

Vote civility: How to keep your workplace politically neutral

The calendar changing to 2020 brings the Summer Olympics in Tokyo and a U.S. presidential election setting up to be more contentious than a gold medal soccer round. At times, it's bound to feel like November 3 will never arrive (and, lucky us, Leap Year gives candidates an extra day of campaigning).

Certainly, politics is going to boil over into many workplaces. As a manager, your challenge becomes maintaining a sane environment where individual ideology doesn't threaten group productivity.

Warnings from 2016

Heated political campaigns take a toll on many workers. A survey by the American Psychological Association revealed that political discussions at work during the combative 2016 election season resulted in:

- 17% of workers saying they felt tense or stressed out.
- 15% reporting being more cynical and negative at work.
- 10% responding that they had more difficulty getting work done.
- 11% personally getting into arguments.
- 20% stating they avoided some co-workers because of their political views.

With the 2020 campaign shaping up to be equally controversial, now is the time to get a handle on things.

Check company policy

For starters, know what is and isn't allowed in your workspace. Putting the kibosh on someone's candidate-supporting cubicle decor becomes easier when you can point to rules in a handbook.

"First and foremost, one of the best things you can do as a manager to control office politics is check with HR about the policies in terms of discussion, attire, social media, etc. Knowledge is power, and knowing what you should be enforcing is key," says executive coach and career strategist Elizabeth Koraca.

Bring up the subject

Address the elephant (or donkey, if you prefer) in the room with your team. State that you realize the upcoming election generates substantial emotion and opinion, but political talk in the office can bother colleagues and dampen morale. Encourage people who want to discuss the campaign to do so on their own time in a place away from others, not while waiting for a staff meeting to begin or around the watercooler (and definitely never around customers).

Also, make it clear that everyone needs to remain mature. Disrespectful or threatening talk has no place in the office and mandates swift action.

"You should draw a strict line in terms of personal attacks or political language and opinion that may be

interpreted as derogatory. This is never relevant to making a political point and is simply harmful. In order to protect all employees, make sure the workspace stays safe and comfortable for everyone trying to work, and intervene when necessary," Koraca says.

Stay alert

Hopefully, a preemptive speech keeps the troops on their best behavior. If, however, certain people still talk politics loudly or frequently, issue individual reminders. Witness a heated exchange? Calm sparring parties by acknowledging their passion, suggesting they agree to disagree, and telling them to get back on task.

Watch your own behavior

Want your staff to refrain from bringing what's happening on the campaign trail into the workplace? Leave your own political leanings outside the office door.

"Don't just talk the talk, walk the walk," Koraca says. "If your employees hear you emphasizing policies to them, but see you having long discussions with others in the breakroom about the latest headlines, you're not setting a very good example. If you tell people to avoid it, avoid it yourself."

Besides maintaining a calm atmosphere conducive to teamwork and productivity, managers have another important reason to stay away from political talk—you risk losing your status as a fair, impartial leader. Team members with differing viewpoints may become afraid to trust you, or they may complain to HR about a hostile work environment. And if denied a choice assignment or passed up for a promotion, they may cry charges of favoritism or discrimination.

Office relationships need to continue long after ballots have been counted. Set the stage now for ongoing civility and commitment to operating as a team. It will serve your staff well regardless of the results come November.