Talking Taboo

Making the Most of
Polarizing Discussions at Work

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Chapter 4
Electoral Politics

Many people welcome political discussions; others dread them. This chapter presents situations in which debates over whom and what people are voting for—candidates, legislation, political parties in general—cause disruptions in the workplace. Some of these incidents touch on multiple issues (e.g., race, religion, sex, health), which later chapters focusing on those topics explore more thoroughly. Electoral politics, though, is the overriding factor.

VOTE FOR MY GUY ON THE CITY COUNCIL (. . . OR ELSE?)

Summary

The owner of a small company tells the workforce to vote for a certain candidate in a local election. Employees are afraid to disagree. Ignoring cautions from HR, the owner continues to talk to them about their votes right before and just after election day. The employees lose respect for the owner and, eventually, the company. This is a significant issue for the organization and is resolved poorly.

The owner of a small business in a rural community sent out an email to the entire company urging everyone to vote for a particular candidate in the upcoming local city council election. He said that this candidate's plans for economic growth would directly impact the company financially.

I was the new HR assistant who had been working there only a few months. I felt that it was unethical and unprofessional for a person in authority to dictate whom his employees should vote for. Other employees were also uncomfortable. They came to HR and expressed fear that their livelihoods could be in jeopardy if they did not agree with the owner's electoral choice.

I discussed the employees' concerns with the HR manager, asking if this type of behavior was common in the company. The manager told me she didn't think the owner understood the situation and promised to talk to him to help him understand how employees could interpret his email.

The day before the election, however, the owner walked around the office asking employees in person whom they were going to vote for. When he approached the HR manager, she politely declined to answer him, respectfully explaining that whom anyone was going to vote for should not be discussed in the office, especially in a manner to try and sway their vote. She also said that with the message coming from him, employees could feel pressured, and that maintaining his good reputation was important. The owner was somewhat defensive but did offer an apology (the qualified kind, as in "if I said something to offend you . . .").

After the owner's favored candidate won the election, he sent out another company-wide email, this time thanking everyone for voting for "the right candidate." The HR manager once more explained to the owner how his actions could be viewed by employees. Now he very visibly disregarded her advice and treated her with indifference.

Employees lost respect for him, over this and other issues. Within two years, the company closed its doors due to bankruptcy.

Had the HR manager not discussed the matter with the owner, his behavior would most likely have continued, but she did address it and his behavior still remained unprofessional. There may not have been any good options.

Lessons Learned

Well in advance of political events, including elections, have a conversation with leadership to define the parameters for engaging employees in discussions about politics. Focus particularly on how employees may perceive any written or spoken statements from the organization's leaders—from immediate supervisors to upper management and owners—that appear to be trying to influence an individual's beliefs or voting choice. Talking through various scenarios can help mitigate risk to the organization.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The owner did not welcome opinions that differed from his, making the biggest factor involved here *polarization* (the organization welcomes individual as well as collective opinions of all kinds and works to prevent people from becoming further polarized from one another).

Me + We + WO + RK Framework

Bringing about improvement and change here would require a focus on the *We* question (what did my counterpart experience during this conversation?).

FALLOUT FROM A POLITICAL FLAG IN THE OFFICE

Summary

An engineer hangs the flag of an extremist political party over his desk. Other employees are afraid and upset and submit whistleblower complaints. HR cites the code of conduct to get him to remove the flag, but employees are still afraid and avoid him. He eventually resigns, but employees are unimpressed with HR's tepid response. This causes major issues, but there is a fair resolution.

An engineer in an international branch of a global company hung a controversial flag over his desk located in an open work area. The flag displayed the symbol of an ultraright organization well known in that country for calling itself patriotic but whose members regularly make radical, rude, and violent expressions of their political and social preferences. The engineer said he put up the flag to demonstrate his opposition to a recent decision by the president of the country regarding its much more powerful neighbor.

People around him were frightened. They started to discuss the problem over text messages with friends outside the company; inside, rumors spread. Nobody wanted to ask the engineer in person to remove the flag, preferring to submit complaints via the corporate whistleblower system. The engineer's supervisor was away on a business trip.

In the complaints, employees said they felt unsafe and discouraged, which was affecting their work. Fellow engineers said they were disappointed that someone in their profession could be a member of an ultraright organization known for engaging in violence. A team in the same workspace said they were insulted, stating that the office was not a place for the demonstration of political preferences.

The HR manager processed the complaints the next business day and made several determinations—that hanging the flag violated the company's code of conduct, which designates that the workplace be kept free of any political expressions, and that the engineer who hung the flag might react unpredictably and aggressively.

Team morale in the office fell, affecting productivity and engagement. Nobody knew if employees' outside text messages about the matter had reached the media, which would put the company's reputation at stake.

In light of these risks, the HR manager decided to get more people involved: the engineer's line manager (above the supervisor who was away), to deal with teams; a security officer, to prevent undesired behavior; and the public relations department, to draft communication for outside media, if necessary. These leaders were

assigned to a newly formed committee. They held an urgent tele-conference and developed several scenarios, from mild (removing the flag and training the engineer on the code of conduct) to hard (terminating the engineer and proactively positioning the company in the media).

The committee decided that because the company had a business need for the engineer's unique technical expertise, considering him critical to the project he was working on, it would implement the mild scenario.

The line manager and HR manager met with the engineer in the presence of the security officer. They stated the importance of maintaining political neutrality in the workplace and avoiding confrontations. Active political expression, they explained, has the potential to hurt others and disrupt a healthy office environment. After they spoke with him, the engineer agreed on the need for a respectful and collaborative environment, acknowledged that he would have to take training on the code of conduct and pass a test, and removed his flag.

The HR manager wanted more widespread follow-up, such as conducting one-on-one sessions with employees affected by the incident and group discussions on the importance of the code of conduct, but the committee deemed these actions unnecessary.

