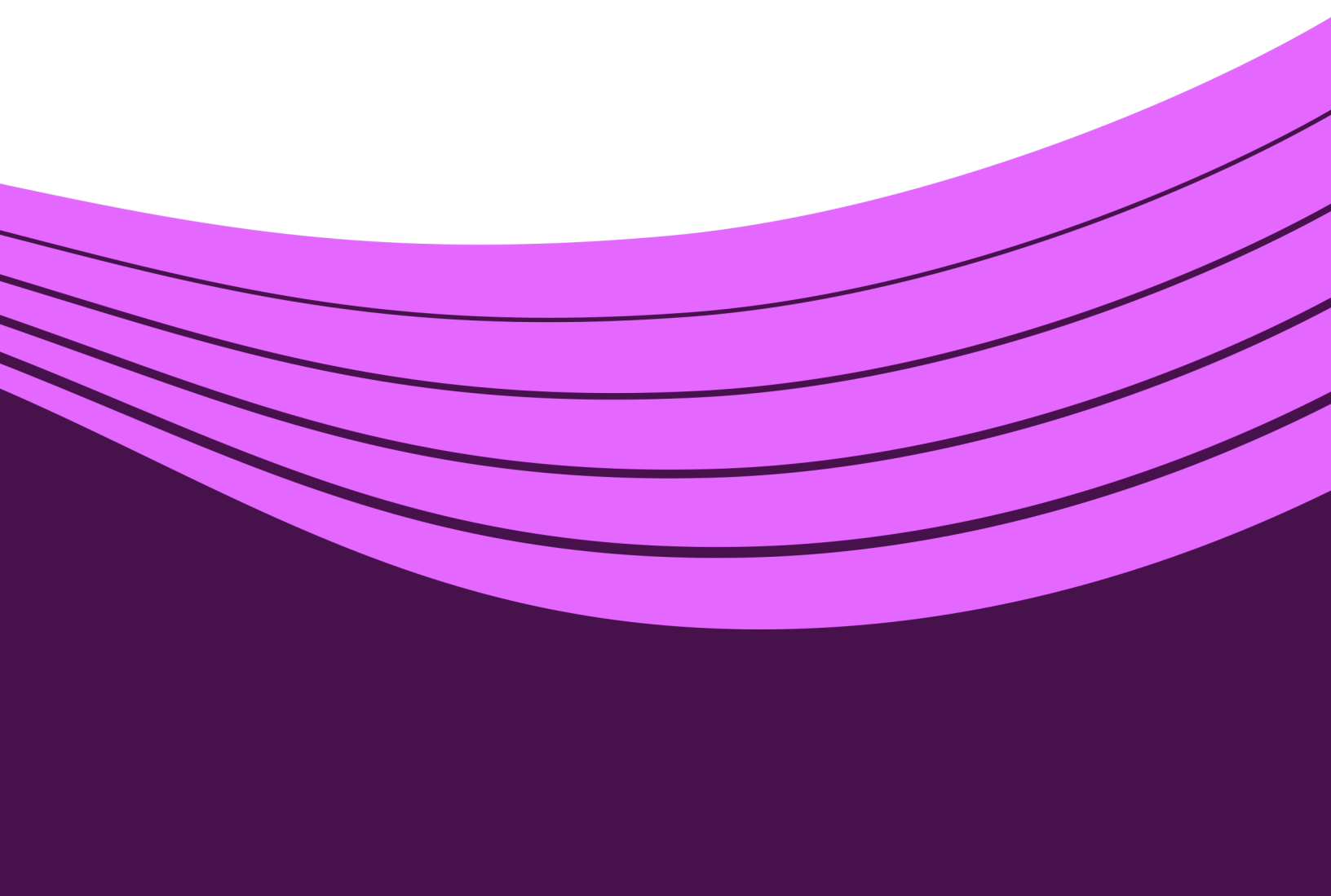




GUIDE

Managing Politics in the Workplace



Introduction

Political divisions are playing out in communities and workplaces across the United States as the 2024 presidential election heats up. The nation is increasingly divided across partisan lines and tensions are on the rise. At Seramount, we recommend addressing [politics in the workplace](#) proactively. This is [business-critical in the current climate of heightened political division](#), particularly in a competitive labor market in which companies must work hard to attract and retain top talent.

The growing political polarization in the workplace has impacted employee productivity, morale, and turnover.

Where do workplace politics fit into work culture?

1 in 5

A 2019 SHRM survey found nearly one in five Americans has quit a job in the past five years due to toxic workplace culture—costing US companies an estimated \$223 billion in turnover.

SHRM’s 2019 Politics at Work survey found political conversations in the workplace were increasing and causing conflict among employees.

