

How to Manage Political Discussions in the Workplace

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During the last presidential election, Caroline North worked as a cashier at a store in western New York state. The cashiers frequently had time to “chew the fat,” and politics was a frequent topic.

“I would often be helping a customer and would walk up in the middle of these loud and often obnoxious debates” between customers and her co-workers, she said. “This was extremely stressful.”

The store owner banned political discussions at the front counter, but the debates continued. If North reminded co-workers of the policy or stayed silent, they said she was taking “the enemy” side.

“Did this affect my work performance? Absolutely!” she said. “Did anyone seem to care? No. So, I kept my head down and did my job as best I could. I never realized how much the echo chamber beat me down until I left.”

North is not alone. Key findings from ResumeHelp's recent [Politics in the Workplace Study](#) show that 51 percent of respondents believe workplace political discussions hurt the work environment.

With the presidential election quickly approaching, many workers in the U.S. are bracing for more political discussions at home and work. But telling employees they can't have these discussions may not be the solution.

[SHRM resource page: [Politics in the Workplace](#)]

"It's unrealistic to expect employees to leave their concerns at the door when they sign on for work each day," said Stephanie Neal, director of DDI's Center for Analytics and Behavioral Research, a leadership consulting firm. "If HR teams simply ban political discussion from the workplace, they risk making employees feel silenced, disengaged and distrustful of leadership."

Forbidding employees from talking about politics can have broader implications beyond morale. While employers can prohibit employees from having certain discussions, it's illegal to ban them from talking about their work conditions.

"It's a common misconception that all speech is protected in all places, but the First Amendment right to free speech only protects people from having their speech limited by the government," explained Kara Govro, Principal Legal Analyst at Mineral, an HR and compliance firm. "In the absence of a federal prohibition on doing so, private employers are free to regulate speech in almost any way that doesn't conflict with [Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act](#) or state or local law."

However, Govro acknowledged that without guidelines, political conversations can quickly become disruptive and devolve into activity that does not align with company policies or behavioral expectations.

Here's a deeper look at how survey respondents feel political conversations influence their experience at work and how employers can respond.

The Bosses' Politics

Political discussions between co-workers and with or in front of clients and customers aren't the only situations that create an undesirable climate for some workers. According to ResumeHelp's survey, bosses and leaders who bring politics into the workplace contribute too.

The findings revealed that more than half (59 percent) of survey respondents believe their manager's political beliefs influence their management style and/or decisions. A quarter said they have either left a job or have wanted to leave their job because of their boss's political beliefs.

The survey also found that a company's politics can extend outside its current workforce and can influence a candidate's interests. Nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of people have decided not to apply to a company's job listing because of the company's political stance, and 10 percent of people have chosen not to apply to a job because of a company's politics on more than one occasion, according to the report.

"As heightened political polarization spills into the workplace, we're likely to see a further decline in trust in leadership this year," Neal said.

Neal highlighted insights from [DDI's 2023 Global Leadership Forecast](#), which found an alarming lack of trust in leadership: only 46 percent of employees trust their direct manager to do what is right, and just 32 percent trust senior leaders at their organization. The [2024 Edelman Trust Barometer](#) also shows declining trust in U.S. institutions.

"If leaders don't navigate interpersonal conflicts tactfully, it could hinder talent retention," she added. "When employees don't see their leaders as effective with interpersonal skills, they are [3.5 times more likely to want to leave the company](#) within the year."

4 Tips for Navigating Political Discussions at Work

"Given how divisive things are now, even if a company has laid the groundwork to ensure its culture is civil and respectful, it may prove helpful to communicate some ground rules," Govro said. "The right approach ultimately depends on the employer's specific situation and culture. Either way, pointing employees to some sort of guidelines is critical."

Govro offers employers these tips for establishing guidelines around political conversations in the workplace:

- Acknowledge that regardless of individuals' political party or beliefs, tensions are running high throughout the community, and many team members may be feeling stress or fear related to the upcoming election.
- Remind employees that the workplace is a place where everyone should feel safe, welcomed, respected and included.
- Communicate to employees that the company doesn't want to limit healthy dialogue about social issues, but it does have a vested interest in reducing disruptions and maintaining a culture of respect.
- Encourage employees to approach these conversations from a place of curiosity and accept that they may not find common ground. Conversation should be seen as an opportunity for better understanding, not a means to change someone's mind.