



EMPLOYEE ACTIVISM IN THE AGE OF PURPOSE:
EMPLOYEES (UP)RISING



Introduction

In an increasingly complex and turbulent world, American employees are raising their hands and voices – at work – about what’s right and wrong. Expanding upon our extensive and ground-breaking work on CEO activism, and alerted by well-publicized events of employees speaking out on employer policies, Weber Shandwick decided to conduct research among employees to assess their awareness and perceptions of these employees who stand up.

The result is our study, **Employee Activism in the Age of Purpose: Employees (UP)Rising**, a survey commissioned by global communications and marketing solutions firm Weber Shandwick in partnership with KRC Research and United Minds.



Weber Shandwick identified the CEO and corporate activism movement early on. For that reason, we have been monitoring several well-publicized instances of employee activism and wanted to help companies better understand the risks and rewards of this new dynamic. Our new research found that the majority of employees, particularly Millennials, believe that they are right to speak up for or against their employers when it comes to hot-button issues that impact society. As employee activism continues to gather steam, leaders need to be prepared to listen and respond.

Andy Polansky, CEO
Weber Shandwick



What we did

Weber Shandwick partnered with KRC Research to conduct an online survey in March 2019 among 1,000 employed American adults. Employees work full-time and in organizations with at least 500 employees in a variety of industries and at different job levels.

The survey described employee activism to respondents as follows:

Some companies and other organizations have recently experienced something called 'employee activism.' Employee Activists are people who speak out for or against their employers on controversial issues that affect society. Here are some recent examples of Employee Activists:

- 1) *A large company's employees walked off their jobs in offices around the world to protest the company paying a large severance package to an executive fired for alleged sexual misconduct.*
- 2) *A large group of employees at a company posted an open letter to protest the company's work with a government agency over the current border crisis.*
- 3) *An employee of a major media company tweeted concerns with his management's decision to spend a large sum of money on a TV ad supporting journalists' freedom of speech, rather than on employee benefits.*
- 4) *Employees of a large retail chain posted comments on their own social media pages that they were proud that their employer removed a certain category of unhealthy products from their shelves.*



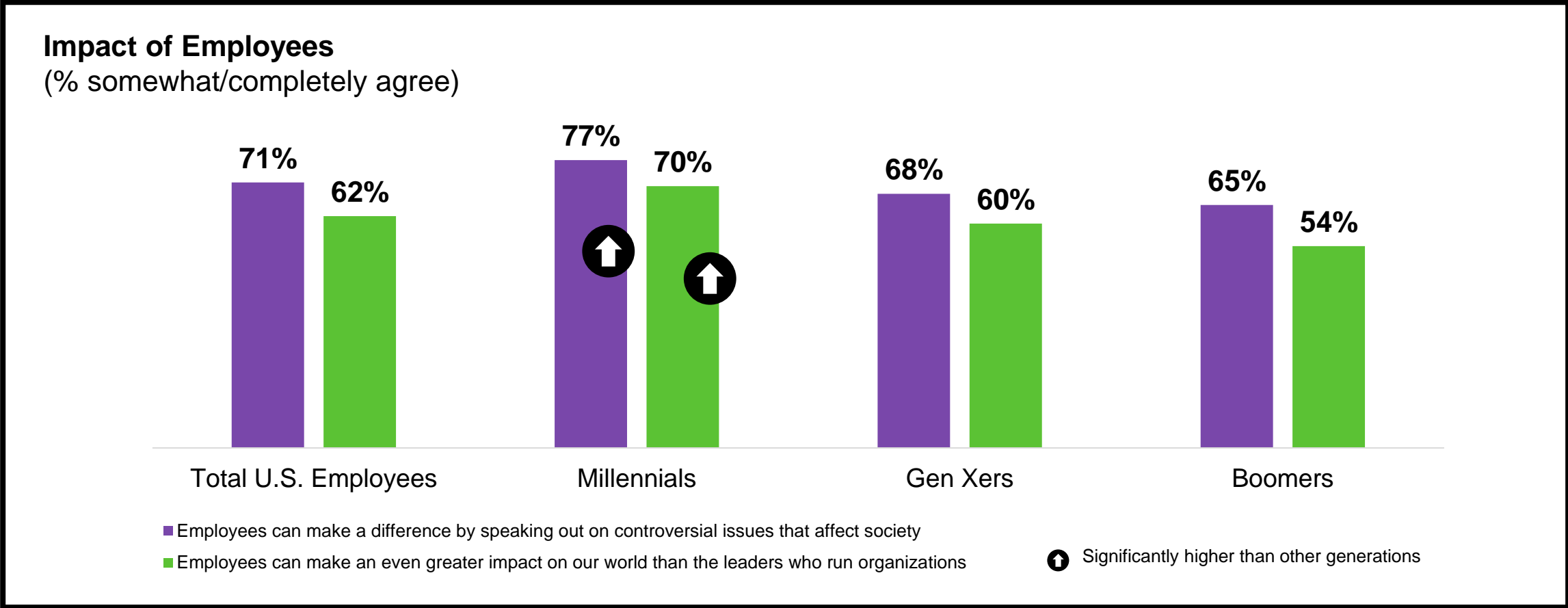
Respondents were then asked about their awareness of these types of events, their attitudes toward employee activism and their own experiences with employee activism.

