

from the July 26, 2004 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0726/p14s02-wmgn.html>

Politics at work: Can cooler heads prevail?

While some workplaces welcome spirited conversations, managers need to know how to defuse tense situations.

By Stacy A. Teicher | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

When President Bush started gearing up to send troops to Iraq, veteran Bruce Fenton broke away from his Republican roots - and stopped checking his political views at the office door.

As founder and president of Atlantic Financial in Westborough, Mass., Mr. Fenton had long avoided talking politics at work, but he feels liberated now that he's been speaking his mind. "Whatever side you are on, this is an important election ... and if people really care and they're keeping [their thoughts] bottled up inside, that's not conducive towards health and happiness," he says.

Whether he's offering up a sophisticated argument or occasionally blurting out his view that "George Bush is a raving lunatic," Fenton has discovered that "no one bites your head off." He encourages employees - including his "die-hard Republican friends" - to take a stand for their opinions, too, and says they all respect each other more for the debate. The lunch room is frequently abuzz - lately with people's take on the film "Fahrenheit 9/11" and the security measures leading up to this week's Democratic National Convention.

But as elections approach and memories of hanging chads resurface, not every workplace is so harmonious. As a result, managers are sharpening their strategies for defusing tense conversations or offensive jokes. Political discussion shouldn't be prohibited in the workplace, experts say, but employers are wise to assert some control over when and how it happens.

"Come November, this race is going to be over, but the company's going to go on ... and things that are said and done in the heat of the moment at a conference table ... may have far-reaching impact," says Earl Taylor, national spokesman for Dale Carnegie Training.

At a recent meeting Mr. Taylor attended in Raleigh, N.C., conversation during a break turned to the fact that John Kerry would be visiting the state to make appearances with his running mate, North Carolina Sen. John Edwards. "As the topic took on a little bit of exuberance, [one senior manager] stepped into it and said, 'You know, I really appreciate the fact that everybody has such an active interest in the politics of our nation, and there's a time and a place for it. Today, we're here to focus on....' and he talked about the business issues." Not everyone at the meeting was a fan of the two Johns, Taylor says, and the manager "had the balance to bring it to a halt before temperatures started to rise."

Managers watch their language

Even if tempers aren't flaring, political conversations or e-mails "can move into other topics that ... could arguably create a hostile work environment," says Stephen Paskoff, president of ELI (Employment Learning Innovations) in Atlanta. One client from Boston recently asked how to handle discussions about gay marriage. It's not always easy to draw the line between talking politics and denigrating categories of people, Mr. Paskoff says, but employers should not tolerate "divisive, negative, stereotypical, or offensive comments."

Co-workers should also be mindful not to cross ethical lines, says Bruce Weinstein, president of Ethics at Work, a consulting firm in New York. "Fahrenheit 9/11" and "The Passion of the Christ" have brought out strong reactions during water-cooler chats, he says. His advice: Think more about what kind of language you use, and keep in mind the Golden Rule. "Your first responsibility at work is to do the job, and disrespectful conversations about these topics ... violate the employer's right to have the employees focus on their work."

In one small department of a pharmaceutical company in North Carolina's Research Triangle, antiwar talk turned into a lesson about diversity. Leigh Morgan, a global project leader, says that she and her colleagues frequently vented their disagreement with President Bush's foreign policy when they gathered in the common area of the suite - until the administrative assistant interrupted them one day to point out that the conversations didn't sit well with her. She had formerly served in the Air Force and was much more trustful of the decision to go to war.

"I was really glad that she shared that with us," Ms. Morgan says, "and we had some conversations about how those of us who were in the majority in terms of opinion [needed to make] some efforts to not talk in public spaces, so that she wouldn't feel as uncomfortable."

Some companies actively build grass-roots political enthusiasm among employees and retirees - usually with the goal of persuading them to lobby for legislation important to the company's bottom line. A growing number are sponsoring candidate forums (to which all sides are invited) or voter registration drives, says Amy Showalter, a consultant in Cincinnati who helps employers set up such programs. She always urges companies to present both sides of the issue without bias, because "employees know when they're being manipulated."

Corporate officials often assure employees that their political views won't help or hurt their careers - and that's especially important when the invitation goes out for donations to a corporate Political Action Committee, a fundraising mechanism to support candidates who back the company's issues. But employees still sometimes feel pressured to give. A recent survey by CFO magazine found that among those at the vice president level or higher, 24 percent said that not giving to their corporate PAC could harm their careers.

Most workers stay mum

At the same time, most employees simply don't want to be distracted by the ideological equivalent of a rubberband war. In a Monster.com survey last year, 30 percent of the 26,000 respondents said the best approach to politics at work is "don't ask, don't tell." Another 46 percent preferred to listen but keep their opinions to themselves. Just 22 percent said people should "stand up and be heard."

For workers drawn into uncomfortable conversations, experts offer a few suggestions: Ask questions rather than answer them if you're not sure how your views will be received. If you feel pressured, find a way to change the subject or excuse yourself from the room. "Try to keep it focused on the issues, not on the personalities, because [otherwise] it becomes totally opinionated and ... lacks the specificity needed for a meaningful conversation," says Taylor of Dale Carnegie Training.

For Nghi Luu, a consultant who spends months at a time at client sites, politics are a welcome relief from another strain of conversation he hears all too often: complaints about work. He often throws out a political topic during lunch, even though he knows it's risky. "People start sharing their opinions ... [and] this usually goes well until someone is very vocal and has too strong of an opinion," he writes in an e-mail. "Then it takes its toll on the group ... and things get a little quiet and a new topic is introduced ... to lighten the mood."

Giving her 'two cents'

At Atlantic Financial, workers tack up news articles that support their side of the latest argument. Overall, there's a good mix of substance and humor, Fenton says. "I was a huge Dean supporter and I took my share of jokes about the cows being afraid of getting mad-Howard disease.... You have to laugh at that. But there are also very serious matters that [the candidates] have brought up," he adds.

He believes his efforts to set a respectful tone have succeeded, because people who used to keep quiet now feel free to jump in. Take Cali Teceno, a client-service representative at the company and, at 22, the youngest of the dozen staff members: "Originally I never used to watch the news, I never kept up with any type of politics whatsoever," she says. "I [still] wouldn't say I'm either Republican or Democrat, but I'm definitely more informed about what's going on in terms of the world.... After about a year and a half, I spoke up and gave my two cents here and there."

Because some of her colleagues have military backgrounds, she finds the discussions about war fascinating. The conversation gets tense every once in a while, she says, but "it's pretty open. I would never say, you know, that I run and hide underneath the table."