Talking About Politics at Work: Should You Rein in Your Team?

Politics are hard to avoid these days with endless debates, ads and news blitzes. Predictably, your people will not avoid talking about current issues in the lunchroom, the hallways or even their favorite bar after work with colleagues. What are the rules? When do they cross the line? And if you are a manager or executive, when should you care?

A few things are clear in terms of workplace behavior during this silly season:

1. **If you are a leader, the less said about your own views, the better.** You need to make sure that no one feels you are trying to pressure them to follow your candidate or issue. Otherwise, when issues arise with any particular employee, your impartiality may be questioned. While there's nothing illegal about mentioning your favorite candidate or inviting them to a fundraiser, you have to make sure that they feel no coercion.

2. **Many candidates these days seem to be crossing the line into stereotypes about race, gender and national origin.** When they do, people naturally want to talk about those kinds of hot button issues. The problem is that they too may engage in denigrating statements about race, national origin or so forth, running afoul of corporate policies, and if it’s pervasive enough, discrimination or harassment laws.

3. **Employees frequently argue that they have a First Amendment right to talk about these issues,** not realizing that (unless they are a government employee or engaged in whistle-blowing) they give up the absolute right to say what they are thinking in exchange for a paycheck. Just because a politician or radio host says it, does not mean that it’s okay for your employees. In my experience, many people still do not understand this.

"...the answer is training, training, training."

What Should You Do?

I have had clients forbid political discussions in the workplace altogether. In one situation, the leaders felt that their workers simply didn't know how to discuss these issues without stepping over the line into harassing behavior. In another, the client did business in a state where there was a controversial abortion initiative on the ballot and employees couldn't seem to talk about the issue without screaming at each other and putting controversial posters up on the wall. The client issued an edict: no talking about abortion, ever.

I’m not sure you need to go that far. As with many things, the answer is training, training, training. In most situations, employees can be educated to disagree without being disagreeable and to know when they’ve crossed the line into stereotypes or denigrating
behavior. Unfortunately, however, repetition is required. Just because you did harassment and discrimination trainings three years ago, doesn't mean you don't need to do it again. In addition, leaders need to walk the talk and reinforce the message frequently.

Did You Know?

We conduct regular workshops in harassment, discrimination and conflict management, critical components of your training program in any year, but especially this one with the airwaves bursting with inappropriate talk.

For more information about these topics, read

*The Power of a Good Fight and Sexual Harassment*

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**MORE INFO ABOUT PREVENTING HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE**

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For additional information on this and many other workplace related topics go to **Workplaces That Work website**

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