

# Advocating for social issues at work more likely to succeed linking morality and mission, study says

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When convincing management to consider advocating for a particular social issue, employees may think it is wise to focus on the benefits to the bottom line but making a moral argument may be a better strategy, as long as it aligns with the company's values, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Employees often care about social issues and use their organizations as a vehicle to foster social change," said David M. Mayer, Ph.D., of the University of Michigan and lead author of the study. "Yet, despite commonly communicating through economic language, speaking up about morals can be more effective when the issue is framed to fit the company's values and mission."

The findings were published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Mayer and his colleagues conducted a series of surveys and an experiment to test when and how moral language could be successful in selling social issues, such as protecting the environment,

expanding health care and curbing poverty. They defined success as when an [employee](#) influenced his or her manager to spend time, money, resources and attention to address a social issue.

One survey asked 141 working adults to report times when they spoke to management about an important social issue. Participants were then asked to respond to questions about how they framed their argument (e.g., if they "argued it would be a socially good or morally right thing to do" and "argued that the change would fit well with the values of the organization").

"Almost half of the participants had done this before and were most successful at getting buy-in from their managers when they focused on morality and when they framed the issue as fitting in well with the organization's mission and values," said Mayer.

Another exercise involved 88 employee-manager pairs to further study how such arguments about [social issues](#) are delivered and perceived.

Employees reported if they "used values to help sell the issue," if they "made a business case" or if they "fit their argument to the company's mission," while managers rated the employee's persuasiveness and if the organization responded positively by then advocating for that social issue.

As in the prior survey, the researchers found that when employees used moral language that fit with the organization's mission, supervisors were more likely to devote attention, time, money and other resources to the social issue. However, if the employee used economic language or moral language that did not align with the company's values, it was not as effective.

"Using moral language without drawing explicit links

to the organization's values might backfire because it highlights the irrelevance of the issue to the organization's core agenda," said Mayer.

Another experiment asked 170 adults to imagine they were supervisors at a manufacturing company and one of their employees shared an idea about incorporating a green technology. Participants then read both business and moral arguments for adding the [green technology](#) and were asked to rate the persuasiveness of the employee.

"Interestingly, we found that framing the issue as being of an economic benefit yielded better results than when it was framed as a moral issue," said Mayer. "We think this could have been because the participants were asked to consider a hypothetical situation as opposed to remembering an actual experience. Perhaps the participants made their decisions based on their beliefs about how managers should make decisions, that managers should always be thinking of the bottom line."

In the final exercise, 305 employee-manager pairs recalled an experience when the employee advocated on behalf of a particular social issue. The employees reported how they framed their argument and how it fit in with the company's values and mission and then assessed how helpful they thought their supervisor would be and whether or not he or she would feel guilty if they did not agree to help. Managers reported how much time, money and resources they put in to address the issue and if they would feel guilty or not if they did not help.

As with prior experiments, the researchers found that when employees used moral [language](#), it was more effective when it was framed as fitting well with the organization's values, according to the study.

Mayer believes this research may provide support for the idea that [social change](#) within companies can come from the bottom up rather than the top down.

"It was the lower-level employees who tried to make change, and many were successful," he said. "This may provide employees inspiration in the

future that they can be influential within their organizations, especially if they address an issue that fits within the company's values and mission."

**More information:** "The Money or the Morals? When Moral Language Is More Effective for Selling Social Issues," by David M. Mayer, PhD, and Susan J. Ashford, PhD, University of Michigan; Madeline Ong, PhD, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology; and Scott Sonenshein, PhD, Rice University. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, published Feb. 4, 2019.

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