Talking Taboo

Making the Most of
Polarizing Discussions at Work

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Chapter 5

Politics in Broadcast and Social Media

These stories take place in that space where politics and media intersect. The public forum, once known as the corner soapbox, now includes a plethora of platforms for expression. Consequences arise when people make their political views known—on the street, in print, or online. In the workplace, employee interactions with broadcast media often occur in the form of a television in the break room. Some organizations have learned the hard way that providing this type of "benefit"—as a source of information, entertainment, or distraction—provides no benefit at all when it serves primarily as a catalyst for disruption. Add social media to the mix and the question becomes one of overlapping, indeterminate boundaries—work/life, public/private—relating to people's opinions.

CHANGING THE CHANNEL TO RESPECT

Summary

Two otherwise productive employees trade insults about the political coverage on the TV in the break room, and their bad behavior escalates. An informative conversation with HR and subsequent training helps them learn to be more respectful and considerate. This trivial situation has an excellent resolution.

There is a television in the break room of the company where I work. As the presidential election approached, there was quite a bit of channel flipping during the day to this or that news program. By itself, this wasn't unusual. However, a few people came to HR with concerns about a controversy in the TV room between two employees with opposing political viewpoints, who were increasingly at odds with each other over several days.

Each employee was being disrespectful of the other. What started in a joking manner with offhand comments had started to escalate into explicit, degrading, and profane name calling and insults. One employee hid the TV remote so that the channel could not be changed. In retaliation, the other employee posted political yard signs all around the other's car in the company parking lot. Their coworkers were witness to their emotional outbursts.

I wish people had informed HR of the situation sooner so it could have been addressed sooner. This was not the environment that our company has strived to achieve for our workforce.

These were two hardworking employees who did their jobs well. Aside from their current feud, there had never been any problems with their work, attendance, or social interactions. They had once liked each other and now could barely look at each other.

The feuding employees were brought in for a sit-down conversation with HR and a manager to see how things had gotten to this point. They each described their deeply felt concerns about the presidential candidates: one feared the United States would be led into war; the other feared national financial ruin. Both were so focused on changing the other's mind about whom to vote for that I had to bring their focus back to how to work together respectfully.

The wonderful thing about living in the United States, I said, is that we are entitled to have our opinions and to voice them. It would be contradictory if people couldn't recognize differences in opinion. But while we have the right to hold any opinions and beliefs, I continued, we cannot force others to believe the same way. Company policy stated that it was important for us to have a civil workplace.

We don't have to agree, but we should be able to respectfully agree to disagree.

It was decided that both employees would participate in an eight-week course of respectful workplace training. We wanted to help them see how they could have reacted differently and to provide them with the tools to make different choices in the future.

HR could have more harshly disciplined these employees, but punishment would not have helped them change their behavior—which in fact they did, on the job as well as outside the workplace. They truly benefitted from the training they received. They gained insights into how their actions affected those around them. They learned to understand other people's perspectives, about politics as well as on aspects of their work. They began to seek out different viewpoints.

Trying to understand others can change your outlook and opinions, if you are open to it.

Lessons Learned

The key to solving this problem—contentious interactions between otherwise collegial, productive employees—was to remind them of the need for civility and to insert that concept into their lives through communication and training.

Had the feuding employees been less open to reason, the outcome might have been far different. What they discussed during their sit-down might even have given fuel to their feud, making productivity and civility decline further. Communication and training are important because they help the workforce hone the skills needed to maintain a civil environment.

Conduct a periodic review of organizational policies on a respectful workplace. Revise and update provisions as necessary to keep up with what is going on in the world. Offer guidance to employees as to what kinds of behaviors are respectful and will be tolerated and what kinds of behaviors are disrespectful and won't be tolerated. Outline the consequences for policy violations.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factor involved here was *openness* (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives).

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?).

ARGUMENT IN THE BREAK ROOM
ESCALATES IN THE PARKING LOT

Summary

A program on a news channel on the break room TV prompts a political argument between employees, who escalate their conflict after work in the parking lot. After all is said and done, this somewhat trivial occurrence has a good outcome.

A news program on the TV in the break room featured a political issue, and two employees on a break started discussing it. They were on opposite sides of the issue, and their discussion began to get heated. Other people present became uncomfortable and alerted management.

When the feuding employees went back to work, that seemed to be the end of it. As they left for the day, however, their argument resumed. In the parking lot, one employee allegedly threw his sandwich at the other, got in his car, and drove off. There were no other witnesses to this "assault" reported to HR by the "victim."