The committee's work was effective only inasmuch as the controversial flag was gone. But there was lingering fallout in the workplace. The engineer had undermined people's trust. Everyone avoided him, including his team members, those near his work area, and other employees.

The engineer still expected to be terminated anyway once the company no longer needed his project-specific unique and critical expertise, so he stopped sharing information that his coworkers needed. Three weeks after he put up his flag, the engineer resigned, citing in his exit interview "an unwelcome atmosphere."

Many employees came to the conclusion that anyone could violate the company's code of conduct with minimal consequences.

I think the committee should have been decisive enough to implement the hard scenario, terminating the engineer immediately. Then the code of conduct would have meant something—employees would have felt defended by it and would want to continue following it. The managers involved and the company itself would have gained more trust.

Even the mild scenario that the committee chose to implement would have been more beneficial had the company conducted the follow-up discussions that HR suggested.

Lessons Learned

The organization has some responsibility for helping employees manage situations involving behaviors that run counter to its established rules and culture. Codes of conduct and other policies governing workplace interactions should define what behaviors constitute violations of those rules—complete with concrete examples. This is essential when onboarding new hires or during periodic reviews with current employees. Regularly remind everyone that workplace policies override personal views.

Taking such preventive measures can help forestall the type of outcomes experienced here, where one employee's provocative behavior caused others in the workplace to feel insulted, frightened, and unsafe.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factor involved here was *conflict management* (the organization resolves conflict rather than buries it). The company took a timid and reluctant approach to the resolution of this conflict.

Me + We + WO + RK Framework

Bringing about improvement and change here would require a focus on the *RK* question (what refined knowledge can arise from these experiences and outcomes?).

POLITICS BEEF LEADS TO POLITICS BAN

Summary

A discussion among employees about the presidential campaign veers off onto a tangent about breastfeeding. Someone finds a comment offensive and tells HR, which issues a ban on all further political talk in the office. Although this is a minor incident, it has a good outcome.

A group of employees were discussing the presidential campaign, and the issue of women's rights came up, which went off on a tangent on the topic of breastfeeding. The discussion participants consisted of male conservatives and female liberals. Someone (a participant? an eavesdropper?) took offense to a comment and brought it to the attention of HR.

No one in HR was privy to the conversation, so it was a literal "he said/she said" scenario. HR briefly considered having one of its staffers meet with the offended and offending parties together to discuss the matter privately. That probably wouldn't have been effective, and it might even have widened the gap between the parties due to their argumentativeness and the volatility of the situation.

HR took the most prudent course of action by announcing to the entire workforce that, going forward, controversial political topics could no longer be discussed in the office at all.

There were no more complaints brought to HR about political topics. The assumption was that there were no more political conversations—but if there were, they were handled without the need for HR or management to get involved.

Lessons Learned

People have the right to believe what they want to believe; organizations need to make certain that all employees comprehend this.

There is also an appropriate place and time to have conversations about one's beliefs, and employees need to comprehend this too.

Advise employees to think carefully before they express their individual beliefs in the workplace. Encourage them to be respectful and to think about how they would react if something they found offensive was discussed in their presence. Sometimes employees simply need a reminder to be prudent about their chosen topics of conversation and then "edit" what they have to say.

Suggest guidelines so that potential conversationalists can ask themselves questions before they speak: Is this topic controversial? Are people likely to have opposing views and, if so, how strongly? Can we have a reasonable discussion? Is it wise or unwise to proceed?

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factor involved here was *polarization* (the organization welcomes individual as well as collective opinions of all kinds and works to prevent people from becoming further polarized from one another). The company chose to avoid further expression of opinions by the workforce.

Me + We + WO + RK Framework

Bringing about improvement and change here would require focus on the *We* question (what did my counterpart experience during this conversation?).

WHAT YOU HAVE WHEN YOU HAVE NO POLICY ON POLITICS IN THE WORKPLACE

Summary

Employees and managers at all levels of a company, including top leaders and direct reports, regularly engage in political conversations, post political signs, and make political jokes in the office.

> Their longstanding unprofessional behavior continues because of pervasive company culture, the lack of a policy on politics, and the practice of ignoring or minimizing people's concerns or complaints. The situation remains unresolved.

I was an analyst for a company in a government-regulated industry. I started working there the year before a presidential election and left the year after it. During the campaign, people at all levels of the organization—employees, managers, executives, assistants, principal analysts, engineers, and so on—talked about politics and shared their points of view.

For example, someone pasted campaign stickers on an inspector's desk "as a joke." A manager who opposed a candidate criticized the character of a manager who supported the candidate. An employee mocked another for having voted for the previous president. A supervisor became enraged by a political poster hanging in a cubicle and directed the supervisor of the employee who occupied that cubicle to remove it. An executive announced that she found it an unbelievable contradiction for people in our regulating agency to belong to a certain political party. An administrative assistant said he "still liked" certain directors "even though" they were members of a different political party. When the #MeToo movement came along, the CEO and his deputy made jokes about it and would insert the topic into their conversations.

It was challenging to work there because so many people felt comfortable announcing which candidates they supported and why, sharing their political philosophies, and explaining their sides of political and cultural issues. People judged each other and harbored resentments. Various political kinships developed, whereby if employees were not "with" a group, they were considered "against" it.

At first, I found all this talk mostly just annoying. But over the course of the campaign year, office life definitely changed. People became even more vocal about their political views and more

judgmental of their opponents. The situation did not escalate much, but it remained an annoyance for many employees.

Overall, the workplace didn't seem like a safe place for those of us who had concerns. The organizational culture fostered an environment in which employees were hesitant to report their concerns. Political discussions and jokes seemed to be the norm, with leaders and their direct reports all joining in. There was no thought by senior management that this could cause problems. Political talk continued even after the campaigns and the election ended.

