How To Prevent Political Discussions From Polarizing Your Workplace

Joel Patterson

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Much has been written about political polarization in the U.S. and how a heated political climate has drawn a line in the sand between voters.

But heading into the 2020 presidential election, self-censorship also is on the rise – including at the workplace, where some people fear sharing their political views. Nearly a third of employed Americans worry they could lose their jobs or be passed over for career advancements if their political opinions become known, according to a Cato Institute survey.

For business leaders trying to build a strong culture, knowing how to manage political expression and discussions in the workplace is critical, says Joel Patterson (www.JoelPatterson.com), a workplace culture expert, founder of The Vested Group and ForbesBooks author of *The Big Commitment: Solving The Mysteries Of Your ERP Implementation.*

"Unfortunately, things have gotten so divisive that even if somebody just wears a shirt or makes an innocuous comment, somebody is going to get upset," Patterson says. "When people at work are afraid to say anything political, that fearfulness isn't conducive to a cohesive work environment. Rather than ignore it or futilely try to shutter it, business owners and managers are better off having a plan to deal with the political dynamic so it won't disrupt their business and drive their employees apart."

Patterson offers tips to help business leaders manage political discussions and tensions, and keep politics in proper perspective, in the workplace:

- **Make company culture the first priority.** Having an established set of company core values is highly beneficial in giving your team a framework for how they interact with peers, clients, and other professional contacts externally, Patterson says. "If you have a solid workplace culture, then core values like respect for others, including respect for others' opinions, will carry the day and overcome political disagreements," he says. "An emphasis on core values reminds everyone that they are all on the same team."

- **Give flexibility – within reason. "**Most people don't want or expect a formal workplace policy related to politics in the workplace," Patterson says. "The leadership team of your business needs to let employees know they are valued as individuals while emphasizing

that leaving politics out of the workplace is the best practice for all involved. Let your employees know you are flexible with their comfort level, but they are also accountable for how they conduct themselves as a representative of your company."

- **Keep political programs off the office TVs.** "You don't want to invite arguments," Patterson says. "Making sure that office TVs, especially in the break room, are not tuned to political programs is an easy preventive measure. Sometimes the news and panel discussions get people wound up."

- **De-escalate, don't instigate.** As a manager or business owner, employees will be watching to see how you handle a heated political conversation between workers. "Try to cool things off and lead by example," Patterson says. "If the employees persist, tell them that their loud conversation is distracting to a productive work environment. If someone you work with is expressing a viewpoint that doesn't coincide with yours, a mental note to yourself to agree to disagree often does the trick."

"Handling political talk isn't something business owners and managers should be afraid of," Patterson says. "It's an opportunity to ease the tension their employees feel and remind them that no matter their differences, they can remain strong together."