



Talking politics in the office is a bad idea

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You've heard it said often: Avoid discussion of sex, money, religion and politics. So, why do so many people love to broach these controversial topics in the office?

"Politics, in particular, is hard to avoid because it affects all of our lives so personally," says Richard Brenner, principal of Chaco Canyon Consulting. He notes that the presidential election has dominated news conversations across the country for months and quips about the candidates inevitably crop up in even casual elevator discussions.

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The reality is that you've probably already participated in or overheard political discussions at the water cooler and the cafeteria. The topic is not as hands-off as it used to be years ago. A 2008 survey by the American Management Association on politics and the workplace found that 39 percent of those surveyed said they feel comfortable sharing their political opinions with colleagues. A separate question revealed that 40 percent also felt comfortable talking about politics with their supervisors.

With emotionally charged elections upon us, conversations related to politics are growing more frequent and more involved. But experts urge to tread cautiously. Such discussions can create conflict in your office and within work teams. If you enjoy breaking this social rule, experts suggest that you do so with care as you have more to lose than win when debating politics at work.

Brenner says it's crucial to understand that political discussions tend to expose sharp differences, disparities that can make harmonious cooperation more difficult. The consequences of an off-the-cuff remark could later make it difficult for you and your team to advance a project.

"You don't want to say anything that will alienate co-workers or worse yet, a boss," he adds. If you find yourself in the midst of political banter and perceive that someone feels uncomfortable with the talk, just walk away, Brenner recommends.

Most employers don't have a formal policy about political discussions in the workplace, says John Challenger, chief executive officer of the employment-consulting firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas. Companies often have policies that ban political campaigning at work.

Management should also be mindful of such policies and the rise of political conversations and intervene when discussions go too far. In extreme cases, workplace political debates can even become hostile.

"The last thing you want is a confrontational conversation. A key to political discussions in the workplace is to keep them brief and light," Challenger says.

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The goal for all employees should be to remain well liked by your co-workers and supervisors. Political rifts between workers and their supervisors can be dangerous - and last far beyond election season. Challenger offers the following tips for avoiding needless workplace conflict triggered by politics and other sensitive subjects:

- Avoid discussion about religion, especially if it's closely entwined with politics.
- Leave campaigning at the door. Be extremely cautious of your company's policies regarding the topic.
- Separate political views from your perception of a colleague's skills and abilities. Rich Milgram, chief executive officer of online career community Beyond.com, Inc., suggests staying aware of other people's expressions during the conversation to be sure all participants remain comfortable.

"Don't let the conversation get out of control. If you see that your opinions differ, agree to disagree and move on," he says.

If you find yourself embroiled in a conversation that may be heading for trouble, excuse yourself. You may be doing someone else a favor, too.

"You never need to respond to a political question or a comment that makes you feel uncomfortable. Just move on to another topic," he adds.

Supervisors should be careful about engaging subordinates in political debate, Challenger adds. Otherwise, they're opening themselves to a discrimination lawsuit in the future.

It is not impossible to talk politics at work, Challenger says. After all, he points out, a good political debate can demonstrate a strong mind and passion. But political discussions require caution and tact. Take the time to figure out where co-workers stand on the political spectrum.

Start with a neutral question that reveals their position, such as an opinion on a recent bill or a move in Congress, he suggests. And proceed with caution.

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