It wasn't much of a disruption, but the rival employees were distracted, coworkers were gossiping, and managers were taking time from their other responsibilities to deal with it.

opponent's right to have a differing opinion. HR also crucially emphasized that certain topics cannot be discussed at work, especially if the parties to such a discussion cannot behave honorably.

Organizations would do well to question whether having a television in the workplace is wise. The difficulties it causes often outweigh any benefits for employees.

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). By managing the conflict well, the company can work on preventive measures to discourage future disagreements from devolving.

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?).

LOVE OF COUNTRY QUESTIONED OVER LUNCH

Summary

Employees watching the presidential inauguration on the TV in the lunchroom make divisive comments to each other, creating a disturbance and bothering those who just want to eat their lunch. An excellent outcome is reached after a minor disturbance.

The company allowed the television in the communal lunchroom to stay on during the presidential inauguration ceremony for those who were interested in seeing the new president sworn in.

This was not an unusual practice, and the TV had been on for previous inaugurations and other noteworthy events.

At one point an employee watching the TV became annoyed by coworkers chatting over their lunch. She said it was disrespectful to the incoming president. She continued to make provocative comments, such as saying she was embarrassed by the outgoing president. Eventually she yelled, "This is very important to those of us who love our country!"

Two other coworkers in the lunchroom responded that they were there not to watch the ceremony but to eat lunch. They told the employee they did not support the new president and didn't vote for him. They voiced their support of the outgoing president and were angered by her suggestion they did not love their country.

A heated discussion ensued regarding the merits of the incoming and outgoing presidents, the media, and other political topics. Within fifteen minutes the situation escalated considerably. All three participants became animated and aggressive, banging on tables and swearing with loud voices that could be heard outside of the lunchroom.

HR was notified of a disturbance, and we came in to assess the situation. We quickly determined that this was a political disagreement and asked the three arguing employees to come with us and leave everyone else in peace. Our main concern was to end any interaction with those in the lunchroom who were uninvolved in the argument.

To find out what happened, I took the supporter of the incoming president to one room, and my colleague took the supporters of the outgoing president to another room. They all told the same story. We considered sending them home but decided it was better to let them cool down at the office while making clear that their behavior was inappropriate.

We explained to each side that differing opinions exist and that employees need to be respectful of one another and their opinions.

The supporter of the incoming president was still angry, reiterating that she felt the supporters of the outgoing president were disrespecting the country, initially by speaking over the inauguration telecast. I told her that different people express themselves in different ways and that disagreement does not mean disrespect. We discussed situations in which this could play out.

Once all three employees calmed down, we brought them all into the same room to encourage a group discussion in a civilized manner. We emphasized that HR's concern was not with their opinions but with the disrespect they showed to their coworkers and the company. All three employees agreed that their behavior was disrespectful.

One employee began to cry, saying the political situation was very upsetting for her but that she was embarrassed by her behavior, and she apologized. Her opponent then also apologized for her own behavior. She said while she didn't agree, she respected the right of all to their opinions. All three employees proceeded to engage in a civil conversation about the country and the pros and cons of the different political parties.

No further disciplinary action was taken. Our approach allowed the employees to express themselves while we made clear to them the company's expectations of how to behave in the workplace.

Lessons Learned

This situation was fraught with peril, but the organization deftly turned it around by using the information gleaned from an immediate investigation of the feud and guiding the feuding parties into a discussion about disrespectful behavior.

The discussion shifted the focus from the employees' viewpoints to the broader effects of their behavior. HR was able to demonstrate in real time that showing disrespect for one's coworkers also shows disrespect for the company and its culture. Allowing the employees to express themselves permitted the conversation to move in another direction, which, in

turn, enabled them to graciously admit that their behavior was inappropriate.

Acknowledging diverse views without undermining organizational culture is more than a clever approach—it is a civil and respectful one.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factor involved here was *entrenchment* (the organization encourages staff to understand others' perspectives, refrain from making judgments, and prevent our opinions from becoming entrenched and weaponized). That some employees felt compelled to become involved because the incident occurred in a communal workspace was part of the problem.

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?).

BRIEFLY DEFEATING A CULTURE OF FEAR

Summary

On Inauguration Day 2009, when the nation's first Black president would be sworn in, employees of color are excited. The White executive with control over the office television is visibly upset and in a bad mood. Knowing how she would react, the employees are afraid to ask her to set up the TV and let them watch the swearing-in ceremony. Another White manager finally sets up the TV behind closed doors.

