

Guide

# Managing Politics in the Workplace

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**Political divisions are playing out in communities and workplaces across the U.S. in the lead-up to the 2020 election.** The nation is divided across partisan lines and tensions are on the rise. At Diversity Best Practices, we recommend addressing politics in the workplace proactively. It may be a climate of heightened political division, but it is also a competitive labor market and companies are working hard to attract and retain valuable talent.

The growing political polarization in the workplace is already impacting employee productivity, morale and turnover. SHRM's 2019 Politics at Work survey found political conversations in the workplace are increasing and causing conflict among employees:

- 56 percent of employees say the 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

The SHRM survey found nearly 1 in 5 Americans have quit a job in the past five years due to toxic workplace culture - costing U.S. companies an estimated \$223 billion in turnover.

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 co-workers with differing political points of view, and 21 percent said they would not want to work with a co-worker who votes for a presidential candidate they don't like in the 2020 election.

The outcome of the 2020 election has yet to be decided, but one thing is clear: whichever party wins, the results will leave half of the country feeling vindicated and triumphant

and the other half bitterly disappointed. The political divide in the country - and in the workplace - is likely to increase rather than dissipate in the wake of the election.

If not managed effectively, talking politics in the workplace can provoke discord and animosity and create a destructive workplace culture. Creating a workplace that values different perceptions and opinions is a core element of diversity and inclusion, and we believe political affiliation should be viewed as just another dimension of employee diversity.

## Today's employees and consumers expect companies to take positions on social and political issues.

Many of the policies that are currently being debated in the lead up to the 2020 election are tied to deeply held personal and cultural beliefs, for example, issues related to social justice, abortion, LGBTQ rights, gun ownership, and the environment. For people holding beliefs on either side of these issues, the stakes are high. They want to know what their employer, or the brand they buy from, is doing about their issue. A Glassdoor survey found 62 percent of workers expect employers to take a stand on important issues affecting the country and their constitutional rights. According to a 2019 report by Global Strategy Group, 79 percent of consumers expect companies to engage on political and social issues, and 87 percent say they can make a difference when they do. An Edelman Earned Brand report showed that 64 percent of Americans think CEOs should take the lead on change rather than waiting for the government to impose it.

In response, corporate leaders are increasingly using their influence and reach to take highly visible political and social positions. For example, numerous companies united to oppose a proposed HB 2 law that prevented transgender people from using bathrooms that match their gender identity, arguing that it discriminated against the LGBT community. Patagonia donated the entire \$10 million it saved in through the Trump Administration corporate tax break to raise awareness for climate change and support organizations that are committed to protecting and preserving the environment. Lyft teamed up with March for Our Lives organizers in 50 U.S. cities to offer free rides

to people planning to attend the events, committing approximately \$1.5 million in one day to support the cause. Nike made Colin Kaepernick the focus of its 30th anniversary “Just do it” campaign. The campaign sparked a national debate, and although Nike stock initially plummeted, it quickly rebounded, and soon after the campaign launched, hit an all-time high.

Historically, corporations have been mostly quiet about social and political issues. But that is 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.

## Creating space and 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 recent survey from Pew Research Center found that Democrats and Republicans hold negative views of one another: 55 percent of Democrats and 62 percent of Republicans say those in the opposing party do not share their non-political values and goals. Although a bit cliché, it is 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 and 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 civilly and respectfully in a safe space can diffuse tensions, facilitate better understanding, and help build a genuinely inclusive workplace.

## Top Companies Convene Courageous Conversations

Guidewell created a structured forum for employees to talk openly about the societal divides that impact them in their communities and at work. The company's Courageous Conversations sessions have been held around topics including race, religion, sexual orientation, and politics and civility. From the outset, the company's ERGs played a lead role in planning for, organizing, and convening the sessions. Although GuideWell's executives, including the CEO, are very involved in the forums, serving as sponsors, facilitators and panelists, ERGs gather input from employees around the topics to be addressed, lead the discussions, and serve as panel members.

**AT&T** invited all its employees to participate in a week-long Days of Dialogue program designed to engage employees in productive dialogue rather than debate. More than 800 employees volunteered to lead discussions and another 27,000 agreed to participate. Session leaders were given practical tools to help guide conversations constructively and coached on how to create a comfortable, open space for dialogue around difficult to discuss topics. Participants were provided a toolkit of activities that would immerse them in a different perspective – like changing their online, radio and TV news sources for a week, or attending services at the house of worship for a faith other than their own – and were asked to share what they experienced with a colleague. Employees learned to listen generously, forgive one another for

awkwardness and actively seek to understand different perspectives.

In a climate of increasing social and political tension, the Hispanic Latino Network (HLN) at **Novartis** recognized they could play an important role in building awareness and knowledge around issues related to DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals). To spark a meaningful dialogue, the HLN invited four DACA program recipients from the community to share their stories. The event helped debunk common stereotypes and misconceptions associated with DACA, and was effective in building empathy and understanding. Participants heard firsthand accounts of the experiences of DACA recipients, their fears surrounding deportation, and how hard they work to get and stay in school and build meaningful and successful lives, despite facing enormous hurdles.