A person's hands are visible at the bottom, holding a large, rectangular piece of brown paper. The paper is centered and takes up most of the frame. On the paper, the text "What we learned" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The background is plain white.

What we learned

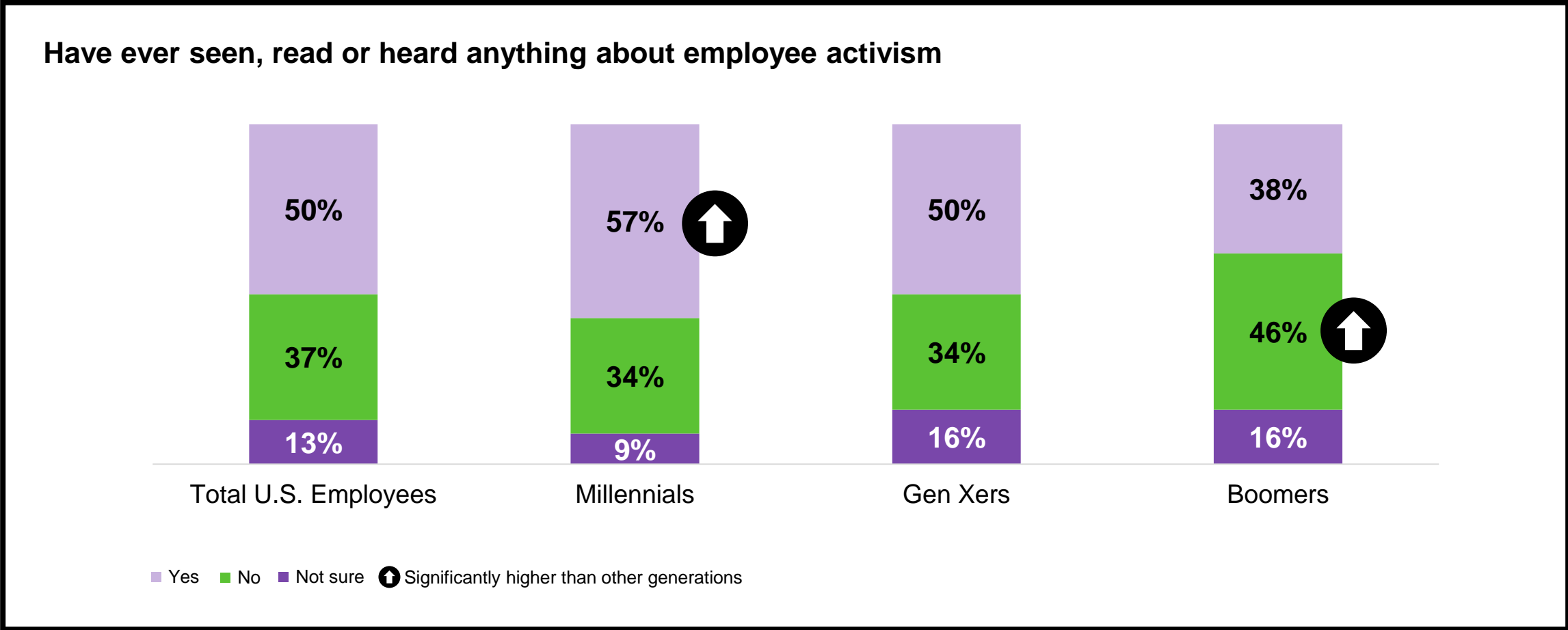
Employees believe they have the power to make change in society. Millennial employees are on the march.