- 56 percent of employees say discussion of political issues has become more common in the past four years
- 44 percent have witnessed political disagreements in the workplace
- 42 percent have personally experienced political disagreements in the workplace
- 34 percent say their workplace is not inclusive of differing political perspectives
- 12 percent of employees have personally experienced political affiliation bias

Glassdoor’s 2020 Politics at Work Survey found **57 percent** of employees have talked about politics at work, **25 percent** said they would consider leaving their company if they felt outnumbered by coworkers with differing political points of view, and **21 percent** said they would not want to work with a coworker who votes for a presidential candidate they don’t like.

Historically, corporations have been mostly quiet about social and political issues. But that’s changing as the world intrudes more on the workplace. Corporate leadership on topics such as social justice, immigration, and climate change can improve financial performance and increase brand value. At the same time, failure to engage can negatively impact reputation and alienate key stakeholders, including employees, customers, and the general public.

As sociopolitical issues become increasingly top of mind for employees and consumers, staying silent is becoming less of an option for company leaders. **Taking a stand on social issues is one of the many ways companies can show their commitment to DEI to stakeholders and shareholders**, but it must be done in a way that is aligned with company goals and values. More on this topic can be found in the Seramount Insight Paper, [“Top Social Issues Critical for Organizations,”](#) which includes extensive research on how and why corporations are taking public stands on social issues.

Creating Space: Guidelines for Convening Open Dialogue and Discussions

To develop inclusive work environments, many organizations have already initiated “**courageous conversations**” around sensitive and uncomfortable topics, including race, religion, and sexual orientation. These initiatives are increasingly being expanded to include conversations around politics and the growing partisan divide. Political conversations are already happening in the workplace, and we need to find ways to introduce civility and dive into these conversations from a place of curiosity and respect.

A survey from [Pew Research Center](#) found that **Democrats and Republicans hold negative views of one another: 48 percent** of Democrats and **59 percent** of Republicans associate more negative traits with the opposing party than they do with the average American. Although a bit cliché, it’s true that we almost always have more in common with each other than it may seem on the surface. Therefore, it is critical that workplaces offer as many opportunities as possible for employees to make connections and build relationships beyond the ones they know are “safe.”

There are many activities you can use to facilitate these conversations. **One powerful yet simple example is the All That We Share ad campaign** launched by TV2 in Denmark. The ad features 80 Danes from all walks of life (e.g. people new to the country and people who have lived there all their lives, working class people and wealthy people). In the commercial, participants are asked a series of yes or no questions. If they answer yes to the question, they are asked to step forward, creating new, unexpected groups that share a common value or experience. Some of the questions are lighthearted (e.g. Were you the class clown?) and others more personal (Have you ever been bullied?). The outcome of the exercise was that people from all walks of life, genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and religions were able to find commonalities across multiple areas of their lives.

THE KEY TAKEAWAY: It is important to allow employees the time and space to share their stories and perceptions in both formal and informal ways. Despite political differences, we can almost always find common ground and discover ways in which we are similar and share certain values and experiences.

The goal isn’t about taking a position; it’s about opening up a dialogue. Getting employees to talk respectfully in a safe space can diffuse tensions, facilitate better understanding, and help build a genuinely inclusive workplace.

Best Practices for Employers

As you prepare for these conversations, it's important to consider rules of engagement. We suggest the following strategies to develop a framework for organizing and navigating respectful conversations around sensitive workplace topics, including politics.

ENGAGE SENIOR LEADERS. For maximum impact, leaders need to be trained on how to lead and engage in difficult conversations. Handled well, confrontational conversations around sensitive topics can uncover the source of workplace tensions, encourage employees to build new relationships, and help leaders make more informed decisions.

ESTABLISH CLEAR POLICIES. Develop and communicate clear expectations about the organization's policy on political expression in the workplace and the rationale behind it. Train supervisors and managers on the policy. Foster civil conversation and debate, including outlining steps to take if inappropriate conduct or disruption occurs.

INVITE OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVES. In addition to ensuring senior managers are equipped to facilitate discussions on controversial topics, it can also be beneficial to invite an outsider to facilitate these open dialogues or to share their unique perspectives. Consider using already vetted readings, text, or video to ground the conversation. This ensures a consistent starting place for everyone and a place for the facilitator to come back to during the discussion.

SET GROUND RULES. Managers need strategies to bring workers together and let them discuss sensitive and hot-button issues, and clear rules about being respectful and civil must be upheld. Ground rules can be set in advance or can be established by the group itself before the discussion begins. Start by asking everyone to define what they need to feel safe and what a respectful discussion would look and feel like to them.

Guidewell uses the following ground rules in its courageous conversation forums:

- Listen without judgment or retaliation
- Do not debate the issue or take sides
- Remain open and authentic
- Assume good intentions
- Model company values of respect, integrity, and courage
- Do not entertain any intentionally disrespectful questions
- Stay focused on the core of the original concern
- Respect different perspectives

CREATE SAFE SPACES FOR EMPLOYEES TO SHARE THEIR PERSPECTIVES. Ensure there is diversity in the room and recruit someone with strong facilitation and moderation skills (e.g., HR professional). Make participation voluntary, review ground rules, and ensure confidentiality and respect. Engage executives and ERGs to help plan and support these initiatives to ensure all employees are empowered to participate and contribute.

