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Pre-Election Office Politics

How Bosses Can Keep the Peace When Reds, Blues (and Other Hues) Get Riled Up

By SUE SHELLNBARGER



Election Day is one week away, torquing up partisan disputes in the workplace. Hot-button issues—from religion in schools to gay marriage to legalized marijuana—are turning formerly safe conversations into strident, divisive debates.

Campaigns have "become so negative and adversarial that it gets people all riled up," says Deborah Weinstein, a Philadelphia lawyer and adjunct professor of employment law at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. "People will tell a manager or supervisor, 'I am being harassed by so-and-so because I'm part of the tea party,' " she says.

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Listen: Sue Shellenbarger discusses the best way to talk politics around the water cooler.

Ms. Weinstein says she's been contacted recently by more than a dozen employers seeking advice on managing political talk at work. She and other workplace specialists counsel that establishing rules of engagement is sometimes necessary. To keep the peace, bosses can simply remind people to focus on their jobs, stress the need to respect others' views or intervene to resolve conflicts between employees, if necessary.

Still, some employers accept political debates as a way of stimulating ideas and honing communication and teamwork. At GMR Marketing in New Berlin, Wis., political differences are treated "like college football rivalries. Just as you would trash talk the other guy's school on a big-game weekend, you make your point in a fun, spirited way," says Greg Busch, an executive vice president at the company.

Lately, the ice-breakers at weekly staff meetings have focused on politics. "Did you see this garbage on TV?" account supervisor Chris Boggs asked co-workers before a last week's meeting, describing an attack ad by a candidate blaming his opponent for trillions of dollars in federal debt. "How is one man responsible?"

A co-worker with opposing views jumped in, and "everybody else said, 'OK, you guys go at it,' " says Mr. Busch, who ran the meeting. "It's one Republican versus one Democrat, and it just becomes sport at that point: Who's the best debater here?" A few minutes later, Mr. Boggs and his opponent agreed to disagree, and everyone got back to work. Mr. Boggs says the debates often end with co-workers "patting each other on the back and saying, 'Good job. You're still 100% wrong, but good job.' "

Other workplace debates are less peaceful. Many of the issues driving current races are deeply emotional, going "back to the family, to cultural loyalties and how you grew up," says Sylvia Lafair, a White Haven, Pa., leadership coach and psychologist. Some campaigns are arousing fears on both sides that basic values are at stake.

About 38% of people say they have been attacked, insulted or called names when discussing politics, says a 2008 survey

of 712 people by VitalSmarts, a Provo, Utah, corporate-training company. And only 15% are confident they can express their personal views fully without getting upset.

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Private-sector employers aren't required by federal law to protect employees' free-speech rights in the workplace, except on issues covered by fair-labor laws, such as wages. Some states have laws protecting political expression at work. Most employers handle the issue by training managers to resolve conflicts and reminding employees to focus on work.

Trying to find common ground with a political rival can help keep the peace. When a past co-worker learned that David Chamberlin had once worked for a nonprofit that opposed her personal views on abortion, "she specifically said she couldn't work with me," says Mr. Chamberlin, New York, senior vice president for an international public-relations firm. He focused on doing good work and tried to find areas of shared interest, such as health care, and she calmed down, Mr. Chamberlin says.

Other times, co-workers have to be told how they are affecting others. When Mr. Chamberlin's co-worker began introducing him to clients and co-workers as "the arch-conservative," he says, "it was her way of trying to be funny, but it also labeled me very clearly." He eventually explained that the label made him uncomfortable.

Rather than arguing with a co-worker who brings up a contentious topic, try making your point with a personal story, says Susan RoAne, a Greenbrae, Calif., speaker and author of books about communication skills. If you disagree with a fellow employee who is raging about Medicare costs, you might say, "I hate paying taxes too, but for my mother, Medicare has been a godsend." And if a co-worker rants and raves, avoid rising to the same pitch. Instead, she advises, try to "get more centered and more quiet, and less emotional."

The stickiest issues arise when bosses talk politics. Some 35% of bosses openly share their political views with employees, and 9% of employees feel pressure to conform to the boss's views, according to a 2007 survey of 727 workers by Vault.com, an career website.

But some bosses manage to foster open discussions. A conservative on most issues, Tony Clement voices his views freely among his 70 employees at the Campbell., Calif., construction-supply company he owns. "Whether you agree with me or disagree with me," he tells employees, "at least understand what is going on in the world." Denise Harris, an accounts-receivable administrator and a Democrat, says, "I can disagree with Tony's point of view, and we learn from each other."

When Mr. Clement circulated a conservative writer's critique of the Obama administration by email among employees, Michael Brown, a salesman for the company and a Democrat, says he told Mr. Clement "that not everything you read is true."

Mr. Clement says he recently changed his attitude toward gay rights after discussions with Mr. Brown. He realized the

issues "were more than two people screaming at each other on TV," Mr. Clement says. Mr. Brown adds: "It's great being able to talk to the owner of the company" about such matters.

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