I was one of five African Americans among eleven people of color in a forty-two-employee workforce at the local office of a national

organization. The nation had recently elected its first Black president, and now it was Inauguration Day.

I was excited, as were many other employees, especially employees of color. The department head was not. A White woman, she had openly expressed disgust about the election outcome. On this day she was visibly upset and remained in a bad mood.

It was common knowledge around the office to not further rile up this executive when she was already upset. She perpetuated a culture of fear. As employees of color, we knew to hide our enthusiasm about the inauguration or we would face her wrath.

The department head had control over the television in the meeting room. It was not uncommon for employees to watch TV during breaks. Would she allow us to watch the historic ceremony during our lunch hour? She had the power to make that decision. Her direct report was not going to do so because he, too, was in fear of her. I was a manager on the team but lacked the power to make the decision. We all knew she would oppose it.

I also did not want to miss the inauguration. As the time for the noon ceremony approached, there was a feeling of unease in the office, evidenced by small group conversations. Employees looked for someone in management to make the decision to give us access to the TV. No one was willing to directly ask the department head, who was the highest-ranking executive in the office that day.

Finally, just before noon, a division director, a White man, set up and turned on the TV in the meeting room. Word spread quickly. Employees of all colors brought their lunch into the room and closed the door. Inside, the inauguration was an emotional experience for us—there was hugging, crying, cheering.

Once the lunch hour was over, however, everyone straightened up. We exited the room silently. It was back to business as usual. When we left for the day, those of us who had been in the room exchanged furtive winks and smiles of acknowledgment.

Had it not been for the courage of the division director, a multiracial group of employees excited about an historic event

opinions as they witnessed the inauguration together in harmony and without fear.

This organization must face and address its many challenges. One concerns the machinations surrounding access to the company TV. Another is the culture of fear in which employees are afraid to approach their leaders, resulting in predictably unfortunate outcomes. There are added difficulties for employees of color or other minority groups.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factor involved here was *belonging* (the organization provides all staff with a sense of belonging). The manager rescued the day by recognizing this underlying need. The company must continue its work in this area so all employees lose any sense of fear.

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?).

PRESIDENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA DON'T MIX

Summary

The president of a religiously affiliated university shares political messages on various social media platforms. Following negative internal and external responses to his posts on one site, he makes his profile and posts there private, but on another site, the public can still see his posts. This is a major issue with a poor outcome.

At the religiously affiliated university where I work, the university president made no secret of his opposition to a candidate in

an upcoming election. He regularly shared politically themed posts on his public profile on a major social network. Several university employees saw one especially contentious post and felt it was inappropriate, especially coming from the president of a religiously affiliated university, and filed complaints with HR.

The university is very clear that all employees are expected to represent the organization in a positive manner. Given that the president's profile on this social media site included his title and organization, he was not following that policy.

I discussed the complaints and my concerns with the VP of HR. I feel that if you are a university president or in a similar role, it is important to be aware of how you are perceived by the public. It would be wise to make your social media profile private or at least to give more consideration to what you are posting.

The VP of HR wanted to address the matter quickly. She was unable to speak to the university president in person, so she sent him an email. She suggested that he make his profile private to avoid these situations in the future. He said he was not happy to hear that employees were spending their time looking at social media or at his profile on that site. But he did make it private and deleted the controversial post.

Because of the controversy, however, employees continue to monitor the president's other social media accounts, which are still not private. He continues to post elsewhere as he sees fit. He recently commented on an altercation during a basketball game involving one of our students. This comment went viral and was reported on news and gossip programs online and on television.

Because the comment incident occurred shortly after the social network post incident, the president should have been disciplined by the university's board of trustees. This would have made clear to him that this behavior would not be tolerated. But no disciplinary action was ever taken.

Making the president's profile private was an effective solution to the problem only insofar as employees and the public no longer

have access to his personal posts there. A better solution would have been for him to have a different, additional, public-facing social network page on that site, where he could share university-related information in a positive manner. This would create an element of transparency even as he maintained his private page. The best solution would be for all of his accounts on all social media platforms to be private.

Ideally, the university should have separate public accounts for its president (whomever that may be) on various sites, which would be monitored by the communications department to ensure they represent the university in a positive light.