MEET YOUR AUDIENCE WHERE THEY ARE. Don't expect change or resolution overnight, particularly in the beginning. Ask participants to challenge themselves, but be conscious of group dynamics to ensure you aren't pushing too far.

LEAVE ROOM FOR MISTAKES. Many people will avoid talking about sensitive topics such as race, religion, and politics because they are afraid that they will say the wrong thing. Sometimes they will. Mistakes are part of the learning process. To build understanding across lines of difference, we must look at mistakes as teachable moments, hold people accountable, and then continue to move the conversation forward.

Guard Against Emerging "Cancel Culture"

The concept of being "canceled" isn't new—it often manifests in the context of social media, where it typically involves ostracizing someone who has said or done something perceived as egregiously wrong. Yet all people are flawed in some way. Canceling someone often doesn't allow room for people to make mistakes or grow. At times, cancel culture can also rest upon unfounded or biased assumptions. It's easy for others to join in, particularly when they remain anonymous. Employees with political affiliations in the minority may find themselves in this position. It's important to educate employees about how people should be treated in the workplace, including implementing training and protocols for reporting bullying behaviors and guidelines on appropriate use of social media.

Best Practices for Employers, Cont.

EXPECT TO BE UNCOMFORTABLE. Discussing potentially confrontational topics will likely make participants uncomfortable—both with what they learn about themselves and what they may discover about the perspectives of other participants. The key is not to retreat from the conversation when our opinions do not align with those of others.

LISTEN ACTIVELY. Encourage participants to remain neutral, actively listen to others, and be open to alternative viewpoints. When someone is sharing an opinion that is different than your own, it is a natural reaction to begin silently preparing a rebuttal. That is not active listening. To build understanding, it is critical to put personal judgments aside and not jump to conclusions. Listen closely to what the other person is saying and try to find elements of their position you can relate to or agree with. When you do respond, lead with areas of common ground.

SHARE OPENLY AND HONESTLY. Real progress is made when people are able to share vulnerabilities and be their authentic selves. Communicating to be understood means being as honest and open as possible and speaking from your own point of view.

ASSUME POSITIVE INTENT. When you engage in conversations around hot-button topics, it is important to remember that each participant has their own unique history, background, perspective, and experience, and that is what ultimately drives them to hold a particular position. If someone says something initially perceived as offensive, assume positive intent and listen closely to what they are saying. Ask clarifying questions if necessary to better understand why they have formed the opinions they hold.

AGREE TO DISAGREE. To accept that you can't find common ground and to agree to move on and move forward is critical in certain contexts. There will be times when participants simply do not agree and need to have room to openly express that. Agreeing to disagree is a respectful, honest, and civil way to acknowledge disagreements. It also leaves the door open to pick up the conversation at another time.

TAKE ACTION ON SUGGESTIONS. Create a strategic roadmap that includes a means of responding to suggestions for follow-up actions that participants might request as a result of these conversations.

While not easy, our role as diversity and inclusion leaders is to facilitate and encourage open dialogue and build understanding across differences. These are difficult times, and tackling divergent viewpoints around topics such as politics can be fraught with stress. Such conversations are hard and uncomfortable and there can be risk involved.

But if we have learned anything from history, some of the greatest change occurs when we are bold and face these challenges with a willingness to leave our comfort zone. Companies where employees are open about their views and comfortable discussing them with their coworkers find increased engagement and teamwork, as well as improvements in retention.

[For more information about this report and other resources available, please contact us.](#)

DEI Research Partnership Empowering DEI and HR Leaders Through Today's Toughest Workplace Challenges

What Factors Make DEI and Talent Roles So Challenging?

Tense Workplace Dynamics

- ▶ Shifting demographics lead to competing priorities
- ▶ Evolving legal landscape
- ▶ Divided employee sentiment around sociopolitical issues

Risk Around Every DEI Decision

- ▶ **Risk of Abandoning Commitments:** Pullback can cause disengagement and friction
- ▶ **Risk of Inaction:** Holding steady can be perceived as noncommitment
- ▶ **Risk of Misstep:** Forging ahead might turn positive intentions into unintended consequences

Balancing Two Equally Vital Roles

- ▶ Maneuver Corporate and Cultural Risks
- ▶ Safeguard Nonnegotiable DEI Investments

Three Pillars of Service to Support Leaders and Their Teams



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Deploying proven research methodology to identify how to make change happen

- ✓ Resources to educate stakeholders and accelerate impact
- ✓ Custom research to answer your up-at-night questions



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Convening DEI and Talent leaders to guide and shape our search for breakthrough ideas

- ✓ CDO roundtables and experience labs
- ✓ DEI practitioner roundtables and hot-topic webinars



Commitment to Applying Lessons Learned

Facilitating buy-in for change and customizing implementation of lessons learned

- ✓ Access to expert advisors to increase your capacity
- ✓ Partner intensives that bring insights to your broader team

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