It was difficult to complain without sounding naïve. Everyone was expected to have a thick skin, mostly about politics but also about sexual harassment, disability, race, religion, and so on. People were told they were "too sensitive"; others feared becoming outcasts. As an example of this attitude, an employee criticized people who take family leave; a coworker whose young son had cancer heard the comment and became emotional; and their manager shrugged off the incident, saying "it's just words."

Given my limited role in the organization, I felt constrained. I decided to mainly take the approach of observation. My supervisor had the authority to create and implement policy, so finally I went to her with my concerns. She deemed them unimportant. I asked her about all the political propaganda in the office—why the company not only allowed it to be posted in the first place but also allowed it to be taken down without the poster's permission. She said that doing anything about it would only create more agitation.

No actions were ever taken by the organization or by individual managers to explain to employees at any level that political discussions, jokes, and posters should be kept out of the workplace (because they can lead to disagreements, which can result in lost productivity and unprofessional behavior). To my knowledge, there was no company-wide policy on political discussions. I did find a department policy on workplace etiquette, which could have been revised accordingly.

Discussing politics at this organization was so widely accepted that people simply either participated or didn't. Many employees had been there for a very long time and had no reservations about expressing their political views. As far as I know, the unprofessional behavior continues. New employees who are exposed to it and existing employees who dislike it either become desensitized or frustrated.

I left the company. This workplace situation was no longer acceptable to me as an individual.

If I could have done anything differently, I would have revised the workplace etiquette policy myself to address the issue of politics in the workplace. I would have presented it to my supervisor as a proposal, backed up with materials for making an informed decision, such as examples of divisive behaviors, people's concerns, consequences of inaction, and so on. She could have brought the proposal to the rest of our team or to management for discussion (a nonpolitical one, for a change).

Lessons Learned

An organization that tolerates pervasive behavior potentially exposes itself and its officers to risk. Organizational leaders set bad examples by engaging in the behavior themselves or dismissing people's concerns about it when brought to their attention. When any of these things happen, it's time to identify an executive champion to effect needed change.

Consider conducting a risk assessment: collect data and other evidence to show that there is risky behavior and what is likely to happen if the organization allows it to continue. In many jurisdictions, certain topics and activities are governed by law or regulation. Divisive, disrespectful behaviors may lead concerned employees to become whistleblowers, alerting regulators or others outside the organization.

It is also important to recognize when an organization will *not* change, regardless of anyone's efforts. It may be necessary, as it was here, to simply remove oneself from the dysfunctional environment.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factor involved here was *conflict management* (the organization resolves conflict rather than buries it). It needs attention because conflict was not managed effectively or at all.

Me + We + WO + RK Framework

Bringing about improvement and change here would require focus on the *RK* question (what refined knowledge can arise from these experiences and outcomes?).

THE CEO GETS A PASS ON THE NO-POLITICS PROTOCOL

Summary

A CEO sends an email to all employees endorsing a candidate for president, which violates company protocol on political discussions. Because the legal team apparently okayed the message, however, HR has to as well: the CEO gets "a pass." When one employee emails a response to the endorsement, the local branch's HR team has to put out the potential fire. Managers are told to refocus on just getting everyone back to work, which leads to a good, albeit inconclusive, resolution.

I worked for over six years for a company with more than ten thousand employees across the country. My division had approximately three hundred employees.

Leading up to a presidential election several years ago, the CEO sent an all-employee email communication from company headquarters endorsing one of the presidential candidates, complete with bullet points noting why it was in the company's and employees' best interests to support this candidate. The communication literally stated that if we did not support the candidate, we would be putting our industry and our jobs in jeopardy.

The email arrived close to the end of the workday and created a momentary maelstrom. In my office, productivity completely stopped. Many people expressed surprise, and others offense, that the company would attempt to pressure employees to vote in a particular way. Some wanted to know if such a communication was even legal.

Someone approached our division's HR department and asked if the email was a violation of company policy. HR said that because the message came from headquarters, it must have been approved by the legal team, and therefore it was fine.

Up until that point, company practice and protocol were to *not* hold conversations of a political nature in the office. I had never heard the topic broached before (and certainly not by a top executive).

After HR's initial response to the CEO's email, there was not much immediate follow-up; they seemed to have been as caught off guard as the rest of us. A few employees privately expressed fear of reprisal if they spoke up in opposition to the CEO's endorsement.

The following morning, an employee sent an email to HR asking if, henceforth, it was okay for anyone to send out broadcasts voicing their own personal political views. Now HR was forced to develop a more strategic response.

The next day, HR announced that, in keeping with company policy, only emails of a work-related nature should be shared globally. It said the CEO's message was indeed work related. Merely sharing one's personal political views, however, would not necessarily meet the work-related requirement.

HR's position thus provided a "pass" for the CEO while preventing potential political disputes in the workplace. The plan was to just have us go back to work. Managers were coached to refocus employees on getting the job done. Employees were told that the CEO's email was for consideration only because an individual's vote is a personal and private decision. For the company to be successful and for employees' own job security, HR said, the most important thing is to do your job.

This approach seemed to be effective because the issue quickly became a nonissue. Employees voted their own conscience, and everyone realized that the company would never know how they voted anyway. That is the beauty of our democracy.

There was no follow-up email from the CEO. In the next presidential election cycle, neither the CEO, the company, nor any employee sent out another global broadcast. Perhaps upper management realized that employees regard these kinds of communications as an invasion of privacy.

Or perhaps it was because the company was still in business: the CEO's favored candidate lost the election, but nothing was "putting our industry and our jobs in jeopardy."

