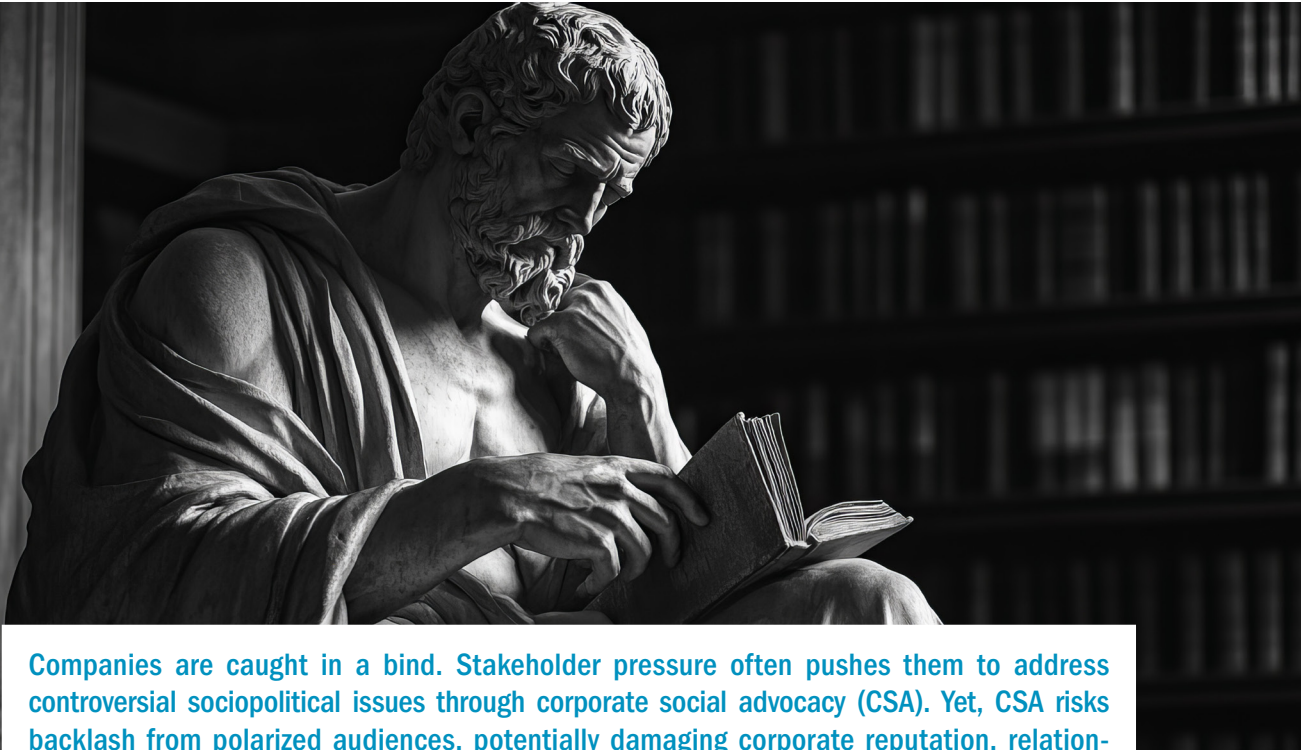


# NAVIGATING STORMY TIMES WITH STOICISM

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Companies are caught in a bind. Stakeholder pressure often pushes them to address controversial sociopolitical issues through corporate social advocacy (CSA). Yet, CSA risks backlash from polarized audiences, potentially damaging corporate reputation, relationships, and legitimacy. This dilemma sparks the question: Should companies engage in CSA in polarized times? I turn to the ancient Hellenistic philosophy of Stoicism for answers. I discuss four selected Stoic thoughts and offer practical advice for managers on whether and how to engage in CSA in stormy, polarized times.

## WHEN SPEAKING UP BECOMES A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

In today's fractured and contentious world, businesses face a multitude of tensions in articulating their roles in society. On the one hand, they are being asked to go beyond shareholder value maximization. The *23rd Edelman Trust Barometer*, bylined *Navigating a Polarized World*, revealed that while trust in governments, media, and NGOs has eroded, business remains the only institution seen as competent and ethical. 85% of respondents want CEOs to take public stands, 63% choose brands aligned with their beliefs, and nearly 70% value societal impact when considering potential employers.