**Bank of America's** Courageous Conversations initiative addresses hot topics including race, gender dynamics, the role of the majority in diversity, social justice, LGBT equality, and inclusion in the workplace. The initiative also addresses local and national events. For example, the company hosted courageous conversations with panels of diverse leaders in the wake of violence in Dallas, Baton Rouge, Minneapolis and Charlotte. To better equip managers to host and lead sessions within their lines of business, the company designed and implemented a courageous conversation toolkit. Within the toolkit, the company encourages its leaders to consider inviting community leaders, civil rights leaders, local politicians, and members of local police departments to engage in open

dialogue on key social and political issues. More than 60,000 employees have participated in courageous conversations, including the company's board of directors, global senior leaders and local market presidents.

**Cisco** spoke up to oppose the White House's executive order and travel ban from predominantly Muslim countries and provided employees who were impacted with legal resources. Company leaders addressed the executive order in a special Cisco Beat all-employee broadcast dedicated solely to the topic. The executive leadership team was on hand to answer questions. The purpose was to educate, listen, and respond, and make sure employees felt heard and supported. Attendance for the Cisco Beat indicated employees were eager to learn where the company stood on the issue. The broadcast had 7,800 live attendees and 7,000 replays. Ninety-four percent of employees appreciated using the session to address a tough issue, and 96 percent said questions were answered openly and clearly. Nearly 100 percent said they appreciated having an open forum with executive leaders to discuss the issue.

## Best Practices for Employers

As you prepare for these conversations, it is important to consider rules of engagement. We suggest the following strategies to develop a framework for convening and navigating respectful conversations around sensitive 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, how to support civil conversation and debate, and steps to take if inappropriate conduct and 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 sorts of 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, but with clear rules about being respectful and civil. Ground rules can be set in advance or can be established by the group itself before the discussion begins. Start by asking participants to define what they need to feel safe and respected, and what a respectful discussion should look, sound and feel like.

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

- Listen without judgement 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 SPACE FOR EMPLOYEES TO SHARE THEIR PERSPECTIVES.** Ensure there is diversity in the room and engage someone with facilitation and strong moderation skills (e.g. HR). Make participation voluntary, review ground rules, and ensure confidentiality and respect throughout the process. 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, 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 like race, religion and politics because they are afraid they will say the wrong thing. And sometimes they will. Mistakes are part of the learning process. To build understanding across differences, we must look at mistakes as teachable moments, hold people accountable, and then continue to move the conversation forward.

### ***Guard Against Emerging 'Canceling Culture'***

The concept of being 'canceled' is fairly new, and is used primarily through social media to ostracize someone who has said or done something perceived as egregious. The problem is, all people are flawed in some way. Canceling doesn't allow room for people to make mistakes or have errors in judgement, and can also be initiated for unfounded or biased reasons. Once a person is canceled on social media, it is easy for others to join in, particularly when they are anonymous. Employees with political affiliations that are in the minority in the workplace may find themselves in this position. It is important to educate employees about how people should be treated in the workplace, including training and protocols for reporting bullying behaviors, and guidelines on appropriate use of social media.



**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 judgements 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 self. 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 experiences, 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.** Agree to disagree is one of the oldest sayings in the book, but it holds true in many situations. To accept that you can't find common ground and to agree to move on and move forward is critical. There will be times when participants just do not agree and need to have room to say 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 follow-up process to receive suggestions for actions participants might suggest as a result of these conversations and, more importantly, a process to respond to them.

## Conclusion

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 like 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 co-workers find increased engagement and teamwork, as well as improvements in retention.

**For more information about this report and other resources available through Diversity Best Practices, please contact Donnice Peterson at: [Donnice.Peterson@diversitybestpractices.com](mailto:Donnice.Peterson@diversitybestpractices.com)**

## A Few Additional Resources

All That We Share, a powerful ad campaign launched by TV2 in Denmark highlighting commonalities across differences. We highly recommend watching the video and sharing it with employees. <http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2017/all-that-we-share-on-tv2/>

Center for Positive Organizations essays: Finding the Strength to Lead in Trying Times and Helping Your Workplace Heal. <https://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/Finding-Strength-in-Trying-Times-Quinn.pdf> and <https://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/Helping-Your-Workplace-Heal-Dutton.pdf>

How to Respond to Employee Cancelling at Your Office, by Stephanie Sarkis for Forbes 2019 explores cancelling culture and the impact it can have in the workplace. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stephaniesarkis/2019/11/24/how-to-respond-to-employee-canceled-at-your-office/#1ac0e31a5a14>

National Organization for Women: For White Allies: Challenging Everyday Racism. <https://now.org/resource/for-white-allies-challenging-everyday-racism/>

At Bank of America, talking politics in the workplace is no longer taboo, by Kristin Broughton for American Banker. <https://www.americanbanker.com/news/talking-politics-taboo-in-the-workplace-b-of-a-says-its-ok>

Pew Research Center: Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal. October 2019. <https://www.people-press.org/2019/10/10/partisan-antipathy-more-intense-more-personal/>

Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis, by J.D. Vance, examines why the white working class is broken and how that helps explain the phenomenon of Donald Trump.