein, companies have relaxed corporate dress codes but not standards of conduct. “We’ve let people’s wardrobes get more casual, but we haven’t allowed people’s language to get more casual,” he says.

What’s more, the American economy and capitalist system “can be powerful foils against extreme aberrations in the political process,” Mills continues. Indeed, unstable political systems generally also have troubled economies. “Business cannot succeed

in failed societies,” adds Henry Schein’s Bergman. “Entrepreneurship cannot succeed without freedom. But if future generations lack a foundation of civics knowledge in which to understand this precious freedom, we put at risk what makes America unique.”

Employers have often found themselves on the front lines when it comes to societal changes. “From our efforts on diversity and inclusion, to achieving gender equity and parity, so much of the recent progress of our society has been advanced and reinforced by corporate leadership, though we have no illusions that we have much further progress to make,” says United’s Munoz.

David A. Moss, the Paul Whiton Cherinton Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, explains that a healthy business environment is contingent on a sound political system. “If you think about really almost any place in the world where the political system is actively breaking down, you can see how

FIGURE 1

## STRATEGY IS A COLLABORATIVE TEAM SPORT

A highly inclusive organizational culture correlates strongly with successful collaboration.

● STRONGLY DISAGREE ● SOMEWHAT DISAGREE ● NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE ● SOMEWHAT AGREE ● STRONGLY AGREE

Collaboration and teamwork are increasingly important to my organization’s workforce strategy



There is a strong correlation between having a highly inclusive organizational culture and successful collaboration



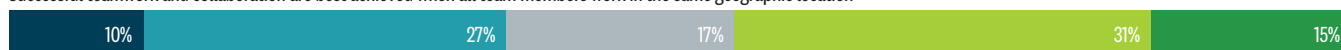
Providing team incentives in addition to individual incentives works to drive and strengthen better team performance



There is a strong correlation between highly diverse teams and strong team performance



Successful teamwork and collaboration are best achieved when all team members work in the same geographic location



I consistently see successful team collaboration and cross-functionality within my organization



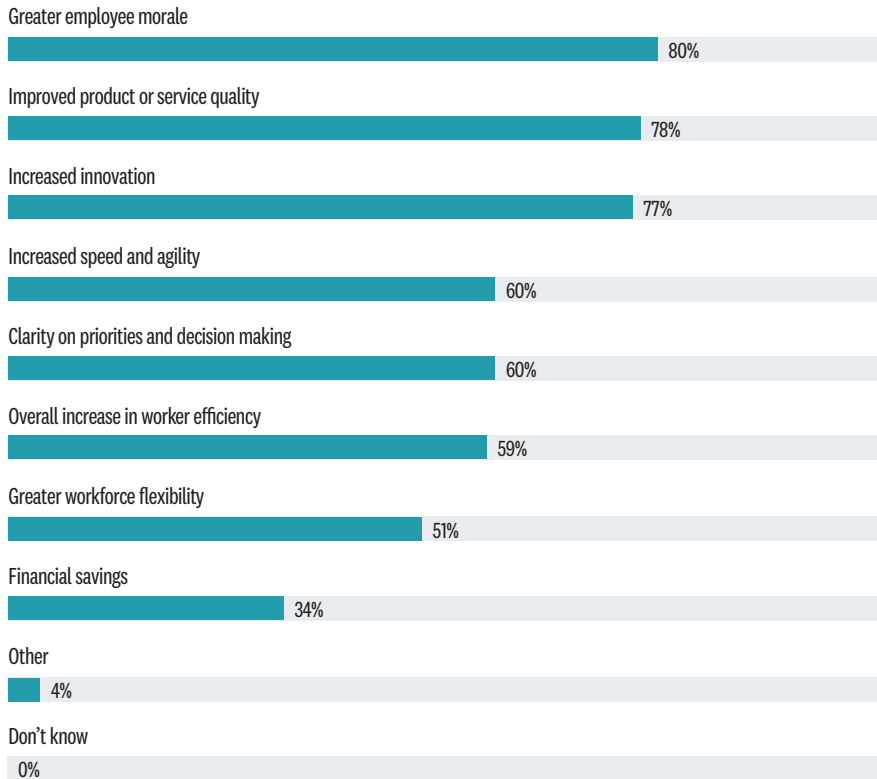
SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ANALYTIC SERVICES SURVEY, JULY 2019

FIGURE 2

## INGREDIENTS FOR BETTER WORKER MORALE

Strong collaboration and more teamwork lead to happier workplaces.