Lessons Learned

The HR announcement regarding the CEO's clearly political email—that it was work related and thus in keeping with company policy—was likely disbelieved by most of this organization's workforce. That said, HR's efforts at discouraging further office dialogue about or in response to the CEO's message was just one way to deal with this volatile situation.

An alternative solution would be to encourage employees to engage in political discussion. HR could facilitate the provision of a safe forum in which all views could be shared, at the division level or throughout the company. In such a scenario, the CEO's political views would still be presented to employees (via email or another medium), but opposing views would be presented as well.

Having a venue to safely discuss political matters would help those who choose to participate develop more thoughtful and well-constructed arguments, resulting in a fully informed population of employees. During work hours and outside of this venue, employees' priority of focus would remain on doing their jobs and *not* arguing over politics.

When politics does come up (as it will), managers could direct employees (or their fellow managers) to the forum. There would

be less fear in the work environment and a more active culture of empowerment and understanding of appropriate topics of discussion in the workplace.

Employees should be encouraged to exercise their right to vote for the candidate they choose.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factor involved here was *polarization* (the organization welcomes individual as well as collective opinions of all kinds and works to prevent people from becoming further polarized from one another).

Me + We + WO + RK Framework

Bringing about improvement and change here would require focus on the *WO* question (what were the work outcomes of this conversation?).

VERBAL ABUSE OVER POLITICS MEETS COMPANY CODE OF CONDUCT

Summary

A political argument between employees escalates; one verbally abuses the other. HR gives the abuser a warning instead of termination, affirming employees' right to have beliefs while distinguishing it from employees' responsibility under the company code of conduct to communicate those beliefs appropriately. HR's response impresses the staff, increasing interest in the code. Although a major incident for the organization, the outcome is excellent.

Two employees in adjacent workspaces were having a cordial conversation, and the topic of politics arose. The first said he was a

conservative, and the second said she was a liberal, to which the conservative responded, "Oh, I guess you're a self-absorbed feminist bitch, then. Ugh." Tensions rose. As the employees became angry and loud, many of their coworkers heard them, and HR was called in to intervene.

As HR staff, I had to act fast. I consulted the company code of conduct and the employee handbook. I contacted my supervisor as well as the chief financial officer, to whom the alleged verbal abuser reported.

At the arguing employees' work area, their coworkers were hesitant to approach them. Productivity ceased. The impact of the situation was immediate and severe. I separated the employees. Now they refused to speak to one another, so it was clear that mediation would not be productive. Neither employee was ready to address anything besides politics. I pulled them aside for one-on-one meetings.

While everyone has the right to their own political beliefs, it is never acceptable to use inappropriate language with a coworker, regardless of those beliefs. HR's goal in this situation was to address the language, not the beliefs. The first employee's hurtful and derogatory comment directly violated the code of conduct, which could lead to termination of employment. This is the message that HR had to make clear to everyone.

I met with the first employee, noting the code violation and asking him if he thought his actions were acceptable. He continued to cite his right to his political beliefs. I responded that he certainly had that right, but in communicating those beliefs in a way that was verbally abusive, he put his job in jeopardy. He began to see the error of his ways and calmed down. I had considered terminating him but wanted to talk with both employees before making that decision.

While I was with the first employee, the CFO—his supervisor—met with the second employee. She told the CFO she was not upset by her antagonist's political beliefs but was upset by his inappropriate language. While she felt safe in the office, she said, there ought to be some action taken against the verbally abusive employee.

I met with her next. My primary concern was her comfort level after the altercation. She repeated that she felt safe and was adamant that her opponent should *not* be fired. She just wanted assurance that this type of behavior would never happen again.

We excused both employees for the day so that they could reflect on events and return in a better frame of mind.

In considering HR's next steps, I discussed the situation with the CFO, who had consulted with outside legal counsel. We decided that since this incident was the verbally abusive employee's first offense and he had no previous behavioral issues, we would give him a written warning, noting that any further violation of the code of conduct would lead to termination.

The next day we met with that employee and presented him with the warning. Having had some time to think about what he had said, he agreed with our assessment. We again stressed that everyone is entitled to their political beliefs, but using inappropriate language to communicate those beliefs, as he did, would not be tolerated. He signed the warning without objection.

Then we met with the second employee, the target of the verbal abuse. She said she was pleased with how swiftly the situation was handled and was satisfied with the action taken. We told her to inform us of further conduct violations. There was never another negative incident between the two employees—in fact, they forged a positive relationship for the rest of their time with the company. People who had heard them arguing were able to see them again in a positive light. Collaboration and productivity returned.

Our resolution of this matter was effective because we acted quickly, addressed the issues directly, and ensured the safety and comfort of both employees. Citing the code of conduct led other employees to become more interested in its standards, particularly regarding inappropriate language. We offered a new offsite training course on how to communicate with tact and professionalism, which was well received.

Had we terminated the first employee for his code of conduct violation, some people might have had more anxiety about that document rather than greater interest in it. That action might have been effective in immediately addressing an individual behavior problem, but it would have been ineffective in the long run as a missed opportunity for growth and development on the part of all employees. Something positive came from the incident.

Lessons Learned

When confronted with a conflict, first solve the problem right in front of you. This is especially important if it involves company policy, such as a code of conduct. Here, the issue was disrespectful communication, not the impetus for the communication.

Second, take steps to ensure that unacceptable behavior will not be repeated. Create or expand opportunities for employees to learn from an incident by having meaningful conversations about what the company policy looks like in practice. Such discussions will help to reinforce employee behaviors that align with the organization's expectations and discourage behaviors that do not.

Lastly, address any remaining issues, but remember that how core issues are handled will affect whether similar situations will recur.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *conflict management* (the organization resolves conflict rather than buries it) and *openness* (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives). Because the company had a good grasp of the former, it could move on to address the latter.