71% of employees feel they can make a difference in society, with 62% believing they can make a greater impact than business leaders can. Millennials are significantly more likely than older generations to feel empowered.



The employee activist movement is acknowledged by employees.

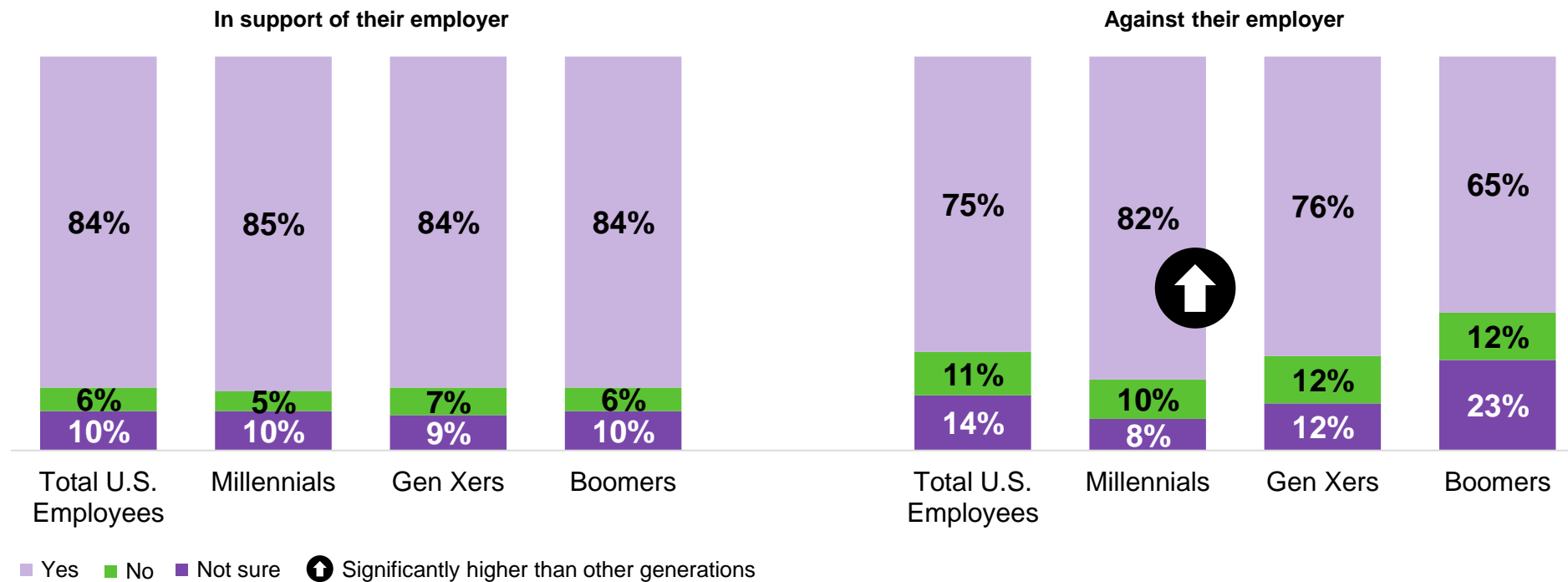
Exactly half of American employees (50%) are aware of employee activism. Millennials are significantly more likely than older generations to be aware of employee activism, with awareness declining with age.