Lessons Learned

An organization's leaders set an example. Employees observe their leaders and will question behaviors that appear out of alignment with the organization's mission, vision, and culture. This is especially true when a leader's improper behavior occurs in a public forum, such as on social media. The organization must be able to respond when employees or the public become aware of the leader's improprieties.

Various governance groups—trustees, directors, ethics committees, and so forth—are usually charged with overseeing organizational leadership, but here, as in many cases, they took no corrective action. Disappointed employees and other observers will continue, however, to look for some kind of response, especially when the need for one seems obvious (such as when a leader's unwise online comment goes viral and is covered in the news!). HR must plan to deal with the backlash or fallout that may result from a failure to act by oversight bodies, or even by the misbehaving leader's peers.

Prepare to have difficult conversations with leaders and employees alike in such situations. If handled in a respectful manner, these discussions can lead to understanding, reconciliation, and acceptance, enabling the organization to rebuild trust and culture and move forward.

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 head of this educational institution needed to be educated about how his actions affected 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 *WO* question (what were the work outcomes of this conversation?).

DON'T JEOPARDIZE OUR FUNDING

Summary

An employee of a federally funded organization violates its social media policy by posting about funding cuts on her social media page. The issue is resolved when she deletes it. Although this is a minor incident, it has an excellent outcome.

We're a federally funded organization, and our last funding round was particularly difficult. Our funding was delayed with little warning and explanation, then cut drastically. One of our employees who was frustrated with the situation posted on her personal social media page a very long and detailed account of the inner workings of how our organization is funded. She also made assumptions about the current administration being responsible for the funding changes.

As soon as HR was alerted, I knew that the social media post would have to come down immediately.

One of our jobs as a federally funded organization is to keep our funders—the federal government—happy. That means staying quiet about any and all political issues that may affect our work. This is outlined in our social media policy. The employee's post said some very strong and negative things about the agency that funds us. Many of our stakeholders, community partners, and funders were among the employee's social media connections. The post could quickly reach them and others.

Our organization's funds had not yet been awarded, so the employee's action could have had a hugely negative impact.

I made our CEO aware of the situation. I had the employee's manager point out to her how the post violated our organization's social media policy. The manager asked her to remove it immediately, which she did. The entire matter was handled in less than thirty minutes, and there were no external negative consequences.

There were no further internal consequences either. Once the employee was educated on the policy, she complied with it. Only if she had not complied would we have sought more punitive action.

Lessons Learned

A strong social media policy provides valuable guidance as well as a framework for taking corrective action for noncompliance and, if damage occurs, for discussing consequences. Review your organization's social media policy and, if needed, update it. Communicate the changes to staff. Educate employees about the use of social media and how the policy fits in, especially if the stakes are high, as in this well-handled incident.

There was a serious risk of irreparable damage to this organization. Had the situation not been dealt with quickly pursuant to its established policy, the very viability of the organization could have been in question.

The nonprofit's board had to evaluate whether the employee's comments were appropriate, regardless of their content. As an HR professional serving on the board, my focus was on separating intent from perception.

The employee's apparent intent was to convey his opinions, taking a stand against the behaviors of certain political figures. The perception, however, was that the employee was engaging in the very behaviors he claimed to be fighting against. Rather than use words that would unify people, he used words that were divisive.

What's more, the employee posted his polarizing comments in a manner that implied agreement among everyone in the organization. In reality, employees of the organization held various perspectives regarding the political event and figures he was commenting on.

The employee's actions affected the community and our organizational partners, who questioned whether the nonprofit itself supported his extreme views, which likely would have alienated a larger segment of the community. It may have even put the nonprofit at risk of being targeted by people at the opposite end of the political spectrum.

Our first priority was the external display. I asked the employee to change the inflammatory message immediately because the board was uncomfortable with it. He was not happy. Even if it was removed, he said, it already served its purpose by provoking a reaction.

Our second priority was social media. I directed the employee to remove any mention of his association with the organization and to get training on observing appropriate boundaries online. He deleted his page, but weeks later he created a new one. That page had no political posts for several months, but gradually they reappeared.

The employee eventually resigned, partly because of the organization's response to his messages but also because his understanding of nonprofit advocacy did not fully align with ours.

Lessons Learned

If no social media policy exists in your organization, do the research and create one. Be certain to include parameters and guidelines for the following: acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, with examples; stating one's affiliation with the organization; posting externally; and consequences for noncompliance. Ensure that the policies are anchored within your cultural norms, including respectful expression of viewpoints within stated boundaries.