Me + We + WO + RK Framework

Bringing about improvement and change here would require continued focus on the *WO* question (what were the work outcomes of this conversation?) and new focus on the *RK* question (what refined knowledge can arise from these experiences and outcomes?).

POLITICALLY TINGED THREAT LEADS TO TERMINATION

Summary

An employee's extreme, obscene comments about a politician makes others feel unsafe and violates the company code of conduct. HR fires her immediately; later, outside counsel and chief executives concur. This major situation has an excellent outcome.

Two employees were having a conversation in an open work area, and the topic of the ongoing presidential campaign arose. One stated that she couldn't understand why anyone would favor a certain candidate, using a common expletive to declare his supporters "idiots." She referenced the candidate's reported boast about crudely "grabbing" women, angrily stating that anyone who supported him should be "grabbed" in the same way.

A coworker in the area was alarmed by the employee's comments and immediately alerted HR. He told me he felt unsafe due to the level of aggression she expressed. Due to his uneasiness, I let him leave the office for the day.

Next, I contacted outside legal counsel and two C-suite executives and drafted documentation of the incident. Then, I called the aggressive employee into my office, cited her violation of the company code of conduct, and terminated her employment.

The employee responded that she knew that she had gone too far with her comments but never intended to imply that she would support sexual aggression of any kind. She agreed that she had violated the code and understood that we had no choice but to terminate her. She was very apologetic. The entire process from incident to resolution took about an hour.

My primary concern was to keep the staff safe and free from exposure to anger and profane language. The extreme nature of the employee's comments and display of emotion, along with the coworker's statement that he felt unsafe, demanded immediate action.

The executives and counsel agreed that termination was the only option. At the very least, the aggressive employee's behavior violated the code of conduct. Due to the more serious potential in the uneasy coworker's perception of an unsafe environment, it was clear that the employee would have to be removed from the office.

After escorting the fired employee from the building, I communicated with the entire staff to see that everyone felt safe and comfortable. I briefly thought about posting a guard for the rest of the day but decided it was unnecessary because the employee had fully admitted her wrongdoing with no additional signs of aggression or anger.

Each step was taken to ensure that I was not moving *too* quickly—that I was thinking through all the ramifications, weighing possible outcomes, and having the right people address legal issues in advance.

The coworker who felt unsafe was appreciative of the company's swift action, especially considering the real possibility that the situation could have escalated. Since he perceived a threat, I could have called the police. Once I spoke to the employee, however, I understood that she did not mean to sound threatening. A police presence could have itself escalated the situation, potentially rendering any other steps taken less effective.

Later on, while the fired employee was on COBRA insurance, we were able to navigate a cordial relationship through our communications.

Lesson Learned

Egregious, unacceptable behavior demands swift, decisive action. Lean on your organization's policies and guidelines to navigate through each step. Then, chart a course to underscore the organization's concerns for employees, with a focus on their safety and well-being. This will allow HR and the organization to mitigate any long-term effects of these unfortunate incidents.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *conflict management* (the organization resolves conflict rather than buries it) and *entrenchment* (the organization encourages staff to understand others' perspectives, refrain from making judgments, and prevent our opinions from becoming entrenched and weaponized). The conflict was well managed, so the company can move on to guiding people to understand rather than judge.

Me + We + WO + RK Framework

Bringing about improvement and change here would require focus on the *RK* question (what refined knowledge can arise from these experiences and outcomes?).

PRECONCEPTIONS NEARLY PRECLUDE THE PERFECT PERSON FOR THE POSITION

Summary

Based on the apparent politics of a job candidate's previous employer (listed on his résumé), an executive doubts whether he would be a good fit for an advertised position. The executive recognizes her bias, conducts the interview with the candidate, and hires a good employee. Her perception of his politics turns out to be wrong anyway, which reinforces the values of resisting bias and of conducting in-person interviews. This minor situation has an excellent resolution.

A fellow executive took the lead on reviewing résumés that came in to HR for an advertised position. She narrowed the field down to a dozen candidates, and we started interviewing. The first day passed with no real clear standouts. The next day, she wanted to discuss one of the candidates scheduled for an interview that afternoon.

According to this candidate's résumé, a large portion of his work experience related to political campaigns for several particularly controversial figures. My colleague was not enthusiastic about him because he might not be a good fit for our organizational culture, due to his association with these campaigns. While she wouldn't want anyone to disqualify *her* because of her political beliefs, she said, she had to be honest about how she felt about *him*. Should we proceed with the scheduled interview?

Yes, I responded. First, it was bad form to cancel an interview the same day it was scheduled. Second, I explained, we should not let preconceived notions based on someone's political work or views color or change the opportunities available to them. In both instances, we would be doing something to someone that we, as individuals, would not want done to us.

If this job candidate is not a good fit with our culture, I continued, it will very likely be revealed in the interview. Let's conduct the interview, identify any challenges or opportunities that come up, then discuss all the candidates going through the hiring process.

The candidate's interview proceeded, and he was outstanding. He directly and personably answered our questions and engagingly discussed relevant topics. We were thoroughly impressed—he was definitely and obviously the right person for the job. My colleague remarked that, based solely on this candidate's résumé, she never would have thought the interview would be successful. She expressed surprise that he surpassed her prejudgment.

We conducted the remaining interviews that were scheduled and later that day offered the position to the candidate, who accepted.

Not long after our new employee started working for us, we were having a conversation with him about the controversial political campaigns on his résumé. It turned out that he had not been on their payrolls. He was on the payroll of a company that managed numerous campaigns for various offices and different parties, and he had had no say in which campaigns they assigned him to work on.

It gave my colleague pause to realize how her initial impression of the candidate's résumé could have influenced the outcome. Her perception might have derailed an opportunity for someone who was a successful interviewee and who now was an employee who fit in well with the organization. He had been unfairly judged on something he did not have control over, which might have resulted in exclusionary behavior on our part.

