

*Context: the core principles described below are for an organization that doesn't yet exist, but could, if the Google/Alphabet reform movement chooses to bring it into existence. A PDF version is also available.*

*This document is a companion to an essay titled "[Stepping Up our Game - Strategic Recommendations to Strengthen the Google Reform Movement](#)"*

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## **Alphabet Workers Alliance - proposed core principles**

Bruce Hahne, Nov. 1, 2019

**Who we are:** The Alphabet Workers Alliance is an organization of Alphabet employees, temporary workers, vendors, contractors, and allies working together to improve working conditions at Alphabet, and to ethically guide and reform Alphabet's impact on the world.

We're committed to these **core principles**, which guide how we act and offer a vision of the change that we seek.

- 1. We embrace the need for global, systemic reform to Alphabet's business practices and ethics.**
- 2. We embrace the need for human safety, well-being, and wholeness over corporate expediency, profitability, or business opportunity.**
- 3. We embrace democracy over oligarchy.**
- 4. We embrace transparency over secrecy.**

We discuss each of these principles in more detail below.

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### **1. Global, systemic reform to Alphabet's business practices and ethics**

Alphabet must change. The past few years have shown us a litany of moral failures:

- The company has made [multi-million-dollar payouts to accused sexual predators](#) while failing to protect their victims.

- The company is accused of [retaliation against employees who reported harassment](#), and against employees who seek to promote reforms to Alphabet's behavior.
- The company has [signed and pursued military contracts](#) to deliver technology which can trivially be weaponized, in some cases not even informing employees assigned to the project of how the technology would be used.
- The company laid plans and developed [software to support search blacklisting in China](#), a project so egregious that Amnesty International, one of the world's leading human rights organizations, [launched a campaign to call for the project's cancellation](#).
- For years, the company [ignored warnings of toxic content on Youtube](#) and chose to pursue a business strategy of “engagement”. The result has been a deluge of dangerous and hate-filled content that [threatens public health](#) and has likely [strengthened neo-Nazi and white supremacist causes](#) globally. People may die as the result of these business decisions.
- The company has [outsourced half of its workforce to vendors and contractors](#), who are often treated like [second-class citizens](#) and [poorly paid](#), in what one former contractor described as a “[caste system](#)”.
- The company has used its political action committee to fund [donations to overt racists](#), and to [politicians who make jokes about lynching black people](#).
- The company has [supported conferences that promote climate change denialism](#) and has [made substantial contributions to climate denialist organizations](#).
- The company [attempted to install the former senior vice president of a hate group](#) onto its now-defunct “ethics board”.
- In the face of these failures, and against a growing chorus of criticism from both internal and external parties, the company doubled down on secrecy efforts by [articulating a vaguely-defined “need-to-know” policy](#) and increasing the internal climate of fear.
- The company has [attempted to suppress labor union organizing](#).

These are not isolated incidents, nor are they the result of a few bad decisions by a few misguided individuals. They are indicators of a broader moral sickness within the firm: a sickness that will require both internal and externally-applied challenge, pressure, and resistance.

Alphabet must change. As Alphabet workers and allies, we commit to work together to bring this change into being.

## **2. Human safety, well-being, and wholeness over corporate expediency, profitability, or business opportunity**

The purpose of a corporation is, like that of the government that creates it, to serve the needs of human community. Here we endorse a strong form of the [stakeholder theory](#) of corporate purpose, which [predates by multiple decades](#) the [shareholder primacy theory](#) that arose to dominance during the 1970's. Stakeholder theory asserts that a corporation has a moral responsibility to everyone impacted by its actions, directly or indirectly: customers, workers, product users, suppliers, vendors, and contractors, with shareholders as just one of many stakeholders. Stakeholder theory rejects the assertion that the purpose of a corporation is to maximize profitability or maximize return to its investors.