Employees see justification for employee activism.

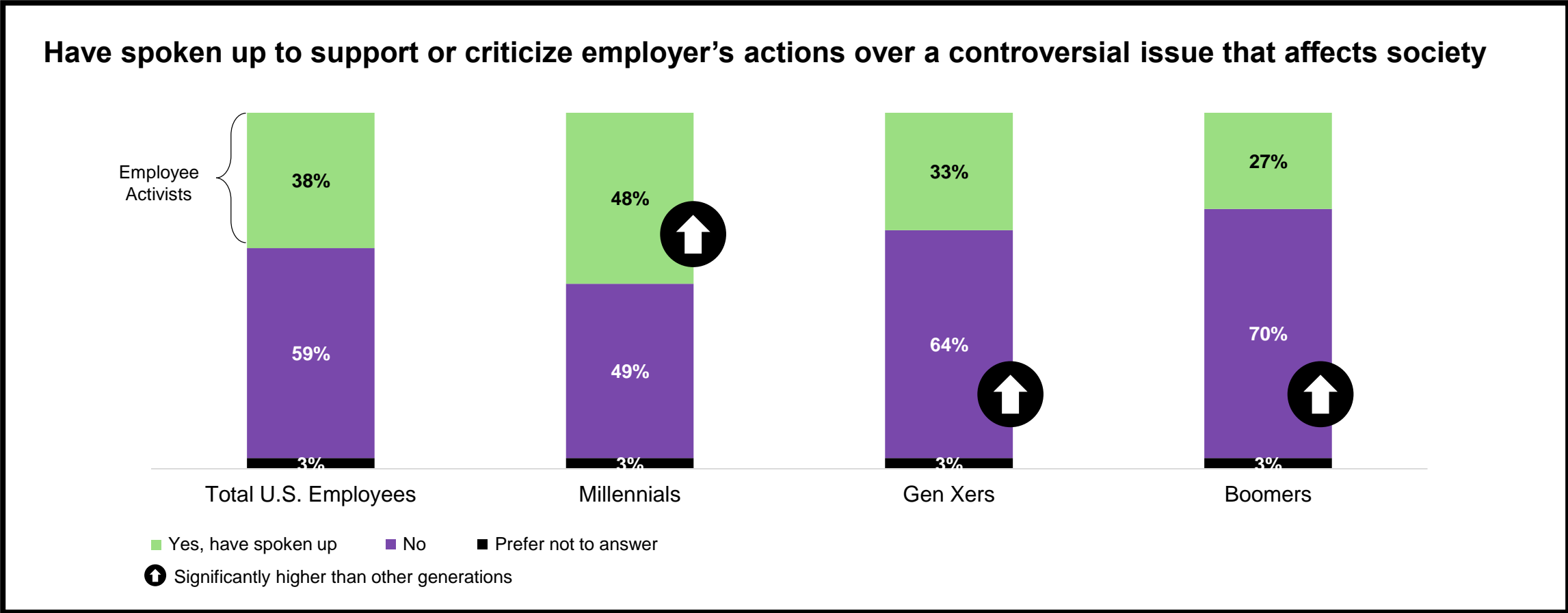
Most U.S. employees believe employees are right to speak up about their employers, whether they are in support of them (84%) or against (75%). The belief that employees have a right to speak up in support of their employers is consistent across generations. Millennials are the only generation that think employees are just as right to speak out against their employers as they are to support (82% vs. 85%, respectively).

Generally speaking, believe that employees are right to speak up...