The candidate's résumé was an important background document that provided detail, but the interview process provided context. Interviewing him was the best way to determine whether my colleague's concerns about him were valid, and we avoided the pitfalls of having her personal views bleed into the situation.

I did appreciate my colleague's openness and candor at the time. She had legitimate concerns about the effect someone can have on organizational culture; she expressed her difficulty in reconciling this candidate's résumé, at least, with our culture.

One should be able to navigate one's own moral compass. I provided honest feedback to my colleague, and she acknowledged that she would not want her views similarly held against her.

This was a learning experience for my colleague and a gain for the organization: a win-win. She was quick to recognize that her ideas were misplaced (which is difficult for many people to do) and was eager to move forward, which is an example of great leadership. And by avoiding exclusionary behavior, we found the perfect candidate.

Had we canceled this candidate's interview, our preconceptions of him would have carried more weight than our actual perceptions of him eventually did. Without our getting to know and understand him face-to-face, we would have denied an opportunity to a thoroughly qualified individual who wound up being the best person for the job. Skipping his interview would have been the path of least resistance but not the best course of action. It also would have compromised my sense of right and wrong. We should all hold ourselves to high standards of integrity (as well as professional and organizational codes of ethics, if applicable).

The outcomes of this conflict were positive in both the short and long term for the candidate, the organization, my colleague, and me. There are no higher standards than that.

Lessons Learned

The issues involved here are twofold: a candidate presented a somewhat vaguely phrased résumé, to which an executive initially responded with bias (which she fortunately soon overcame). The apparent reason for the executive's negative response was not even accurate.

Managers with responsibility for recruitment and hiring can be coached on which elements in a résumé are appropriate to focus on and which are irrelevant. Employees and potential employees should be taught how to present their work experiences effectively. This will help them not only with résumés when they are candidates for new positions, but also with documentation when they are being considered for promotions, transfers, stretch assignments, or awards. Employees may not even be aware of, let alone understand, how certain statements can trigger reviewers' unconscious biases.

HR should stay committed to the in-person or online video interview process, whereby the hiring manager or executive determines candidates' overall qualifications, experience, and fit with the organizational culture by seeing and talking to them in real time. Give all candidates due respect. Make sure they are not prejudged or excluded from opportunities before they have a chance to represent themselves in the proper forum.

When there is a potential conflict between existing workplace culture and a candidate's perceived beliefs or behaviors, check to see whether that perception is due to bias. Be aware of your own biases and consider how they might affect the organization. In dealing with a peer's implicit or explicit biases, clarify your understanding of what they are saying. Address the real underlying situation and validate their concerns. Show how your proposed actions relate to their issues and provide solid reasoning for your stance.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factor involved here was *openness* (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives). The company can work on instilling empathy in people as a pathway to acceptance of other viewpoints.

Me + We + WO + RK Framework

Bringing about improvement and change here would require focus on the *We* question (what did my counterpart experience during this conversation?).

POLITICS OVERTAKES THE PANDEMIC

Summary

Without sufficient information about the pandemic early on, employees split into factions: those who accept the reality of the virus and those who believe it to be a creation of politics. This leads to workplace arguments and disruptions. As new data becomes available, HR provides it to employees, quelling their fears and bringing calm. This is a major incident with a good outcome.

In the beginning days of the COVID-19 crisis, the lack of available data created a lot of skepticism among some employees. They were unable to comprehend what was happening and started to believe that the pandemic was a politically created distraction. They criticized the lockdowns, layoffs, safety measures, and more and even had doubts about the very existence of the virus itself.

Employees' opinions on the reality of the pandemic began to fall into political extremes. Factions developed, and tensions grew. Arguments on the job between employees led to disruptions that hindered performance and productivity.

We were categorized as essential workers, and our company had very little flexibility in terms of employee schedules, whether we could work remotely, and so forth. We were all required to be onsite, put in our hours, produce the contracted materials, and deliver them to the government on time.

HR was responsible for maintaining peace among employees with differences of opinion, no matter how strong, in an amicable work environment. Other than that, the company had no policies in place specific to the pandemic, due to the unforeseen circumstances of the situation.

When the state issued an emergency shutdown, HR used the time to come up with more definitive strategies and a plan of action to deal with both health-related and political disruptions.

Most importantly, HR was able to issue information proving to employees that the virus was real, based on recent government releases of more complete and reliable facts and data. This countered the uncertainties and misinformation that put people on edge in the initial days of the crisis. As fears came under control, political anxieties calmed.

With input from leadership, HR created company-wide policies and procedures in accord with guidelines issued by government health agencies. Measures included physical distancing in common areas, limited numbers of people in conference rooms, and individual employees being permitted to work remotely, as decided on a case-by-case basis. The uniform approach brought discipline to the workforce and a more cordial environment to the workplace.

Lessons Learned

COVID-19 has been an international wake-up call. Every organization needs to carefully define its responses to events that may cause similar disruptions to its workforce and workplaces—and they need to do so proactively, not reactively. Think ahead. Consider the many

types of catastrophic events (e.g., pandemics, fires, floods, earthquakes) that could affect your organization and employees. Include a comprehensive communication plan that can be rolled out to warn, advise, inform, and reassure people.

In this case, even though there was a paucity of information about the pandemic as the crisis began, it still would have been helpful for HR to hold a company-wide meeting early on, at least to address everyone's concerns at once. This might have prevented people from splitting into factions. Growing polarization, left unaddressed, can spawn workplace disruptions in addition to those caused by the main crisis event itself.

Leaders also need to figure out how to manage employees who are at odds with the organization over how it decides to handle the crisis. People should be free to express valid concerns. It is vital to differentiate them from those whose expressions are counterproductive—conspiratorial, provocative, and excessively fearful—with the potential to cause further havoc or harm.

