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Office Politics

The U.S. is deeply polarized and emotions are running high. But it’s possible to encourage discussion while deterring discord.

Paul English co-founded Kayak and is now CEO and co-founder of travel app Lola, in Boston. Most of its 60 employees, like English, are Democrats. During the job season, one gave English a baseball cap that expressed four-letter disdain for then-candidate Donald Trump. English didn’t wear the hat but left it on his desk. Then a manager told him that the anti-Trump tone in the office was making one employee uncomfortable. That Trump supporter feared her political views would hamper her career. English immediately stashed the offending headgear and discussed the issue with managers. “I wondered if a hostile work environment was developing,” he says. Coping with differing views has never been easy, but in today’s sharply divided nation, it’s especially tough. You may not get employees from opposite political poles to agree, but you need them to work together or the company suffers. Here’s our platform to unite the workforce.

1. Keep listening

Banning political talk is counterproductive and probably futile. But don’t ignore those conversations—you need to know what people are saying. “If in the middle of our morning huddle, one of those discussions comes up, I do my best to listen and ask the right questions,” says Ryan Naylor, founder of Vivare, a 12-person recruitment software firm in Phoenix. “We like to ask about how that affects their jobs. We let people know we care about their feelings—assuming they know how to express them.” It’s all social media and text-based, he says. “Sometimes, the office is the first place they’ve vocalized their opinions.” The moment employees start “opinionating aggressively and attacking,” he shuts down the conversation and moves on to another subject.

The Divided State of the Workplace

In August 2015 and again in the spring of 2017, the American Psychological Association commissioned a Harris Poll to survey workers about how election politics affected their work lives.

40% surveyed in the spring had experienced negative effects of workplace political discussions, up from 27 percent in August 2016.

Negative effects included decreased productivity, increased tension, trouble getting work done, and more workplace hostility.

2. Model the behavior you want from employees

Employees at Washington, D.C.–based Phone2Action, creator of software for contacting lawmakers, got into a heated debate about abortion over a companywide forum. Founder Ximena Hartsock decided to offer some insight and encourage people to stop and listen to one another. She did it by posting a heartfelt, personal account of her own struggle to conceive. Not only did that soften hostile feelings, but several employees revealed that they or family members had had miscarriages as well. “The issues are all very nuanced, and there are always personal stories behind them,” she says. “When those conversations don’t happen, that gets lost.”

3. Address problems on a case-by-case basis

At TravelPass Group, a travel technology startup with 100 employees in Lehi, Utah, one staffer got too loud with his views. Tone it down, he was told—stop making coworkers edgy. “There are ways to express yourself without undermining...
another person’s beliefs,” says co-founder and CEO Ryan McCoy. It was an effective intervention, McCoy says. “We had an open dialogue, and the result was that he apologized and we haven’t had that discussion since.”

4. **PUT CULTURE FIRST**
Creating a culture of respect and openness is the best way to keep political differences in check. This is why Harrscock felt she needed to intervene in her company’s abortion debate. “If people don’t feel connected to one another and that they are a community, no matter how well you’re making money, it will eventually collapse,” she says. “Because culture is what keeps your company together.”

Genevieve Thiers, who co-founded the babysitting marketplace Sittercity, invites people to her new (and political) venture Newfounders to “Dumb Debates” in which opponents argue two sides of an issue while doing things like playing Twister or eating hot sauce. Once, when visiting the ad agency Brandless, she and a friend decided to shake things up. He grabbed her Hillary Clinton doll, she donned his “Make America Great Again” baseball cap, and the two marched through the company offices arm in arm to throw people off. “The point is, we need to talk,” she says.

**26%** felt tense or stressed because of workplace political discussions, up from 17 percent.

**31%** had witnessed political arguments at work, up from 25 percent previously. Fifteen percent had gotten into arguments themselves, up from 11 percent.

**16 PERCENT** have a more negative view of their co-workers because of their politics and say they feel more isolated at work. Seventeen percent, up from 13 percent, say team cohesion has suffered.

**THE GUIDELINES OF A POLITICS POLICY**
If you do create a policy about politics, what should it say? These questions will help you decide.

Should employees be allowed to collect petition signatures or promote a candidate or issue in the workplace?

No. Your policy should ban employees from promoting a candidate or cause on company time, or using company resources, says Jaime Lizotte, HR solutions manager of compliance specialist ComplyRight. “It’s the employer’s responsibility to keep the workplace safe from hostility.” T-shirts are simply unprofessional. Pens and coffee mugs? Permissible.

Where is the line between opinion and harassment?

Tough call. “Employers can limit conversation viewed as divisive or harassing while workers are on the clock,” says Evan J. White, co-founding partner at White Harris, which specializes in management-side employment law. But it’s easy to trip up over legally protected discussion, such as employees talking about how to improve workplace conditions. “If an employee says, ‘We’re being paid if our boss was white and not an immigrant,’ it’s really easy to find yourself in those cross hairs,” says White.

When would you discipline or fire an employee over politics?

Paul English of Lola says that if someone were to publicly post racist comments, “as soon as that became a topic of discussion at work, it would be a firing offense because they’re making work a hostile environment.”