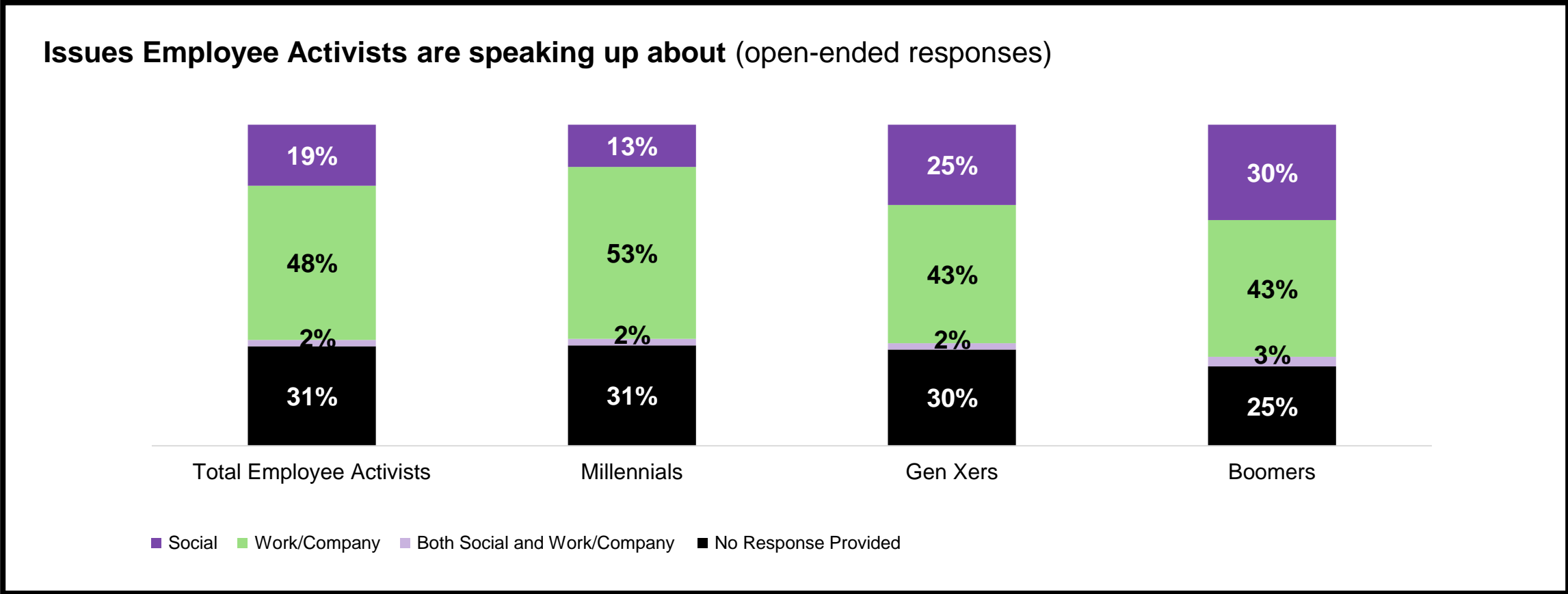
Four in 10 employees are Employee Activists.

38% of American employees have spoken up to support or criticize their employer's actions over a controversial issue that affects society. Millennials are significantly more likely to be Employee Activists than older generations (48% vs. 33% of Gen Xers and 27% of Boomers).