Which of the following business benefits do you expect from strong collaboration and/or teamwork? [SELECT ALL THAT APPLY]



SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ANALYTIC SERVICES SURVEY, JULY 2019

difficult it is to do business there,” he says. “Typically, GDP is highest in countries that have the most stable political systems. So it’s important never to take our political system for granted, and that means—among many other things—we need to ensure strong civics programs in our schools.”

### Kissing Cousins: Capitalism, Democracy, and Civics

In drafting the Constitution and creating the representative republic by which Americans are governed, the Founding Fathers focused on certain things. They feared mob rule, so they advocated for a system bent on compromise. The best ally against mob rule was slowness, the idea

being that cooler heads would prevail after deliberation. They considered an educated public—which provided an educated electorate, educated consumers, and educated capitalists—as essential to this foundation. “Without civics training, people will be less willing to support that,” says Jeffrey Rosen, President and CEO of the National Constitution Center.

Public schools available for every child to attend was a path to this educated citizenry. “James Madison had it right when he wrote that a government in which the public has a major voice, or ‘popular government,’ he called it, ‘without popular information or the means of acquiring, is a prologue to a tragedy or a farce, or perhaps both,’” says UPenn’s Delli Carpini. “What he meant is that if you want the system to work, you need to have a public who has access to information about public issues. And that argument, aspirational as that might be, suffuses through the very underpinnings of our system of government.”

Public education, beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic, was also meant to teach Americans what their duties and rights were as citizens, Thomas Jefferson believed. Engaged citizens weren’t only supposed to keep an eye on what the government was doing, but also contribute to the economic, political, and social system. America’s free enterprise business model, says Tim Bailey, director of education at the Gilder Lehrman Institute, was based on free market economics, where fair competition and give-and-take in transactions thrived because of knowledgeable consumers.

Early on, Madison, Jefferson, and the other Founding Fathers understood that people would have to collaborate and compromise, whether it was in a political context or economic one. Collaborative skills are only more in demand, some 250 years later. According to a recent survey of 503 executives by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services, 88% of respondents somewhat or strongly agree that collaboration and teamwork are increasingly important to their

organization’s strategy. **FIGURE 1** Ninety percent of respondents believe there is a strong correlation between having a highly inclusive organizational culture and successful collaboration. “Understanding, tolerance, teamwork—those so-called soft skills are really rooted in a history and a knowledge of our common values and beliefs and our Constitution,” says Margaret Spellings, the Secretary of Education in the Bush administration and currently the CEO of Texas 2036. “Capitalism and democracy and civics are all kissing cousins.”

For business, strong collaboration and/or teamwork produces a big payoff. Eighty percent of the survey respondents say greater employee morale is the top benefit, followed closely by improved product or service quality (78%) and increased innovation (77%). **FIGURE 2** Clear and regular communication among all members (90%) is the leading ingredient for a successful virtual team, respondents say—again, a 21st-century skill that civics training can foster. **FIGURE 3** In fact, Delli Carpini considers communication—effectiveness in both making an argument and listening to others make one—as one of four pillars of proper civics training, with the other three being democratic values, politically relevant knowledge, and a sense of history.

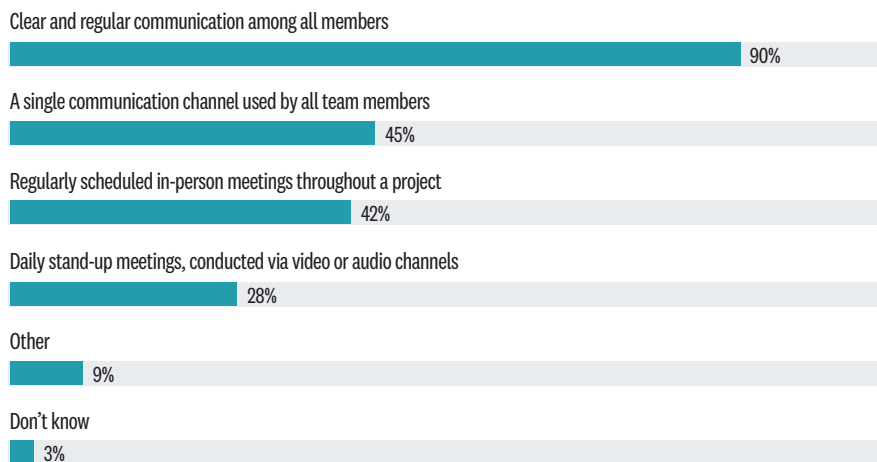
Communication is only one aspect of interactions in the workplace. It is also common ground between races and ethnic groups. The Center for Talent Innovation found in a 2016 survey on easing racial tensions at work that “the workplace is one of the few settings where we commonly interact across racial and ethnic lines.” Organizations are emphasizing diversity and inclusion because they lead to better economic outcomes, and the respect of other races, genders, and creeds that civics knowledge engenders will only become more important in this effort. “Some might say that the absence of civil discourse is not accepting what makes people different,” says Dr. Craig Samitt, the CEO of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, who says diversity and inclusion help the health care insurer