This heightened expectation is fueled by the rise of stakeholder activism, driven not only by external activist groups, but also by employees, investors, and socially conscious millennials and hypermodern individuals, who demand corporate engagement with issues such as racial justice, gender equality, and climate change (Marschlich & Dhanesh, 2024). As a result, many companies have been stepping beyond the boundaries of corporate social responsibility (CSR) into corporate social advocacy (CSA), where they adopt stances on divisive social and political issues.

However, CSA is fraught with risks in polarized times. Taking a stand can invite praise and admiration from some stakeholders, while drawing ire, boycotts, and even political pushback from others (Cammarota et al., 2023). Intense reactions to Target's recent pullback of its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in the United States is a case in point. Target, the U.S. retailer, announced that it is rolling back its three-year DEI goals, will no longer report to groups such as the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index, and is discontinuing a program that sourced products from Black- and minority-owned businesses. However, the announcement led to sustained consumer boycotts and significant drops in foot traffic and revenue.

For managers, this raises difficult questions:

- > Should businesses engage in sociopolitical advocacy in polarized times?
- > If they do, can they endure potential repercussions?

I argue that current approaches to communicating businesses' roles in society often fall short, leaving leaders and managers without clear frameworks for action. To address this gap, I turn to Stoicism. This ancient Hellenistic philosophy, forged in turbulent times, offers practical principles for navigating uncertainty, distinguishing between what lies within one's circle of control and what does not, and maintaining ethical clarity under pressure. Drawing on the writings of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, I outline four Stoic thoughts that provide managers with both philosophical grounding and actionable guidance to better decide whether, when, and how to engage in CSA in a polarized era.

## CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY AND RESPONSIBILITY: UNDERSTANDING KEY DIFFERENCES

CSA, which overlaps with concepts such as brand activism, and corporate sociopolitical activism, occurs when a company takes a public stand on controversial sociopolitical issues, whether they relate to its core business or not. Unlike traditional notions of CSR, CSA involves taking stances that may strengthen ties with some stakeholders while alienating others (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Consider Nike's decision to feature Colin Kaepernick in its 30th anniversary

campaign. In 2018, Nike featured Colin Kaepernick in its ad campaign after he was ousted from the National Football League (NFL) for kneeling during the national anthem to protest racial injustice. The ad, with the tagline "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything," drew widespread attention, sparking praise from supporters and backlash from critics. By aligning with Kaepernick's protest against racial injustice, Nike sparked anger and admiration.

This differs from CSR, which Carroll (1991) famously defined as "the simultaneous fulfillment of the firm's economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities." This definition focuses on a wide range of stakeholders meeting a plethora of responsibilities across diverse sets of stakeholders. Examples would include Lego trying to move to more sustainable materials in their bricks and elements, or IKEA's commitment to working with social entrepreneurs. Thus, CSR is about balancing a wide range of responsibilities while CSA is about taking a clear stance on controversial issues. While CSA is often considered an evolution of CSR, its most distinctive characteristic is the communicative angle. CSA emphasizes advocacy, making public statements, issuing positions, or launching campaigns around divisive issues, which highlights the role of communication.

## COMMUNICATING BUSINESSES' ROLES IN SOCIETY

Two dominant approaches emerge in the literature on communicating businesses' roles in society (Verk et al., 2021). The first is a **functionalist, persuasive approach**, wherein companies shape narratives to strengthen reputation, and stakeholder relationships and loyalty. By leveraging behavioral insights and emotional storytelling, they build ethical corporate identities that signal corporate values and purpose. For socially conscious stakeholders, identification with corporate ethical identity fosters engagement, loyalty, and trust. Yet, persuasion has its limits, especially when addressing polarizing issues. Carefully crafted messages may falter when audiences are deeply divided.

This is where the second approach, the **co-creational approach**, offers an alternative. Here, CSR is seen as something that companies and their stakeholders create together through dialogue. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism, this perspective embraces

respectful conflict rather than trying to smooth over differences (Winkler et al., 2020). The goal is not consensus but creating space to capture and amplify diverse stakeholder voices. Consider Ben & Jerry's support for Black Lives Matter. On declaring their support for the movement, their Facebook page was filled with passionate and often hostile comments, creating a space for stakeholders to express divergent views.