How would a corporation committed to comprehensive stakeholder ethics behave, in a world where the firm seeks the entire population of the planet as its users and stakeholders? Such a corporation would build its products to support democracy, not authoritarianism. It would refuse contracts to build or enhance weapons systems. It would dismantle recommendation algorithms that lead people to white supremacist content in the name of “engagement”. It would protect its employees from sexual predators and refuse to pay off the attackers. It would ensure that all people in its supply and support chains, all temporary workers, vendors, and contractors, are paid a living wage with appropriate benefits - because they're stakeholders.

Such a corporation would, in many ways, live up to the manifesto written by Google's founders in the early days of the firm: “[You can make money without doing evil](#)”.

## **3. Democracy over oligarchy**

It is no longer acceptable for control over one of the largest media and information firms on the planet to reside with a [small number of billionaires](#) who are unaccountable to the public and unrepresentative of Google's broad base of stakeholders. With a shift in our understanding of Alphabet's stakeholders from “shareholders” to “everyone on the planet”, and a shift to stakeholder ethics, the governing model of Alphabet must similarly change. Alphabet's stakeholders need the ability to elect representatives who wield decisionmaking power at the highest levels of the firm.

Multiple models of corporate governance already exist that provide for stakeholder power. Many European nations already mandate [worker codetermination structures](#) in which one-third to one-half of all board members are elected by the workers. [Germany uses a two-tiered board structure](#) in which the corporate executives of all large firms are accountable to a supervisory board with 50% worker-elected members. The supervisory board must also approve all major decisions, and has the power to set corporate strategy, determine the compensation of executives, and as needed, to fire them.

In the U.S., 2018 saw the introduction of the [Accountable Capitalism Act](#) in the Senate, which would require that at least 40% of all corporate board seats be worker-elected, prohibit PAC expenditures

without 75% approval of shareholders, and allow for the revocation of a corporation's right to exist if it continually violates the law. Similarly, the [Reward Work Act](#) of 2018 and 2019 would require that one-third of all corporate board seats be filled by members directly elected by the firm's workers.

The [demand list from the 2018 Google Women's Walkout](#) called for a single employee representative on the Alphabet board. When we compare this request to the governing structures operating successfully in Europe today, and proposed within the U.S., we can see that this demand isn't enough. To truly shift from oligarchy to stakeholder democracy will require a much more sizable shift in Alphabet's governing model.

#### 4. Transparency over secrecy

In 2017, one of America's major national newspapers launched its new slogan: “[Democracy Dies in Darkness](#)”, correctly articulating that it's not possible to have a functioning democracy if an institution is allowed to hide its activities from its stakeholders. For Alphabet, transparency in the service of stakeholder ethics can, and will, take many forms. Some examples include:

- Contractual transparency: the firm doesn't enter into secret contracts, and certainly not into secret contracts that may harm some stakeholders. This means no more secret military contracts, and no more use of [anonymous shell corporations locked down by non-disclosure agreements](#) to negotiate data center rights.
  - [Algorithmic transparency](#): stakeholders need to know how algorithms make their decisions, and the algorithms should be subject to extended, publicly-documented third-party testing for potential bias and harm.
  - Project intent transparency: Alphabet workers have the right to know the true business intent of the projects on which they work.
  - Internal design document transparency: Consistent with long-standing Google values and culture, design documents, postmortems, source code, and project information should default to a principle of transparency and visibility.
  - Procedural and business unit transparency: The Google Walkout demands of November 2018 call for a [sexual harassment and misconduct transparency report](#), and the [sit-in demands of May 2019](#) call for a “transparent, open investigation of HR and its abysmal handling of employee complaints related to working conditions, discrimination, harassment and retaliation.”
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## **Conclusion**

We stand in the early days of a multi-year struggle to transform and redeem one of the largest media corporations on the planet. The struggle won't be easy, and there will be setbacks and costs to be paid along the way. The costs of inaction or complacency, however, are much higher: for workers, for Alphabet's users, for women and minorities at the firm, and for those on the receiving end of discriminatory algorithms, automated surveillance at scale, and weaponized technology. As stakeholders in how we create the future, and as human beings who support safety and well-being for all people, we commit ourselves to the tasks at hand: to improve working conditions at Alphabet, and to ethically guide and reform Alphabet's impact on the world.