

Zenefits | How should you handle political discussions in the workplace?

Initially written in 2020 for an HR audience, this article addresses enduring challenges around political discourse at work.

Political discussion in the workplace is often challenging for employees and managers alike. When these conversations arise, leaders must balance open dialogue with the need to maintain a productive work environment. Some organizations advocate strict “no-politics” policies to preserve focus and efficiency. However, politics is a part of American life, and it would be unrealistic to expect otherwise. Business leaders should instead focus on creating an environment where employees can engage in respectful, productive dialogue.

You don’t need to win to have a good political discussion

Leaders can set clear expectations that political discussions are not about winning, but about understanding. If each person enters the debate hoping to learn something new, it removes the need to listen intently only to refute the other person’s point of view. When participants focus only on responding rather than understanding, meaningful listening breaks down. Encouraging careful listening, respectful responses, and thoughtful articulation helps keep discussions constructive, even when perspectives differ.

Be OK with discomfort and be willing to grow

Political discussions can become toxic in the workplace, but fostering understanding across differing viewpoints can help prevent conflict. When chatting with colleagues, remember to practice empathy — even if you don’t share their views.

Disagreement is inevitable, but when individuals remain unwilling to listen, productive dialogue becomes impossible. You have to be willing to listen to opposing views and even affirm their importance. This is tremendously challenging in our current partisanship-fueled culture.

Stepping outside of our comfort zone is where we experience the most growth. By engaging with someone who doesn’t confirm our biases, we stretch our worldview. Leaders can encourage employees to approach disagreements with openness and a willingness to listen.

You're more likely to find common ground among employees who walk away from the conversation knowing something new about their colleagues.

Keep your opinions guarded if you know they will cause conflict

Opinions are like fingerprints, and everyone has them. Not everyone falls in the middle of the spectrum. When employees are known to hold strongly polarized political views, leaders may need to encourage discretion around political opinions that could disrupt collaboration, or to show support for candidates who come across as controversial.

No, it's never easy to bite one's tongue, but it's the best thing to do in some situations. While every employee is entitled to their views, they should be mindful that not everyone will agree. Although the line between opinion and harassment may appear blurred, the law has clarified the difference. Yes, the law protects freedom of speech, but it doesn't mean wearing one's political opinions like a badge carries no consequences. Let employees know the limits of workplace politics to ensure no harsh words or taunting happen now or in the future.

Avoid escalation

Emotionally charged behavior undermines trust and collaboration. When it comes to politics in the workplace, it's essential to avoid getting too heated. It can be easy to start arguing with co-workers about who's right and who's wrong, but in the end, it only creates tension and makes everyone uncomfortable. While it's easy to demonize those who don't share our views, this makes productive dialogue impossible.

No one wants to deal with an angry co-worker, so when you hear abusive language (even about a political candidate), let employees know that there are consequences for using such language. Then, it's time to end the discussion. The last thing you want from a work discussion is for a fight to break out. Urge employees to keep it cool and maintain a constructive relationship with others in the workplace, even when they disagree. As a result, you'll create a positive culture and achieve more as a team.

Avoid hot-button issues

Issues linked to religion, morality, or controversial issues tend to be divisive and often lead to tension in the office. If employees feel inclined to discuss something sensitive, ask them to do it away from the water cooler or outside the Zoom breakout room. Instead, tell employees to find a private place. Suggest discussing specific policies rather than employees making generalizations. When tensions run high, let the office be a place where it is allowed to halt the

conversation or change the subject. Steer clear of controversial topics and keep the peace in your workplace.

Don't let employees gloat

After an election or a considerable debate, no one likes a showoff, especially an exuberant employee. Lynn Taylor, a workplace expert and author of "Tame Your Terrible Office Tyrant," says gloating puts others down, is unproductive, and creates an us-vs-them mentality. Do not tolerate bragging, and on days following a critical election or when emotions run high, keep employees focused on workplace tasks and away from politics.

Know when to walk away.

Be mindful of when and how to engage in political discussions in the workplace. It can be easy to get carried away, but remember there are boundaries. Take notice when political discussions in the workplace become overheated, and if it's time to walk away from a conversation. It is up to each individual to decide what is appropriate in their workplace. But suggest employees err on the side of caution. It is better to keep the peace in the office and avoid any potential conflict.

There are instances where lines must be drawn or when an exchange has run its course. However, productive disagreements do have their merits as participants often come out of these conversations with more nuanced, deeper insights and stronger solutions. While it might be easier for a business owner to limit the exchange of politically divergent ideas, workplaces that encourage peaceful, lively debates will be all the better for it.