FIGURE 3

## COMMUNICATION KEEPS IT REAL

Clear, regular interaction is only becoming more important as workplaces become virtual and remote.

What makes for a successful virtual team? [SELECT ALL THAT APPLY]



SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ANALYTIC SERVICES SURVEY, JULY 2019

arrive at solutions much faster. “Those perspectives help drive progress, not stalemates,” he says. “Teams are stronger when you have people with different skill sets and perspectives.”

Engagement, whether it is with the community an organization operates in, or whether it is employee-to-customer or employee-to-employee, also thrives when civics knowledge expands. Corporations are embedded in their communities, and that should provide for profound levels of engagement, says Sharon Harper, CEO of The Plaza Cos. “The more prosperous our communities, the more connectedness there is and that breeds more engagement,” she says.

Better engagement with its surroundings is critical for the 21st-century organization, which finds itself progressively more vulnerable to rapid change. Digital transformation has underscored the need for workers to have change management skills—something that Blue Cross’ Samitt feels civics training is primed to provide. At Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, which is subject to local,

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state, and federal regulation, “constant change can affect us, so knowing how government works and using our voices prevents panic,” Samitt says.

Meanwhile, emotional intelligence, in the form of empathy and other soft skills Spellings referred to, is becoming a larger part of corporate cultures when it comes to how organizations deal with their stakeholders, whether they are customers, employees, or suppliers. Compromise is a key emotional intelligence tool, especially when defusing potentially polarizing situations with those stakeholders. But “the whole idea of compromise seems to really be having its dark days,” says Gilder’s Bailey. “Right now, compromise seems to be a four-letter word.”

### Failing to Hold the Education System Accountable

Some academicians and civics experts track the decline of civics skills training and education to the tumult of the 1960s. Not just because the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War caused Americans to rethink what was being taught in the public schools, but *how* it was being taught. Curricula and new teaching methods became less structured with the goal of more student engagement and less book training. Civics education, deeply rooted in rote instruction, was on the wane.

Another problem is that even when civics was taught, it often wasn’t taught especially well. “Justice [Sandra Day] O’Connor is a big proponent of civics education, and has frequently made this point—that too often students find their civics classes deadly boring,” says HBS’ Moss. “And she may well be right about that.”

Complicating civics education’s plight today is the fact that when teachers do try to relate it to the day’s events, trouble often follows. “There’s the possibility that you’re going to step into something that’s considered controversial,” says Delli Carpini. “And, of course, there are the more structural impediments that affect many public school systems, such as having enough

qualified teachers and pressure to teach other, more ‘practical’ things in the limited time available. I think that combination is what has led to the decline in teaching civics.”

Texas 2036’s Spellings feels reading comprehension is also part of the problem. “It’s hard to learn civics and learn about the Constitution if you can’t read.”

Whatever the reasons, the slow retreat from civics education certainly has led to an embarrassing lack of knowledge about American institutions and processes. “Civic engagement is the air that keeps democracy alive,” says Allstate’s Wilson. “We all need a refresher course on civics, from children in school through leaders of business and government.”

The education system may attract the most attention when it comes to civics because of its historic role in advancing such knowledge. But it’s not fair to pin all the blame on the education system, which often moves glacially, says Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education in the Obama administration and now a director at Chicago CRED (Creating Real Economic Destiny). Business leaders aren’t holding the nation’s educational system accountable. “If talent is not being produced here in America, global companies have the ability to go find that talent anywhere. I get the economic rationale for that,” he says. “But I think some part of their commitment to being a good corporate citizen, is to absolutely partner with and support those who are educating young people, but also to hold us accountable and to demand results.”

