

Talking Trump at Work: How Do You Speak Up for Your World When It Might Cost You Your Job?

By Bruce Jacobs



Expert Forum

9/21/15



Our country's current presidency pretty much scraps most of our reliable rules about how to safely navigate politics in the workplace.

Whatever your opinions or mine, it is a fact that the administration of President Donald Trump reshapes the powers and directions of the presidency like no other in recent historical memory. In so doing, it rips up our shared rulebook for appropriate conversation between co-workers.

An election that has broken up marriages and blown up friendships is one from which your workplace speech can trigger lifelong repercussions.

So what do we do when once-unquestioned civic rules about the limits of a president's power yield to a sense that he can defy those bonds if he has the means to break them? What do we say to our co-workers when matters of "opinion" about agreed-upon methods of civilized authority morph into an all-out war over the national identity?

Even the best of the usual guides to workplace political disagreement, such as this well-crafted fall 2016 [Harvard Business Review piece](#) about how to talk politics with co-workers in the Trump era, weren't built for this. They cannot protect us from what we, like all citizens of crisis-ridden states, must face: brutal choices. Between what is practically necessary in our material lives and what is right according to our visceral values. Between what we need in order to live and what we must do in order to live with ourselves.

It is an impossible but inescapable question: Where do you draw your line? What is your answer to those – children, grandchildren, questioners – who will, at some point in your life, ask you to explain what you chose to do today?

It takes a political sea change to confront us with such a question. People may go entire lifetimes without facing such a choice. But we face one now.

And the only true answer is in asking oneself that one question: Who am I?

At this historic moment, the one indispensable piece of advice in that *Harvard Business Review* article about talking politics at work is, "[Weigh the consequences.](#)" What is it worth to you – not only in your values but to your very stance in the world – to risk a "wrong" response to your boss or to co-workers in some politically-charged conversation or situation? I don't mean wrong in the conveniently politically-incorrect sense of those who say racist or misogynist or otherwise bigoted things under the guise of challenging cultural authority. I mean wrong in the brutally consequential sense of being willing to defend diversity and equality – across lines of gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, or any other difference – in the face of possible loss of career stature, income, or even personal safety.

What choice are you willing, and able, to live with in order to be who you are?

Now that is a question that requires work.