While both approaches have their own merits, in polarized contexts of practice, neither offers a clear path. This brings back two pressing questions for managers:

- > Is CSA for everyone? Just because a handful of large, global brands engage in highly visible acts of advocacy, should everyone else follow?
- > If they decide to, then how can they prepare for potential backlash?

## STOIC PRINCIPLES TO FRAME BUSINESSES' ROLES IN SOCIETY

Stoicism, founded by Zeno in 301 BCE, emerged in ancient Greece and Rome during turbulent times. At its core, Stoicism argues that human flourishing stems from virtue, not external circumstances. It emphasizes a few core principles -- living in harmony with nature, practicing the virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and self-control, and focusing only on what lies within one's control while accepting external factors as "indifferents." Recently, Stoicism has seen renewed interest in entrepreneurship, leadership studies, and environmental sustainability. I draw on four Stoic thoughts, with quotes taken from Holiday and Hanselman (2016), to help organizations decide whether and how to engage with divisive societal issues in polarized times.

### 1. Stoic thoughts on identity



*Whatever anyone does or says, for my part, I'm bound to the good. In the same way an emerald or gold or purple might always proclaim: "Whatever anyone does or says, I must be what I am and show my true colors."*

(Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 7.15)

The Stoics taught that human flourishing rests on four cardinal virtues – wisdom, courage, justice, and self-control. Applied to business, this suggests that “good” companies demonstrate moral authority by aligning their actions with these virtues. A Stoic-inspired company would show wisdom in choosing which social issues to engage with, temperance in responding to factors beyond its control, fairness toward multiple stakeholders, and courage in addressing difficult topics.

Companies express their “true colours” through corporate identity, which answers the question “who are we?” and reflects a company's enduring traits expressed through its values, mission, and culture (Balmer et al., 2007). For example, IKEA's vision is not just to sell affordable furniture but to “create a better everyday life for the many people.” This broader purpose legitimizes its commitments to sustainability and social responsibility, leaving space for engagement with issues such as equity and inclusion.

When advocacy reflects an organization's true identity and practices, it strengthens trust. But when companies adopt causes opportunistically or without alignment to their purpose, they risk being perceived as inauthentic, which is often worse than staying silent on issues. Stoic thought reminds us that criticism is inevitable. What matters is whether the company's CSA consistently reflects a morally grounded ethical identity, engaging in advocacy only where it is authentic and true to its core ethical identity and values.

### 2. Stoic thoughts on circles of control



*The chief task in life is simply this: to identify and separate matters so that I can say clearly to myself which are externals not under my control, and which have to do with the choices I actually control. Where then do I look for good and evil? Not to uncontrollable externals, but within myself to the choices that are my own.*

(Epictetus, *Discourses*, 2.5.4-5)

A central Stoic principle is to focus only on what lies within one's control and to accept everything else with equanimity. The Stoics viewed health, wealth, power, and reputation as "indifferents" or factors ultimately beyond our control. Applied to CSA, this raises an important question: What is truly within a company's control?

Internal factors could include aligning advocacy with corporate identity, ensuring brand-cause fit, exercising moral courage, and drawing on the convictions of leaders, owners, and employees. These reflect choices that are more or less within the company's spheres of influence. By contrast, shifting consumer cultures, political currents, social movements, institutional pressures, and industry reputation tend to fall outside a company's relative circle of control. Stoicism urges companies not to be pressured by these external uncertainties but to act with integrity on what is within their spheres of influence.

### 3. Stoic thoughts on facing obstacles



*While it's true that someone can impede our actions, they can't impede our intentions and our attitudes, which have the power of being conditional and adaptable. That which is an impediment to action is turned to advance action. The obstacle on the path becomes the way.*

*(Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 5.20)*

If companies choose to engage in CSA, Stoic philosophy offers a valuable guide for navigating potential backlash. For the Stoics, obstacles are not setbacks but opportunities to practice wisdom, justice, courage, and self-control. Applied to CSA, this means that once a company adopts a public stance consistent with its identity, it should hold fast to its values and principles rather than retreating at the first sign of backlash. Hastily backtracking under pressure can erode stakeholder credibility and damage trust.