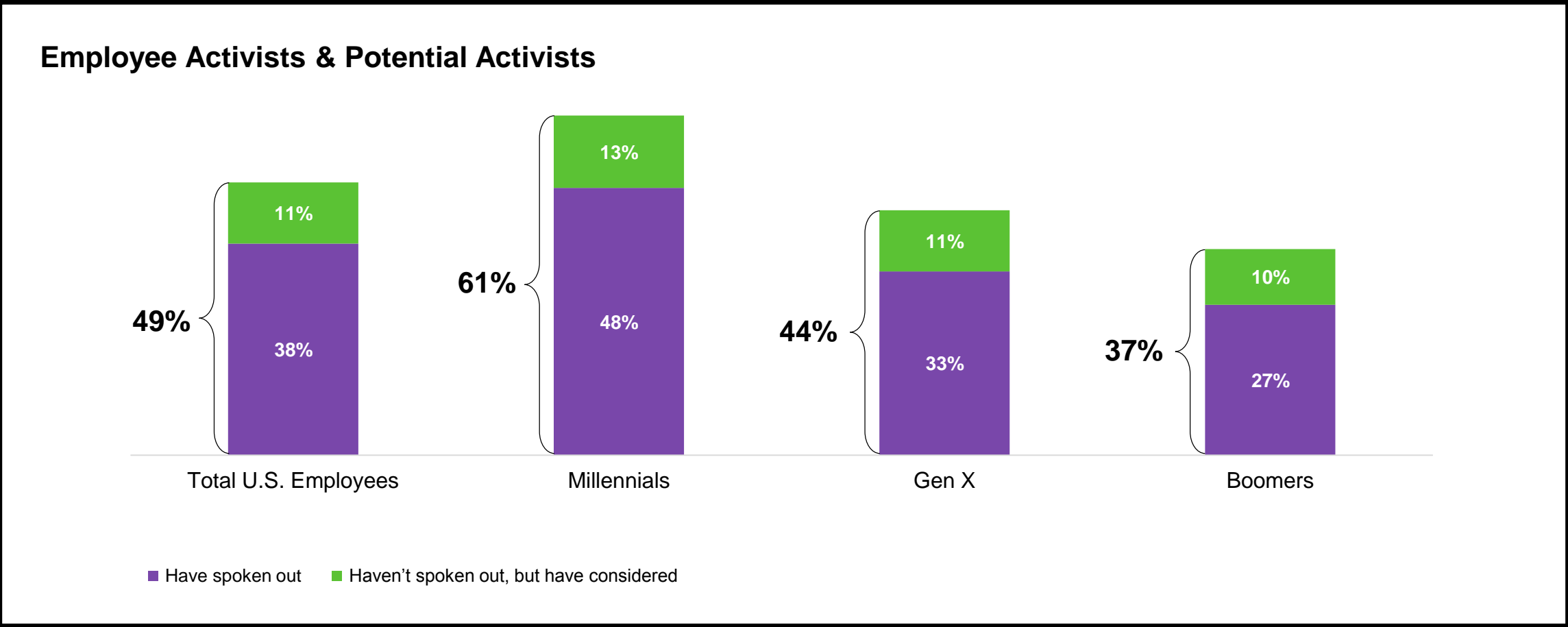
Employee Activists speak out on workplace issues and societal issues.

Employee Activists were asked to explain, in their own words, what they were supporting or criticizing their employer about and how they made their opinions known. In some cases, they were activists for social issues, but mostly – when they could articulate their activity – they became personal quickly and were activists for on-the-job issues.



There is greater potential for employee activism.

While 38% of employees are Employee Activists, an additional 11% are Potential Employee Activists, as they've considered speaking out. Millennials are most likely to be Employee Activists or potential Employee Activists (61%), followed by Gen Xers (44%) and Boomers (37%).



Employee Activists take action in a variety of ways, internal and external.

76% of Employee Activists have taken action towards their employer in the past 12-18 months on the company's action or stance on a societal issue. The most common single action is initiating conversation with other employees (36%), opening the possibility for activism to grow internally and gain momentum externally.

