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When the Boss Talks Politics

A recent survey found that that it's common for bosses to talk about their political preferences around subordinates. Experts warn the practice isn't as harmless as it might seem -- it can ultimately hurt a company's bottom line.

By Scott Flander

If you're a boss, have you ever talked politics around the people who work for you? Ever made it crystal clear to them which political candidates you support?

Are you trying to be like clueless boss Michael Scott in *The Office*?

Well, you're not alone.

About one-fourth of all employees say their top managers make it clear to subordinates the political candidates they prefer, according to a recent survey by Harris Interactive.

The problem is that there's just a slight possibility that not every single person you supervise shares your views.

In fact, 20 percent of employees surveyed were uncomfortable telling their bosses the candidates they support.

So what does that mean? It means, according to some experts, that you've got trouble.

"They don't realize the damage they're doing to themselves," says Frank Kenna, president of the North Haven, Conn.-based Marlin Co., which commissioned the nationwide telephone survey of 752 full- and part-time employees.

Here's what the worker is thinking, he says: "My boss supports Joe Blow, I hate the guy, I hate my boss."

Kenna, whose publishing and consulting firm helps managers communicate with their employees, notes that although one-fourth of the employees said their bosses make their candidate choices clear, the percentage of bosses who casually talk about politics in general at work is probably much higher.

Other experts agree, including Doug Noll of the Fresno, Calif., consulting firm Boogaert & Noll and co-author of *Sex, Politics & Religion at the Office*.

"When you start imposing your personal, individual beliefs on other people, you are starting to limit people's ability to express themselves," he says. "You're limiting critical thinking."

Noll, whose firm helps companies build healthy attitudes in the workplace, says a boss talking politics can have far-reaching implications for an organization. If the employees are split 50-50 Democrat and Republican, for example, a boss risks alienating half of his staff.

Those employees, says Noll, might say to themselves, "I better keep my mouth shut, because I know dissent is not tolerated in this company. If it's not tolerated in a political discussion, it's not going to be tolerated in a business discussion."

Adds Noll: "This is symptomatic of an unhealthy organization. It affects your ability to attract and hold good employees." And it ultimately hurts a company's competitiveness, he says.

Despite the dangers of talking politics, many bosses don't think it's a big deal, says Noll. Although a few might be real jerks, he says, most are simply unaware they might be intimidating their employees.

"We all have values and beliefs, and we can't stop expressing our values and beliefs in the workplace," he says. "People can't help themselves."

The answer, he says, lies not in tweaking company policies, but in holding open discussions that help bosses and others understand the implications of talking politics in the workplace.

"Open up the can of worms," he says. "Let everybody decide what's appropriate. Build the norms from the inside, not the outside."

Richard Brenner, a Cambridge, Mass.-based consultant, believes it's unethical for a boss to talk politics around the people he supervises because it can put the employees in a very difficult situation.

The employee could keep his or her mouth shut, he says, "but if you sit quietly, people assume you're not on board." So the employee must, in some way, pretend to agree with the boss -- and that can be extremely stressful.

"Any time a supervisor tries to influence his subordinate in almost anything," says Brenner, "the subordinate is thinking, 'What about my job?'"

Brenner, whose Chaco Canyon Consulting helps companies with "interpersonal difficulties," says employees in these situations tend to "bring home a lot of tension and frustration," sometimes taking it out on their families.

While it may be HR's job to straighten out an offending manager, Brenner urges caution.

He agrees with Noll that the problem is best solved through discussions, not company policies, but says a written policy against talking politics is still needed to protect the HR person.

For example, he says, HR might tell a manager not to talk politics in the office, but if the CEO thinks there's no problem with it, "the manager will go around the HR person to the CEO."

Adds Brenner: "If you act outside written policy, you are almost always at risk. It provides political protection."

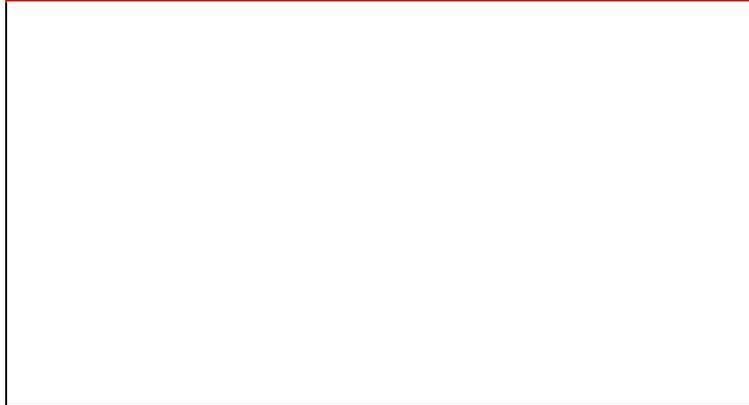
If there is such a policy and it's not followed, that's probably not the only problem in the organization, he says. "When policy and behavior are misaligned," he says, "it's like mice -- they're not just in the kitchen. Look around. Take it as the signature of other possible misalignment before you do anything. It's not possible to have just one cockroach."

The problem might be lax supervision, and it might start at the top, says Brenner. "If you start lower in the organization dealing with lax supervision, you're not going to get anywhere."

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