

How HR can foster workplace civility in divided times



With American society as polarized as it has been in decades, maintaining workplace civility can be a challenge. We have just completed a bitterly divisive election. Public discourse and even private conversations are angry. That same coarseness can permeate the workplace unless employers intervene.

But employers must be careful not to chill protected speech when they try to enforce civility.

Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act guarantees employees the right to discuss workplace conditions and band together for mutual protection. Civil discussion of workplace problems is protected speech under Section 7. Thus, employers cannot ban complaints against supervisors or working conditions under the guise of a rule promoting civility.

The NLRA covers all employers, not just those with unionized workers.

Fortunately, building a civil workplace can be done by focusing on simple, small actions that don't provoke controversy. A commitment to common courtesy—even just saying “please” and “thank you”—can go a long way.

Workplace Civility from a distance

With a record number of workers telecommuting, many of the visual cues and verbal filters that restrain work discourse are missing. A commitment to civility applies to conversations on Zoom or Skype. It also covers visible background materials such as books and artwork that could offend co-workers.

Address conflict professionally

A civil workplace is not necessarily without conflict. But coworkers must address conflicts professionally, through compromise that helps disagreeing parties move forward productively.

HR can begin the conversation on civility in the workplace by modeling civility. Remind employees they are on the same team and that demeaning co-workers is counterproductive. Tell employees their ideas are always worthy of discussion. Train supervisors to receive complaints and suggestions with courtesy and respect.

Employees must feel free to complain when co-workers are uncivil or demeaning. Management must be willing to hold bullying or abusive employees accountable while not trampling their rights under the NLRA.

Additional Resource: Learn more on [How to keep your workplace politically neutral.](#)