Have taken any of the following actions toward an employer regarding their actions or stance on a controversial issue that affects society in last 12-18 months

	Employee Activists	Millennials	Gen Xers	Boomers
Have taken any of the following actions in the last 12-18 months	76%	78%	80%	62%
Initiated a conversation with another employee or other employees	36%	36%	40%	33%
Shared an opinion or comment about your company that was initially posted by someone else on social media	26%	32%	23%	11%
Expressed an opinion at a company-wide meeting or forum (including online forums)	22%	21%	28%	12%
Contacted your employer's human resources department	21%	26%	20%	16%
Posted an opinion or comment on social media	17%	18%	23%	8%
Contacted one or more of your employer's top leaders	16%	15%	25%	10%
Posted an opinion or review on a career site	15%	16%	13%	9%
Signed a petition	12%	13%	10%	12%
Posted a video on social media	11%	12%	9%	5%
Encouraged others not to work for your employer	10%	12%	9%	4%
Said something to the news media (e.g., by talking to a reporter, posting a public comment, or writing a letter)	6%	9%	3%	1%
Participated in a demonstration, protest or march	5%	6%	6%	3%
Quit your job and let your employer know you were leaving because you disagreed with its stance on an issue	3%	6%	2%	-

Green bold signifies higher than other generations

Employee Activists seek mostly internal attention for their cause.

Among recent Employee Activists, the most common targets of their attention were other employees (46%) and top leaders at the organization (43%). Approximately one-third of those who took recent action were also hoping to get the attention of the general public (35%).

Whose attention hoped to gain when took employee activist action in past 12-18 months (among those who took any action in past 12-18 months)

	Employee Activists	Millennials	Gen Xers	Boomers
Other employees at organization	46%	49%	40%	50%
Top leaders at organization	43%	38%	49%	47%
The general public	35%	38%	30%	37%
Financial investors or backers of organization	12%	16%	11%	5%
The news media	11%	10%	15%	5%
Other	2%	1%	3%	6%
None of the above	8%	6%	15%	5%



Employee Activists aim to influence organizational policy.

Employee Activists who took action recently were primarily seeking to influence their employer’s policies and actions (54%). Many were also hoping to influence public opinion generally and/or their employer’s reputation (46%).

What hoped to influence when took employee activist action in past 12-18 months (among those who took any action in past 12-18 months)

	Employee Activists	Millennials	Gen Xers	Boomers
Employer’s policies and actions	54%	48%	63%	59%
Public opinion generally and employer’s reputation (net)	46%	48%	39%	46%
Policies and actions of other companies and employers in industry	19%	25%	14%	11%
Circumstances in local community	17%	20%	17%	15%
Policies and actions of other companies and employers outside industry	13%	20%	9%	3%
Focus on the news media	9%	8%	14%	2%
Government policies and actions	8%	6%	13%	6%
Other	1%	-	4%	-
None of the above	4%	4%	5%	4%

Employee Activism often gets supportive response from the top.

