



WORDS ON WISE MANAGEMENT

How to protect your workplace from political disruption

by Joe Godwin, F&H Solutions Group

In today's tense political environment, our divisiveness over politics doesn't end when employees walk through the office door. You've probably seen a coworker turn a hot-button political issue into a heated, unproductive argument. You might have even been part of an online exchange that turned from a reasonable debate to ALL CAPS yelling with just a few clicks of the keyboard. Political discussions in the workplace don't just kick off a few office squabbles; they also result in reduced productivity, a decrease in work quality, difficulty getting work done, a more negative view of coworkers, more stress, and increased workplace hostility.

Many employees believe the First Amendment allows them to say anything they want and political talk can't be restricted in the workplace. However, neither the First Amendment nor federal law protects speech at private companies, and a few state laws prohibit discrimination based on political affiliation but do not protect speech in the workplace.

In some instances, certain speech can be protected under other laws. For example, a discussion about a candidate's support for raising the minimum wage may lead to talk about the starting pay rate at your company. That's protected speech under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) because pay relates to the terms and conditions of employment. As a result, it's legally allowed.

Although employers in the private sector have the discretion to limit political expression, it isn't reasonable to say "No politics!" to your employees and expect favorable results. It is reasonable to tell employees you will intervene in conversations that distract them from doing their jobs, waste company time, or have a negative impact on your operations. If an employee asks why you've placed limits on political discussions, you can tell her that heated political debates affect the business in a negative way and hurt the positive culture and work environment you're trying to build, and people don't want or have to be exposed to that kind of stuff when they're trying to do their jobs.

Here are a few steps you can take that will help your employees avoid politically based disruptions.

Create reasonable policies

Any policies you implement should:

- Clarify what's not allowed, such as wearing political pins or using company resources (e.g., telephones, computers, or printers) for politically oriented activities.

- Prohibit company e-mail from being used to benefit outside political endeavors or promote personal, political, or religious beliefs.
- Be clear that you will not permit threatening, harassing, or discriminatory behavior based on another worker's political views or activities.
- Inform any employees running for public office that they must ensure their involvement in politics doesn't interfere with their work performance.

Don't allow political harassment

Include political harassment as a part of your anti-harassment or antibullying policies to protect employees from badgering or pressure by politically driven coworkers. Although they're not included in the federal or state prohibitions against harassment, political remarks can progress quickly from topics such as health care or immigration to perceived harassment based on race, gender, or other protected classes.

Encourage use of your complaint procedure

If you make an internal complaint process available, employees can use it to report offensive political discussions. That, in turn, will help you ensure that employees are treated fairly and receive a prompt response when they complain about uncomfortable situations, which can prevent them from seeking legal action.

Enforce your policies

If an employee oversteps the boundaries and offends a coworker, management must follow up. Supervisors should consistently enforce the restrictions you've placed on political discussions and avoid preferential treatment, and they shouldn't hesitate to use the disciplinary process for repeat offenders. It's better to attempt to defuse a situation before it becomes a bigger issue. It's also essential to make sure employees understand they're being disciplined for the disruption, not for their opinions.

Putting it in perspective

Preventing employees from discussing politics in the workplace altogether may not be realistic in today's political environment. However, you can create and manage a workplace culture in which politics doesn't become disruptive.



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