



## 5 Ways to Manage Political Differences in the Workplace

Four years ago, headlines focused on the unprecedented workplace tension that existed leading up to the 2020 presidential election. This year's presidential election is no less stressful, but we enter it with plenty of experience refining what works to address employee anxiety while maintaining an inclusive culture and productive workforce.

When asked to describe politics in one word, Pew Research Center found that [79 percent of Americans](#) express a negative association. Coupled with the impossibility of avoiding political news, this negativity can creep into the workplace and derail employee focus, escalate division, disrupt teamwork, and increase legal exposure.

# 5 ways CHROs can keep the focus on work - not politics

## 1. Acknowledge the anxiety

Leaders cannot ignore political tension in the office and hope it goes away. When signs of anxiety or distress manifest through increased absenteeism, decreased team morale, or a drop in productivity or quality, address it right away.

### **Communicate company wide.**

Directly address the upcoming election and the stress it elicits through company-wide communications or even, depending on company culture, a town hall. Doing so allows you to set the tone and remind employees of company values, company policy, and any benefits you offer related to elections (such as time off for voting).

### **Coach managers to serve as a sounding board.**

During one-on-ones or other employee meetings, managers should listen with empathy and without judgment but should not express opinions on political issues. Allowing employees to express their feelings in a safe environment enables them to clear their minds and gives managers an opportunity to reset employee focus on work and prevent tensions from escalating.

### **Send a wellness message.**

Consider designating a quiet area for employees to decompress and encourage [mental and physical breaks](#) where employees put the phone down, go outside, or go for a walk.

## 2. Double down on your culture and values

### **Reinforce company values with every message to employees.**

Remember that your company's values come first and embed those values in every communication. Consider using Employee Resource Groups as additional message carriers to their members.

### **Include the global workforce.**

While global companies must adapt to the laws in each country and jurisdiction, when it comes to differing cultures and beliefs, fundamental company values should be able to accommodate these differences. Make sure your communications are inclusive of your global teams.

### **Home in on larger team goals. Work does not cease in trying political times.**

Reiterating the role and value of your company and employees' work in the larger cultural context can help focus employees on how they make a positive impact through the work they do.

### 3. Know and communicate workplace policy and legal boundaries

Trying to restrict all political discussion is impractical and could have negative effects on employee morale. Instead of banning certain topics from discussion, focus on behavior.

#### **Clearly communicate an unambiguous code of conduct:**

Your code of conduct, employee handbook, and other company policies broadcast employer expectations and set parameters for behaviors that help the organization achieve its goals.

#### **Despite what employees may believe, free speech does not apply.**

Private employers have the right and obligation to [set boundaries](#) for workplace behavior. Educate employees on your policies and encourage managers to point to them as an objective source when they need to shut down conversations. Managers should be advised to adhere to the policies and apply them consistently to avoid the appearance of playing favorites. The bottom line: employees do not have an absolute right to free speech in the workplace (limited exceptions described below).

#### **Assess the situation when employee actions threaten to cross a line.**

Employers should [assess the situation](#) and evaluate, among other things, the type of speech, whether it is harassing, discriminatory or offensive, whether it is protected under law, the severity, and potential ramifications of responding or not responding.

#### **Be aware of legal limits and pitfalls:**

- **Clear and consistently enforced rules:** If you have rules governing workplace behavior, these rules must be clear, known to employees, and uniformly enforced in a non-discriminatory fashion. Vague rules and inconsistent enforcement may draw unfair labor practice charges.
- **Some employee speech may be protected:** Although private sector employees do not enjoy First Amendment free speech rights, their speech or actions may be protected by federal labor law. Even offensive remarks may be protected if they are made during protected concerted activity (actions of multiple employees regarding workplace terms or conditions).
- **Social or political protests may be protected:** The current National Labor Relations Board broadly defines protected concerted activity to potentially include certain social or political protests. This means that even if an employee is engaged in actions not directly related to the workplace – for example, wearing a “Free Palestine” shirt – an employer may draw unfair labor practice charges for stopping such actions.

#### **The bottom line:**

Employers must communicate when it’s okay to talk about politics—in the lunchroom or the break-room—but be prepared if conversations or spirited debate cross the line.



## 4. Foster inclusivity and lead by example

All voices are important, but don't assume that leadership has checked their own biases at the door or that all leaders know how to respond to political conversations on their team. Supervisors have their own feelings and anxieties and leading a team requires self-awareness and an understanding of how you come across.

### **Train your leaders.**

Supervisors, managers, and leaders must be able to effectively communicate workplace policies to their teams and enforce policies fairly and consistently. Education on how to mediate disputes, express empathy, and de-escalate conflict should be part of any manager's basic training and are particularly useful skills in today's political climate.

### **Consider creating a separate space for conversations about “political” issues.**

When political discourse threatens to overwhelm work or prevents employees who want to opt out of political engagement from doing so, it may make sense to set up Slack, Teams, or other separate channels or email groups for political discussion that are easy for people to filter out. Make sure the code of conduct is publicized and enforced in these spaces.

## 5. Tout your resources

### **Publicize company support for voting.**

While Americans have a negative perception of politics, most still believe [voting can make a difference](#). Make sure employees are aware of the benefits you offer to make voting easier including time off to vote, flexible work to accommodate getting to the polls, and nonpartisan information on voter registration and ways to cast a vote.

### **Highlight your EAPs.**

Remind employees of existing benefits that may help them during a stressful political season such as offerings on counseling, mental health resources, and stress management.

At the end of the political season, your culture and values are what remain. Leaders can sharpen their conflict skills during an election year knowing that these efforts provide value all year long.