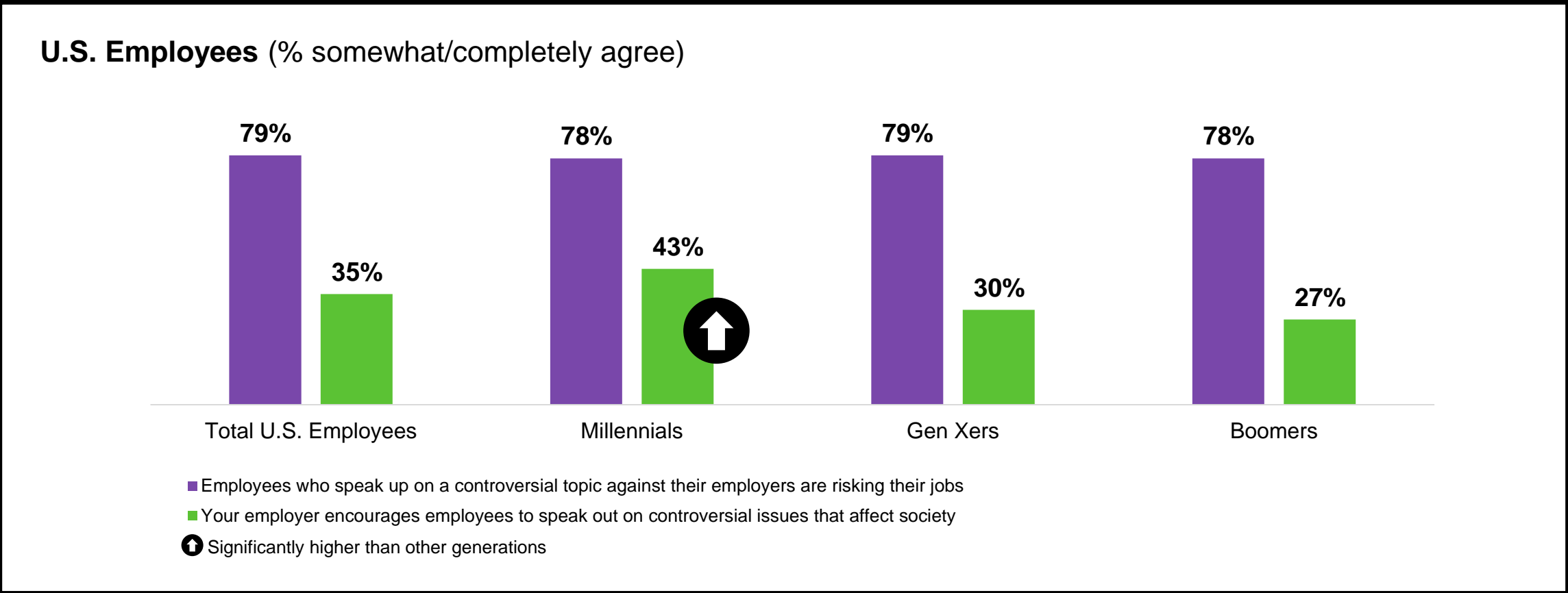
44% of Employee Activists who recently took action received a response from their employer. Of those Employee Activists who received a response, the communication most often came from their direct supervisor or manager (64%), and one-third (32%) received a response from the head of their organization or CEO. The majority of those activists who received a response report that it was supportive (72%).

When action was taken toward employer...

	Employee Activists	Millennials	Gen Xers	Boomers
Received any sort of response from employer (among those who took action)	44%	47%	42%	22%
Received response from... (among those who received response)				
Direct supervisor/manager	64%	72%		
Head of organization, or CEO	32%	32%	(base size too small to report)	(base size too small to report)
Human resources department	21%	23%		
Other	2%	-		
Response received was supportive of actions or not (among those who received response)				
Yes, response was supportive	72%	77%		
No, response was not supportive	17%	11%	(base size too small to report)	(base size too small to report)
Neither supportive nor not supportive	11%	12%		

Employee Activism is not without risk.

79% agree that those who speak up on a controversial topic against their employers are risking their jobs. This view is consistent across generation. Perhaps the reason for this perception is that employers do not encourage employee activism, with just 35% saying their employer does. Millennials are most likely to either work for employers who encourage it, or know that their employers encourage it.



Guidelines for navigating the new wave of employee activism

1. Embrace employee activism as a positive force to propel your reputation and your business.
2. Ensure your corporate purpose and culture are known from the point of applicant interview and onboarding through employee tenure.
3. Be mindful of what is on employees' minds.
4. Cultivate a culture of openness and transparency.
5. Establish a response protocol.
6. Clearly articulate and communicate your company's values.
7. Make your company's values part of the solution.





As societal issues mount and political rhetoric stirs up emotions in the workplace, employees may feel compelled to speak out more often in the hopes of making a difference or impacting their employer's point of view or policies. Our research found that employees are already turning to other employees or to social media when corporate values are not being followed. Corporate reputation can find itself on shaky ground if no one is taking the employee pulse or feedback seriously.

Leslie Gaines-Ross, Chief Reputation Strategist at Weber Shandwick



The propensity of Millennial employees to speak out about their employers' actions on societal or workplace issues requires leaders to engage with employees differently. Because of the ubiquity of social media and the 24/7 news cycle, the wide variety of topics that can activate employees to speak out must be considered on a nearly daily basis today.

Kate Bullinger, President of United Minds

Thank you

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