He doesn’t believe the business community understands just how much power it wields, or how important it is to leverage it to get educators to “change at a pace that reflects how fast the world is moving. So I would challenge the business community to step up on both sides, on the support side but also on the accountability side.”

Also fueling the civil discourse problem is the ever-growing world of social media, which has created what the Founding Fathers feared



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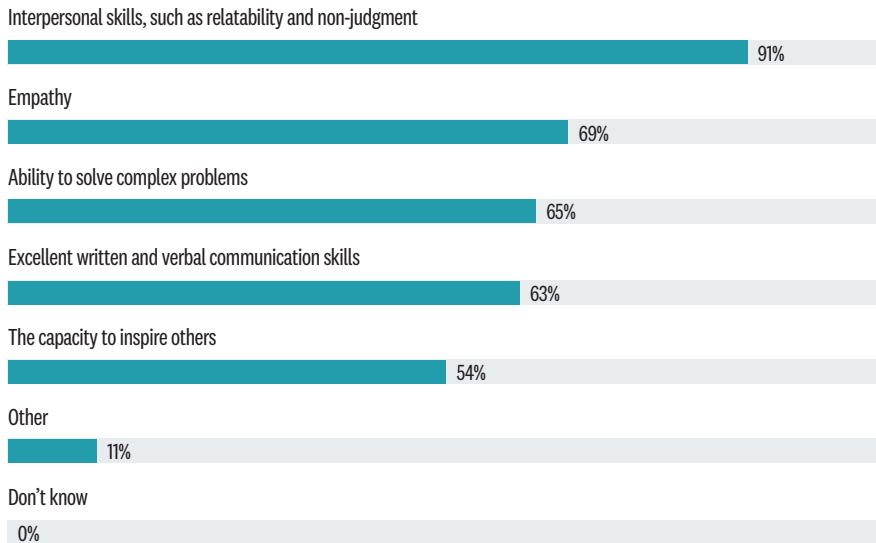
FIGURE 4

## WORKPLACE TEAM MEMBERS NEED INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Being able to relate to others and not judge them fortifies the efficiency and productivity of teams.

In order for a team to be efficient and productive, what skills must its members possess?

[SELECT ALL THAT APPLY]



SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ANALYTIC SERVICES SURVEY, JULY 2019

most—the emergence of mobs. In the most recent Weber Shandwick survey, 63% of respondents believe social media has more of a negative than positive effect on civility, and of those respondents who expect civility to only get worse, 57% blame social media and the internet. “Now people exist in bubbles,” says the National Constitution Center’s Rosen. “Social media makes them insular.”

Listening respectfully to different points of views and being open to compromise aren’t part of the modus operandi of tweeters and posters. Citizens may be engaged by social media, but they are often talking or listening only to people they already agree with. “There is much that is positive about social media, but a downside is that it makes it easier than ever to stay in our own little echo chambers,” says Delli Carpini. “That adds to the sense that I’m right and you’re wrong, the absence of a set of agreed-upon facts, and a kind of tribal mentality. That is a hard environment

in which to learn new things, think differently, hear the other side, or be willing to compromise.”

Such intolerance of opposing views also impedes progress. By often confining themselves to echo chambers, whether on social media or just consuming news that confirms their views, Americans now often “extend civility only to those who wear the same ‘team jersey,’” says Munoz. “But that cannot be the way forward, either for our politics or our commerce.”

### Respect, Respect, Respect

In the context of the American Republic, the fact that people can talk to each other even if they disagree is a positive, “especially if in a workplace that’s trying to foster teams and collaboration at various times,” says Moss. The skill of argument, of debate, is part of classic civics training, as is learning to respect and understand others who are of different races or religions or backgrounds. This, too, is vital for teams when it comes to efficiency and productivity. According to the survey, 91% of respondents said interpersonal skills, such as relatability and non-judgment, had to be possessed by team members. Empathy (69%) was second among respondents, beating out the ability to solve complex problems (65%) and excellent written and verbal communication skills (63%). **FIGURE 4**

Perhaps more telling are comments that respondents made, which drive home how important civics skills are to employee relations. “Respect, respect, respect,” wrote one. “The ability to listen for value and meaning; the ability to ask good questions; a balance of drive and perspective; commitment; mutual accountability; unselfishness,” wrote another. It’s as if they were reciting from a civics playbook.

