



Four Things Employers Should Do To Accommodate Political Diversity In The Workplace

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In a recent discussion with the chief diversity officer at a Fortune 500 company, my conversation partner pointed out that the workplace has become increasingly politicized. He noted that the distinctions employers and employees used to make between work life and personal life have become less well-defined.

And, of course, he's right. Whether the blurring of that work/personal line is right or wrong is a reasonable question. But regardless of the answer, the reality is that the current moment makes such a separation impossible. The question on the table now is, given this fact, how can employers navigate this space knowing that politics are, by their very nature, contentious and controversial?

Making matters more complicated, we are experiencing the politicization of the workplace at the same time we're reaching new heights of self-censorship. The latest poll from the Cato institute, suggests that "Nearly two-thirds—62%—of Americans say the political climate these days prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive."

An environment in which people feel they have to step carefully around political issues while, at the same time, those same political issues permeate every aspect of our lives, can only result in tension.

This means that, whether employers like it or not, the challenge of how to keep the peace has landed at their doorstep. Organizations have choices in how they respond to the current sociopolitical moment. One option is to go the way of Ben & Jerry's who, in relation to the racial justice movement, decided to fully and publicly embrace political engagement. This approach has the advantage of sending an unambiguous message to employees and patrons. We all know where the company stands.

Other employers don't wish to go that route. This may be for any number of reasons, including the desire to welcome a clientele and a workforce with a wide range of views on politics and/or on the extent to which they want their employer to take a political stance. While it seems daunting, employers and organizations who wish to go this latter route can take certain steps to maintain a healthy climate.

Below are four points, some of which I touched on here, that employers can build into the workplace culture to ensure the climate is robust while respecting different perspectives. In

situations where interactions are going to be repeated, if political diversity is valued, attention must be paid to both the maintenance of strong relationships and to the goal of open communication. Honesty, clarity, humility, and compromise are the guiding principles here.

1. When workplace interpersonal interactions go sideways, recognize explicitly that intent matters, but it isn't everything. Having good intent doesn't eliminate the hurt that someone can feel.
2. When workplace interpersonal interactions go sideways, recognize explicitly that feelings are important, but they aren't the only thing that matters. The person feeling upset has an obligation to take the offending person's intent into consideration. Without this acknowledgement, any claim to valuing different political perspectives is empty as certain perspectives can and will be silenced as soon as someone feels offended.
3. Build into the workplace culture the understanding that someone's identity (racial, ethnic, religious, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) doesn't determine the topics on which they're permitted to express an opinion. To be sure, this doesn't mean asserting that lived experience doesn't matter or that all opinions are equally valuable. It simply means that, on the political and moral issues that arise, having the "wrong" identity doesn't disqualify someone from weighing in.
4. Recognize that, when it comes to disagreement on sociopolitical topics, it is impossible to please everyone all of the time. However, demonstrating a solid understanding that employees come with a diverse range of political views can help serve as a guide through the challenges that will inevitably emerge.

Again, organizations and institutions of any size, if they haven't already, are going to be faced with these issues. Hopefully, these four recommendations can help serve as a starting point for internal conversations going forward.