That said, Stoicism does not equate steadfastness with rigidity. Changing course can be acceptable, but only when guided by reasoned judgment and alignment with corporate identity, and not as a knee-jerk reaction to vocal opposition or shifting public opinion. In polarized environments, the challenge is to filter noise from substance, remain anchored in corporate ethical identity and values, and make decisions rooted in values rather than expedience.

### 4. Stoic thoughts on facing obstacles



*I will keep constant watch over myself and most usefully will put each day up for review. For this is what makes us evil: that none of us looks back upon our own lives. We reflect upon only that which we are about to do. And yet our plans for the future descend from the past.*

*(Seneca, Moral Letters, 83.2)*

Stoicism emphasizes the need for reflection, deeply reviewing everyday thoughts and actions to better inform the future. This parallels the practice of reflective practice, widely applied in fields from education and medicine to communication management, to help professionals accept responsibility and navigate uncertainty (van Ruler, 2021). Reflective practice has two dimensions. Reflection-in-action occurs during implementation, when practitioners draw on experience and judgment to respond in real time. Reflection-on-action happens afterward, as they assess outcomes and ask: What worked? What failed? How can we improve?

Reflective practice is critical in the context of CSA. Managers must engage in reflection while designing and executing advocacy initiatives and when evaluating them. Through reflection, managers can analyze causes and outcomes, accept responsibility for decisions, embrace uncertainty, and ensure CSA efforts stay anchored in the company's core values and identity, an essential factor in polarized times.

## STOIC STRATEGIES FOR CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY IN POLARIZED TIMES

### Anchor CSA in corporate identity

Before taking a public stand, companies must ask: Does this issue align with who we are? Advocacy should not be opportunistic but rooted in corporate identity, purpose, and values. Even organizations in stigmatized industries can credibly engage with CSA if there is strong brand-cause fit and alignment with their stated mission. Because CSA inevitably provokes both support and criticism, the decision to engage should come from within, rather than from pressure to appease external voices.

### Focus on what you can control

Environmental scans can help organizations distinguish between internal factors they can influence and external factors they cannot. Consumer culture, political ideologies, and activist movements will always shift. What companies can control is whether their advocacy aligns with identity, brand-cause fit, and perhaps, the convictions of employees and shareholders. Stoic wisdom suggests directing energy towards these relatively controllable factors rather than being led by uncontrollable externals.

### Confront obstacles with reasoned choice

Potential backlash is part of CSA. Stoicism advises resilience: Remain steady when criticism comes, and do not retreat unthinkingly. At the same time, companies must exercise reasoned choice. If resistance becomes overwhelming, they can adapt, but only if the decision to change is deliberate, grounded in values, and aligned with corporate identity, not dictated by noise from polarized audiences.

## THE STOIC PLAYBOOK FOR CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY

### 1. Anchor in identity

Only engage in CSA when the issue clearly aligns with your company's mission, purpose, values, and identity. Authenticity matters more than external pressure.

### 2. Focus on what is within the company's control

Accept that factors such as shifting consumer culture and ideologies are beyond the company's control and focus on factors that are relatively within the company's control, such as corporate identity, and brand-cause fit.

### 3. Face obstacles with reasoned choice

If you engage in CSA, expect backlash. Stay steady in your stance, but adapt, if necessary, through reasoned, values-based judgment, not reaction to noise.

### 4. Build strengths in reflection

Train teams in reflective practice. Build in structured reflection sessions before, during, and after campaigns to ensure decisions remain authentic and identity-driven.

### Build strengths in reflective practice

Finally, companies should embed reflective practice into how managers and teams approach CSA. Beyond campaign monitoring, reflective practice means ongoing evaluation, during planning, execution, and after implementation. Training practitioners to ask hard questions, assess alignment, and learn from obstacles ensures that decisions are thoughtful and identity-driven. Reflection equips leaders and managers to know when to persist and when to recalibrate.

## OUTLOOK: FROM DANCING TO WRESTLING

Marcus Aurelius wrote, “The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing” (Meditations, 7.61). In today’s stormy, polarized climate, the metaphor resonates. CSR may often resemble a delicate dance of balancing competing responsibilities. CSA, however, is closer to wrestling, requiring strength, agility, and courage. For companies, the Stoic challenge is clear: to step into the arena prepared, principled, and ready to withstand blows without compromising core corporate identity, values and purpose.

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## MORE INFORMATION

This research insight article is based on Dhanesh, 2025, as listed above.