Conflict is inherent in capitalism, in that it creates opportunity and the response to it. But conflict is also intrinsic to the workplace, which is why the ability to compromise is so important. “Look, you’re not going to get a business to move in a direction unless they see it as beneficial to their

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bottom line,” says Bailey. “I’ve talked to some businesspeople as far as what’s going on in society in general and there is concern because what they find is people not willing to compromise. Even in their own workplaces, whether it’s managerial or even with lower-level employees not being willing to compromise or knowing how to sit and work out a compromise on an issue, because that’s not the example that we’re seeing in society at large.”

Broadly speaking, a national consensus is forming that civics training must be resuscitated, “but less so on what to bring back,” says Rosen. Indeed, while more and more states are either bringing back civics education or making moves to strengthen it, there are nongovernmental initiatives being undertaken by foundations and universities that are exploring new instruction techniques.

According to the Center for American Progress, all but 10 states require a civics course in high school. But in only 10 of the 40 states with such a requirement is the course for an entire academic year. Moreover, only 17 states require a civics exam for graduation. When it comes to the mean score high school students are getting on the U.S. government AP exam, students in 2018 in only 10 states—South Dakota (3.36), Vermont (3.30), New Jersey (3.13), Virginia (3.10), Minnesota (3.07), Connecticut (3.06), Utah (3.05), Wisconsin (3.04), Maryland (3.03), and New Hampshire (3.02)—scored at least a three, which means a student understands the material enough to pass a college course.

But more and more outside influences are entering the fray to help state efforts. In Colorado, three local judges started the Judicially Speaking program to show high schoolers how judges consider civics when adjudicating.<sup>2</sup> Nonprofits are helping nationally. Generation Citizen provides middle and high schools with curricula and seeks to provide students with ways to help solve community problems.

A wider movement is underway to make civics training more experiential. The National Constitution Center’s

Interactive Constitution program, which is administered online, has gotten 25 million hits. The program is meant to engage students through “constitutional exchanges,” where they work off an interactive platform to deal with Constitution-based issues, not political ones. “We will ask, ‘Can a school ban the Confederate flag?’” says Rosen. “Or, ‘Does the Fourth Amendment allow for a search of cell phones?’ Everything is about a constitutional issue. We want people to think like judges and constitutional experts.” The program this year did a successful pilot involving 2,000 students, he says, and will expand its reach next year.

The Gilder Lehrman Institute is expanding its Hamilton Education Program to 250,000 students nationally and in 2020 will offer an online version of it free of charge to all U.S. middle and high schools. The Hamilton Education Program Online is currently being piloted in 75 schools nationally. The institute in October 2015, along with *Hamilton* producer Jeffrey Seller and creator Lin-Manuel Miranda, The Rockefeller Foundation and the New York City Department of Education created a partnership to provide 20,000 New York City public school students with the chance to see *Hamilton* on Broadway and integrate the play into classroom studies. However, before seeing the play, students must engage in a hands-on class project using Gilder Lehrman Institute resources that provide a deeper dive into the people, events, and documents of the founding era.

Harvard Business School, meanwhile, is taking its renowned case study method and extending its use to civics education. “Students who engage in

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case discussions about key decisions in the history of American democracy, from the Constitutional Convention to the civil rights movement, tell us not only that they're learning more about the nation's past, but also that they're better prepared to understand key issues in the present, and better able to look at issues from another person's point of view," says Moss, who runs the program. "We've also seen this outside the classroom, in case discussions for the general public. Once again, those who participate in these case discussions report that afterward they feel more excited about voting and better able to engage in constructive political discussions, including with people they strongly disagree with."

HBS is targeting the program mainly to high school students and is currently working with over 200 teachers in more than 30 states. In 2018, the program reached about 10,000 students from a wide range of communities and schools—rural, urban, and suburban, from the most economically challenged schools to the most privileged.

"We're currently finishing up a three-year pilot project, and we're getting ready to scale the initiative," Moss says. "One of the many great things about applying the case method to history is that students see that there are typically many different ways that any given episode or decision could have turned out. A particular decision that was made one way or another only looks fixed and inevitable in retrospect. It definitely didn't look that way to those who faced the decision at the time. The class sessions work best when teachers encourage students to deliberate and debate—to really wrestle with the decisions that are at the heart of the cases. The students get into it. They develop their critical-thinking skills, which are so important for college and the workplace. They develop their ability to work through a problem and work through their differences with others. Class becomes exciting again, and—in the end—it's a great way to prepare for the challenges and responsibilities of citizenship."

