

Talking politics at work: yes or no?

Experts discuss benefits, risks of voicing opinions

By AMANDA CUDA
Staff writer

Article Last Updated: 10/19/2008 11:40:09 PM EDT

It seems that everywhere you look, someone is talking about this year's presidential election. Campaign signs endorsing either Democrat Barack Obama or Republican John McCain dot front lawns throughout the region. Newspapers, TV and the Internet all offer constant updates on candidate appearances, debates and campaign issues. Everyone, it seems, has an opinion on this election.

Even your co-workers.

But is it acceptable to talk about politics in the office? Some experts say absolutely not, as expressing your political views can lead co-workers and managers with conflicting ideas to regard you in a negative light.

However, others argue that, not only is talking about politics at the office acceptable, it might even be beneficial -- as long as you approach the subject tactfully, and with caution.

The second camp includes Stuart Sidle, professor and coordinator of the University of New Haven's Industrial/Organization Psychology Program. Sidle, who specializes in workplace psychology, said this year's presidential race is one of the hottest in memory and people can't help wanting to discuss it. "It's an issue that's very hard not to talk about," Sidle said. "It's on people's minds."

Despite that old saying about not discussing sex, religion or politics in polite company, Sidle said it's OK to give into the urge to discuss this year's presidential race. In fact, he said, talking honestly about politics can build a better working environment. People feel more comfortable in an office where they can be themselves, and not constantly suppress their ideas, Sidle said.

"You don't want to have a workplace where every topic that's slightly controversial is off-limits," he said.

Also, he said, many of the big issues in this election, like health care and the economy, will ultimately have an effect on most businesses, and are actually important to discuss in the office. "What goes on in the government is going to impact what goes on in the workplace," Sidle said.

But there are drawbacks to jawing about your political views with colleagues. Not the least of these is that those you work with might disagree with what you believe, and hold your opinions against you, said Rich Gee, an executive coach based in Stamford. Gee said if your views differ greatly from those of your co-workers -- particularly supervisors -- and if you are vocal about those opinions, it can color the way people look at you and your job performance.

The best way to avoid that situation is to keep mum on politics in the office, he said. "The bottom line is that you should never talk politics at work," Gee said. "You don't want to do anything that's going to distract from your job performance."

Also uncomfortable with workplace political chats is Andrea Gumbus, associate professor of management at the Welch College of Business at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield. Gumbus said she teaches her students that potential workplace conversation

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.
PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.



FormatDynamics®

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

topics fall into one of three categories: green light (safe), yellow light (discuss with caution), and red light (do not discuss at all). Politics, Gumbus said, is, at best, a "yellow light" topic, and you should be careful what you say and to whom.

"You always have to be aware of the impression you're making," she said.

Side admitted that talking about the presidential election while on the job is a tricky business. But there is a way to have such a discussion without alienating co-workers.

First, he said, use your head before plunging into a heated political debate. Don't initiate an office discussion about the presidential election with a long rant about why candidate X or Y is either awful, or the best thing to happen to American politics. Start slowly.

"Share a little bit of your views, wait for the other person to reciprocate and build on that," Side said.

Other experts also advocate tact in talking politics on the job. "You have to be fairly circumspect in your level of enthusiasm and the way you speak," said David Cadden, professor of management at Quinnipiac University.

Like Side, Cadden isn't against talking about the presidential race, but he urges tailoring the conversation to the environment. For instance, he said, you'd speak differently to a boss than you would to a co-worker of equal standing. "Be sure you know who you're talking to," he said.

Side also advises not focusing your conversation on a particular candidate. That can lead to trouble, particularly when discussing the presidential election, he said. "Talking about the candidates this year can very quickly turn into a conversation about

age, race, gender, marital status -- all things that can be sensitive topics in the workplace," Side said.

For instance, he said, if a manager in your office tells you that he thinks GOP vice presidential hopeful Sarah Palin shouldn't be running for office because she has a baby, it might lead you to wonder if this person would object to promoting a woman with a baby.

To avoid such conflicts, Side said, workplace political discussions should avoid focusing on the individuals and talk instead about the issues.

One thing the experts agree on is that talking about politics at the office should never overshadow your real purpose for being there: to work. One of the reasons Gee objects to talking about politics in the office, other than fears that your views can come back to haunt you, is that it's distracting.

"It detracts from your work," he said. "You're not talking about work, you're talking about politics."

Side agreed, to an extent. He still thinks office political discussions can be healthy, but not if they bring the workplace to a standstill. "If people aren't getting work done, it's time to get back to work," he said.

Do's and don'ts Here are five tips on talking politics at work, from University of New Haven professor Stuart Side. 1. No lectures -- Follow the rules of reciprocity. If you share some of your views, stop and wait for your colleagues to share theirs. 2. Welcome diversity -- Diverse viewpoints are great for innovation. Don't quash diverse thinking by attacking people with less-popular political views. If you question the political idea expressed by a colleague, be sure you are questioning the idea and not the integrity of your co-worker. 3. Stay focused and productive -- Spending too much time talking

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.

PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.

FormatDynamics®

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



about political news can keep people off task. If work isn't getting done, it's time to change the conversation. 4. Understand that politics impacts the business -- Helping others see how political decisions impact your company helps people develop a strategic mindset. Rarely is one candidate all good or all bad for an industry. On the other hand, new policies or regulations can create new threats and opportunities for industries. 5. Be yourself, but be self-aware -- While you can make lasting impressions on co-workers, supervisors and customers based on what you share about your political beliefs, some may misunderstand you. Recognize that there are times when it is in the best interest of your organization, yourself and possibly even your political cause to keep your mouth shut.

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.

PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics.



FormatDynamics®

The advertisement features a lightbulb icon on the left, the text "A bright idea in online advertising." in orange, "PrinterStitial® ads by Format Dynamics." in black, and the Format Dynamics logo on the right. The logo consists of a stylized orange 'F' and a grey 'D'.

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™