As of this writing, the pandemic isn't over, but organizational leaders would do well to put together a debriefing now on the most recent phase of the ongoing crisis.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *polarization* (the organization welcomes individual as well as collective opinions of all kinds and works to prevent people from becoming further polarized from one another) and *openness* (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives). The company can build on its early experiences in bringing people together to navigate later crises.

Me + We + WO + RK Framework

Bringing about improvement and change here would require focus on the *WO* question (what were the work outcomes of this conversation?).

AN ELECTION YEAR MIGHT BE TIME TO ENFORCE THAT BAN ON POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Summary

Employees and managers engage in widespread political activity in the workplace, even though company policy prohibits it. HR issues a reminder of the policy and acts to discourage further activity. The response may be too little, too late, but the effort is a way forward to prevent future political activity—even if the present outcome is somewhat inconclusive.

A long-term employee's work regularly took him to different departments throughout the company. As he made his rounds, he heard many people, employees as well as managers, discussing the upcoming election and freely sharing their opinions about the candidates and issues. Political materials covered walls and desks. Official communication methods (e.g., company email, intranet) were being used to solicit, promote, and defend various political views.

The employee came to HR because he was concerned that these activities might escalate to verbal or even physical altercations, especially in light of the nation's already volatile political climate. He also observed what he called a loss in productivity. Based on my prior dealings with this employee, I knew him to be fair and reliable, and I had no reason to doubt his report. I suspected he was actually downplaying the magnitude of the situation.

The employee asked if HR planned to enforce the company policy prohibiting political activity in the workplace. As outlined in the handbook, the aim of this policy is to discourage uncomfortable exchanges and maintain a peaceful work environment.

It was still early in the election year, so it seemed prudent to do something right away rather than wait for a politically motivated disruptive incident to occur, which could lead to disciplinary or legal

action. I met with my manager, and we agreed that doing nothing would increase that risk.

We had to remind people of the company's policy prohibiting political activity—but without inciting an increase in such activity in response.

One option would be to conduct an investigation of the specific departments cited by the concerned employee. The individuals found to be violating the policy could be coached or reprimanded accordingly. This approach, however, would not do much to raise awareness of the policy by the whole organization. We decided to send out a mass communication without singling out departments or individuals.

One difficulty with sending out a company-wide message is that employees often wonder what prompted it, which can lead to rumor mongering and finger pointing. We didn't want to tip anyone off to the concerned employee's report, so we did not investigate further (even to confirm it—I already believed him).

The director of HR sent a communication to all employees in all locations, with a general reminder of the current policy prohibiting political activity in the workplace, along with the appropriate section from the company handbook and a request to contact HR with any questions.

Local HR representatives were advised to increase their visibility in the office during the election cycle and to be available to employees who wanted to share related issues. The reps were also asked to discreetly observe and address any policy violations.

In the weeks after the reminder was sent out, several employees approached HR directly. Some challenged the policy, believing it suppressed their participation in the election process and inhibited their freedom to express themselves in a democracy.

Other employees thanked us for the reminder about the policy, saying they had been disturbed by the in-office political activity but felt uncomfortable reporting it to HR for fear of reprisal—not only

from coworkers but also from managers who expressed "disconcerting" opinions.

Other than these private comments to HR, there were no further reportable incidents of political activity in the workplace for the rest of the election cycle. I hope that the communication reminding employees of our policy continues to prevent them during future political campaigns and events.

Lessons Learned

HR plays an important role in monitoring what goes on in an organization's culture. One could reasonably wonder why this HR department had not noticed the increase in a prohibited activity occurring throughout the workplace before it reached the point at which an employee felt compelled to report it.

Once HR was alerted to the issue, staff took the necessary action. But it's wise to periodically reengage and reeducate employees about policies outside of an emergent issue. Consider whether preventive interventions or communications would be equally effective to preclude activities that kill productivity. Have a structure in place for disciplining managers who fail to enforce policies or fail to notice widespread violations in the first place.

When a problem is reported, corroborate it and find out how pervasive it is by observing workplace interactions. Do regular reality checks. Think about how you want employees, supervisors, managers, and leaders to engage with HR to bolster the organizational culture by following and leveraging the company's policies.

As for political activities specifically, engage supervisors and managers to see if the organizational culture is affected by outside political events and to what extent.

Issues surrounding freedom of speech in the workplace usually depend on the nature of the employer. Private company prohibitions do not necessarily equate to government suppression. Chart a course with input from counsel for explaining to the workforce whether and how the First Amendment applies to your workplace.

Lastly, listen to feedback following HR interventions. Here, the fact that employees thanked HR for reinforcing the no-politics policy was a clue that something deeper might be happening. The fact that they were also disturbed, feared reprisal, and knew of disconcerting opinions requires follow-up and possible additional action.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *conflict management* (the organization resolves conflict rather than buries it), *belonging* (the organization provides all staff with a sense of belonging), and *openness* (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives). Within the confines of what its policies will allow, the company has the tools to address similar situations in the future.

Me + We + WO + RK Framework

Bringing about improvement and change here would require focus on the *WO* question (what were the work outcomes of this conversation?).

VIOLENCE PREVENTION TRAINING
PROVOKES VIOLENT COMMENT

Summary

A supervisor chosen as a potential leader criticizes his training on the prevention of workplace violence by making a comment that advocates violence against immigrants. The company suspends him and withdraws its efforts to further train or promote him, but allows him to return to work, even though he still sees nothing wrong with what he said. This is a significant incident with no real resolution.

The company identified a midlevel employee as having the potential to grow into a higher-level role. He was entered into our

leadership training course, which covered the company's values, code of conduct, expectations, and more. After he completed the course, he was assigned a coach/mentor who met with him on a regular basis.