Also make certain that your code of conduct has provisions to address a behavioral situation like this one—in which the organization decides on a course of action to address unacceptable behavior and the employee abides by the action (albeit reluctantly) but over time repeats the behavior.

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). Here, an employee was actively trying to polarize rather than unify through his messages.

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?).

LACK OF CLARITY ON POLICY COMPOUNDS PROBLEMS

Summary

The practice of a nonprofit political organization is to neither endorse nor disparage particular candidates. An employee disparages a candidate on two social media sites. She gets a warning

for violating the organization's social media policy and requests a clarification of the policy regarding employees' personal accounts, but the organization never provides it. Racial issues come up regarding how she has been disciplined. This major issue for this particular workplace unfortunately has a poor resolution.

I work for a relatively small nonprofit organization that champions causes at one end of the political spectrum. Most of our employees are politically engaged activists who lean the same way. The organization's practice is to neither endorse nor disparage any particular candidate. It issues a "scorecard" ranking candidates in terms of their stated alignment with the organization's preferred causes and initiatives.

The organization informs employees of its neutral position on endorsing candidates. It also informs them of its social media policy forbidding disparaging comments about candidates. But the organization has not emphasized that the social media policy covers more than the organization's accounts—it extends to employees' personal social media accounts.

During the presidential primaries, an employee posted messages on her personal account on an external social network and also on the organization's internal channel. She strongly supported one candidate and described another candidate in the same political party as "a liar." Most employees supported the latter candidate, who ranked highest on the organization's scorecard.

While the employee's remark was somewhat innocuous on its face, posting it went against the organization's neutral position on endorsements as well as the social media policy on disparagements. The employee's action violated both.

This was the employee's second social media incident. Earlier, she had posted something internally that management disliked, and it was taken down without her knowledge. Because of that first incident, I thought it was important for HR to address the current controversy with her directly and immediately. We didn't want

the "liar" remark to remain visible to our employees or to affiliated organizations.

The employee's supervisor asked her to remove the post, and she did, although reluctantly, and HR gave her a verbal warning. The employee also requested clarification of what she could and could not post on social media.

Several factors made the situation difficult. First, the organization had not made clear to employees that its social media policy covers their personal accounts. Second, our employees are activists, who, by definition, are trying to upset the status quo. They need a place to express their views, and our policy seems at odds with their nature.

The third factor was race. The disciplined employee was a person of color. A number of her coworkers believed that in the first social media incident, she was singled out because of her race. Entirely coincidentally, two other persons of color had recently been terminated. So the organization was already struggling with the perception that it marginalizes its employees of color. Now management had to deal with an individual disciplinary action under a heightened sensitivity to racial issues.

The employee's request for clarification of the social media policy added another layer of complexity. We thought the policy was detailed, but aspects of it, apparently, were lacking. While its intent was clear, the specifics were not spelled out adequately.

Several levels of management debated the relevant issues, but ultimately we did not provide the clarification requested. We simply responded to the employee with a caution to not post remarks publicly disparaging candidates, either on her own social media pages (since people knew where she worked) or on our internal channels (since coworkers could construe them as offensive).

Our social media policy is still unclear about what types of comments employees can and cannot post and whether management can restrict or set guidelines governing employees' posts. Our national communications director has yet to provide a good answer to the

clarification question. The organization needs to find a way for our employees to express themselves in a safe, inoffensive way.

Lessons Learned

This cautionary tale provides multiple examples of how *not* to handle a situation. Certainly the lack of clear information about policies and the failure to provide definitive answers to pressing questions don't bode well for a good resolution of ongoing conflict.

If your organization's social media policy covers employees' personal accounts, be sure to clearly and explicitly spell that out directly in the policy so that employees understand what is expected of them. Specify what they can and cannot post on both internal and external social media outlets.

Be aware of how an organization's actions are perceived (e.g., by employees, the public). It doesn't matter whether those perceptions are accurate. If your organization says or does something that appears to diverge from its stated policies, cultural norms, or standard practices, that disconnect—even if unintentional—will be perceived poorly.

When certain groups of employees believe they are being singled out, the organization must address and correct that perception right away; otherwise, the issues can become more divisive over time.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *openness* (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives) and *conflict management* (the organization resolves conflict rather than buries it). The organization didn't really listen to its employees, which led to conflict and will fail to prevent further conflict.

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?).