Several other programs are underway throughout the nation. The McCain

Trust in major social institutions—as personified by the decline in the public's trust in government and other large organizations, including companies—has also **suffered from a lack of civics knowledge** and civility, says Oscar Munoz, United Airlines CEO.

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Institute has started the #ActsOfCivility Initiative, which strives to promote acts of civility on social media. The Reagan Institute's Great Communicator Debate Series puts on a national series of high school debates nationwide, having been founded "to develop engaged, informed, and conscientious citizen leaders." Since 1971, more than 900,000 students and educators have gotten involved in civics education curriculums that the Close Up Foundation has designed "to provide participants with a stronger understanding of government institutions, history, and current issues, and their roles as citizens." The American Legion has been running its Boys Nation annual civic training program since 1946, while the American Legion Auxiliary has sponsored the Girls Nation counterpart since 1947.

Corporations, too, are getting into the act. Allstate, which advocated for a bill that passed in Illinois that mandates high school civics education, says it embeds civic obligations into all of its activities. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota's Citizen Blue program, which has been around for 20 years, educates employees about the political system and encourages participation in government at all levels. Endeavor, Gap Inc., Patagonia, Snap Inc., Spotify, Target, and Twitter are among the companies that have implemented civic participation programs targeted at boosting voter turnout.

"There are companies who are taking positions and using their money,



## A COMMAND OF CIVICS IS INCUMBENT ON EVERY AMERICAN, AND EVERY AMERICAN INSTITUTION, INCLUDING CORPORATIONS.

using their resources to say that there are important things happening in society and we need to acknowledge them because we want to try to drive changes,” says Mills, asserting that if business is taking stands on a variety of social and cultural issues, “couldn’t corporate America do it on civility?”

Expanding awareness of the issues we face is a key part of combating a breakdown of civil discourse in American society, but perhaps using one of the culprits in that demise—social media—may be a good idea, too. The free market, after all, works both ways. What can be used to promote evil can also be used to advance good.

“The opportunities that social media provides for improving public discourse and citizen engagement outweigh the negative things that we definitely see,” says Delli Carpini. “For example, we now have the ability for people to call out something that is intentionally or unintentionally inaccurate, that misses the point or is spun in a way that is unfair. That kind of an ombudsman role that citizens now get to play—to be news producers rather than just consumers—is really, really valuable.”

The lack of civics knowledge and the rise of incivility also can’t just be laid at the feet of the school system. As Mills notes, if CEOs or others in the workplace said some of the things that some politicians and others in the public glare have said, they’d be summarily fired.

“Yeah, it’s incumbent upon the educational system to do more, but it’s incumbent upon all of us,” says Chicago CRED’s Duncan. “Every institution, every family has a chance to do something constructive here.”

### Conclusion

What Duncan says echoes what the Founding Fathers said: that a command of civics is incumbent on every American, and every American institution, including corporations. As Allstate’s Wilson notes, the concept of a corporation and the license under which it operates within society includes civic obligations that go beyond serving customers and making a profit. Society also expects businesses “to create jobs and improve communities,” he explains. “Capitalism is under attack because there aren’t enough high-paying jobs in the U.S. and people know that technological change will make this situation more challenging. As a result, it is our civic duty to work collaboratively with governments to create more high-paying jobs. This will protect business’s license to operate, create more economic prosperity, and increase support for democracy and capitalism.”

Trust in major social institutions—as personified by the decline in the public’s trust in government and other large organizations, including companies—has also suffered from a lack of civics knowledge and civility, says Munoz. But he notes that as corporations have seen brands gain or lose trust, the relationships between people and brands are changing, especially when it comes to Millennials. Now the largest demographic bloc, Millennials show a willingness to develop deep levels of trust with brands that they feel reflect their values, act ethically and sustainably, and take principled stances, even when short-term profits might be affected, he explains. Improving civics knowledge would dovetail nicely with this more principled mindset, especially as it increasingly influences the U.S. macroeconomic picture.

“These changed expectations offer a profound opportunity to rebuild a culture of trust in a way that is authentic and organic,” says Munoz. “So, the ball is in our court as business leaders to step up and earn that trust, which is fraying in other parts of our society.”

### Endnotes

- 1 Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools, published by the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.
- 2 The State of Civics Education, by Sarah Shapiro and Catherine Brown, Center for American Progress, Feb. 21, 2018.





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