The employee subsequently applied for an internal position as a supervisor at a branch of the company on the opposite side of the country. If he got this promotion, he would be in charge of all of the local operations and employees in that rural region.

One of the employee's required trainings was an online course on workplace violence prevention. He found it offensive and told his leadership coach at their next meeting. During their conversation, he said the course unfairly depicted readers of gun magazines as violent, bad people. As their talk continued, the subject of immigration came up. The employee said to the coach, "If someone with a gun went down to the border and picked off a few illegal immigrants, they'd get the message."

The coach told the employee that this comment was inappropriate. He ended their talk, then notified the legal and HR departments.

Around the same time, the employee received an offer for the supervisory position he had applied for. He accepted the promotion and began the process of selling his house and incurring other company-paid relocation expenses, preparing to move across the country to that region.

Meanwhile, as the HR business partner, I opened an investigation into the employee's remarks. The beliefs he expressed were inappropriate, insensitive, and indicative of a marked lack of empathy and trustworthiness. This was especially concerning because he had completed the course on preventing workplace violence and earlier had completed his leadership training.

I needed to assess this potential supervisor's ability to lead going forward and needed to determine the repercussions of his remarks now and in the future. Did his beliefs affect how he worked with his current team? Did or would he share his beliefs with other employees? Were his values compatible with the company's? If the company

pulled the offer for his promotion, how would that affect him personally and professionally? If the company could maintain a working relationship with him, what further training and guidance would he need? Would management and HR have to make any other changes in the organization because of this incident?

I interviewed the employee. He was pleased to have gotten his promotion but felt betrayed by his leadership coach. He said the coach should not have shared what he told him in confidence. The employee was more offended by the coach's action in reporting his comment—"picking off" immigrants with a gun—than by his having made the comment. He saw nothing wrong with what he said.

The employee's tone deafness about his remarks led me to believe that he lacked the empathy to be a good leader and that rewarding him with a promotion would be ill advised. I thought he would not be successful as a supervisor anywhere in this company, much less as the sole person in charge of a distant branch in a rural region without another leader, coach, or mentor nearby to advise or assist him.

It was also discovered that the employee had accepted the promotion without checking with his own supervisor and had started incurring relocation expenses that were not yet authorized.

By now, HR brought in the employee's supervisor, the coach, the regional manager, the directors of HR and employee relations, and legal counsel to discuss next steps. Terminating the employee was considered, but in the end it was decided to give him a second chance. This decision was based on his length of service and highly rated job performance—despite his apparent nonalignment with the company's values.

The employee would be held accountable for his past actions, along with an opportunity to behave differently in the future. His career opportunities would be limited, however, both by what he said and his lack of understanding of why it was improper.

The company withdrew its offer to promote the employee to supervisor at the branch location and imposed a week's suspension.

The regional manager and HR director informed him of these actions and told him to use the time away to decide whether the company would still be a good fit for him. They spelled out the company's expectations for his behavior. If he chose to return, they said, he would be welcomed, but he would need to align himself with company values while in the workplace. They would continue to help him develop his leadership skills.

Out of an abundance of caution after their conversation (especially since the employee's objectionable remarks concerned gun violence), the company provided extra security at the site for forty-eight hours, to ensure that he would not return to take out his anger on those he thought had wronged him.

After his one-week suspension, the employee did return to work. At first he was resentful, which created new tensions in the workplace, then gradually he seemed to let his resentments go. He did his job and met the expectations put in front of him. But the trust relationship was irrevocably damaged. He did not attempt to mend fences. He stopped communicating with anyone unless absolutely necessary. After about a year, he left the company.

The whole episode occurred over a period of about eighteen months. I felt that its resolution was inconclusive.

The measures taken by the company in response to the employee's remarks were effective inasmuch as his objectionable behavior stopped.

The measures were ineffective, however, for two reasons. First, allowing the employee back at his job created new tensions in the workplace. Second, the position he would have been promoted to (had it not been withdrawn because of his behavior) remained unfilled, putting management back at square one as to finding a leader for that branch location.

Lessons Learned

There was no clear way forward here because the leaders assigned to manage the situation more or less set aside the employee's behavior,

despite the fact that he never saw it as unacceptable or inappropriate. Perhaps they felt the company had already invested a significant amount of time and energy in him. None of the decision-makers here seemed to be using the same playbook.

A coaching rather than a corrective tone might have made the employee's rehabilitation easier once he returned to work, but the damage was done and trust was broken. The situation ultimately resolved itself with the employee's voluntary departure from the company.

In a similar situation, several courses of action may be useful. First and foremost, engage management in a discussion about how employees are considered for promotions: leadership traits, character, behavior, alignment with culture and corporate philosophy, and so forth. Consider scrutinizing pertinent policies and procedures, including those governing relocation expenses.

The learning and development team should review its role in helping to prepare employees for higher-level roles. Gauge courses offered on leadership, prevention of workplace violence, and other topics, not only to see if they can be improved but also to ensure they align with corporate culture and the values that all employees are expected to follow.

When employees demonstrate behavior that does not align with organizational standards, find out what provisions are in place to guide the best response. HR has an interest in identifying and attending to employees who are a bad fit—and fitness is based on what the organization wants, not on what the individual believes. Make sure people are aware of the consequences of unacceptable behavior. This may or may not extend to requiring that they have intensive training on respect, dignity, and empathy.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *belonging* (the organization provides all staff with a sense of belonging) and *openness* (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives). Working on

these elements will be the first steps to rebuild trust in this company. Its people need to understand the impact of what they say and do on others.

Me + We + WO + RK Framework

Bringing about improvement and change here would require focus on the *Me* question (what did I experience during this conversation?) and the *We* question (what did my counterpart experience during this conversation?).