

How do you talk politics at the workplace?

By Bruce Jacobs

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Expert Forum



The longtime rule of thumb is that you don't. It is a good rule. But in today's political climate, with the heat literally and figuratively soaring in matters both national and global, the venerable "check your politics at the door" axiom is harder than ever to follow.

Four words alone -- "Donald Trump. Bernie Sanders." -- will have you feeling the searing heat in today's room.

And that is only the broadly publicized span of current political debate. From Black Lives Matter to calls for the deportation of millions, politics is not just the elephant in the room. It is the incendiary vapor in the air.

Add to that the increasingly direct link between private sector financial contributions and political campaigns, and the result is many workplace cultures where nonpartisanship in personal affiliation is quietly understood to be a laughable relic.

But if you value the long-term health as well as the human fairness of your organization, permitting a workplace climate in which political opinions carry traction, whether tacitly or openly, comes at a high price. It will cost your organization talented employees who are not willing to be punished on the job for believing things that violate none of the tasks they are asked to perform. And it will cost you your reputation as a fair and growth-oriented organization.

Even if political policy is at the heart of your organization's work -- say, if you are an environmental nonprofit -- an employee's private beliefs or loyalties are none of the organization's business if they do not affect his or her job performance. Of course, it is never permissible for anyone to speak or behave in the workplace in a way that is hostile or discriminatory on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality or other essential aspects of identity.

But how do you handle the everyday office talk that falls between the cracks? What do you do when an employee remarks on a political news story in a way with which some others may not agree? What do you do when your boss and coworkers ask your opinion, expecting your approval, about a company event at which explicitly political positions were expressed from the podium with which you do not agree? This actually happened to me. I felt cornered, and I responded by saying that I thought the event itself was well-executed -- which it was -- but that we all had differing opinions about the political issues. It was a very awkward moment, and although it passed without drama it was clear to me from then onward that this was a culture in which I did not wish to enroll.

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If you are company leadership, you need to pre-empt this problem by making it clear in written organizational policy that political workplace conversation not directly related to the work at hand is strongly discouraged, and that it is forbidden for any employee to suffer on-the-job consequences for having opinions that do not violate workplace fairness rules or compromise a person's effective performance of their duties. You also need to show that you will not tolerate violation of this principle.

If you are an employee, you need to either deflect political comments -- you can say, "I don't talk about that stuff at work" -- or respond by respectfully expressing your opinion and your expectation that differences are natural within the prescribed limits of fairness in the workplace. If you feel inappropriately pressured to agree with what is expressed to you by others, push back with a tactful confidence that there is room for your personal stance if you do your job well and are a good citizen of the company community. If you meet further resistance or pressure, ask why, and be prepared to either contest it or to leave the organization for a better one.

Politics is a major part of our lives. But there are limits to the role it can play in your job. Do not let political agendas overstep the boundaries of human fairness and organizational judgment.