

TALKING TABOO

Making the Most of Polarizing Discussions at Work

Chapter 1

Problematic Workplace Conversations: An Introduction

“Don’t talk about politics, sex, or religion in the workplace.”

“Don’t play the ‘race card.’”

“Keep your private life private.”

Many of us have been given this advice, but how many of us have been able to follow it over the course of our working lives?

Sometimes our desire for prudent forbearance from tough workplace talk is overtaken by personal passions or principles. Sometimes it’s overtaken by overwhelming external events, such as those that occurred during the tumultuous years of 1968 and 2001—and 2020 through 2021.

When politics, sex, race, religion, and other polarizing subjects come up in conversation among coworkers, what happens next? For HR professionals, there are lessons to be learned from the real-life incidents of colleagues who have handled the fallout in their own organizations.

As for me, I love to talk about controversial topics because they’re so interesting. It helps that I was raised in a cultural environment that encouraged emotionally charged word battles, acted out with equal enthusiasm by citizenry in public parks or by friends and family at the dinner table. Polarizing subjects capture my attention—even when playful banter devolves into physical confrontation—because

they're really all about people who *care* about something. They care so much, they will fight with anyone who opposes their perspective. Disagreements over politics, sex, religion, race, ethnicity, and the like are universal, hitting every swath of humanity.

As an Hispanic and an immigrant to the United States, I have encountered discrimination. The first time was as a child in Miami, when my family was asked to leave a store because we were Cuban. In private, my father often expressed hateful views about others. As a teen, I argued with relatives about apartheid and basic human rights, baffled that even people who have experienced the pain of racism would choose to engage in racism themselves.

At my first job as a cashier in a drug store, I was ringing up a prescription for a poor elderly woman on Medicaid who loudly lamented the lack of subsidies and the uncaring pharmaceutical industry. A younger man waiting in line behind her, about to pay full price for his medication, became more and more annoyed listening to her. Finally he interrupted to ask why she thought “big government” should give her welfare benefits. When she argued back, he called her a “communist.” She weakly hit him with her umbrella as other customers applauded her resolve, but he just shrugged, calling her a “crazy old bag” as he left the store.

I was appalled—and enthralled. Clearly, conflict was part of human behavior. Three subsequent events led to my deepening interest in the topic of conflict as a subject for serious scholarship.

The first was the Elián González fiasco that took place in 1999 and 2000. A predawn federal raid sent a young immigrant boy back to his father in Cuba. I was in graduate school working in a laboratory, talking about the news with a fellow student who defended the government's approach. I was vehemently opposed to it, pointing to the excessive use of force as unnecessary and destabilizing to a community steeped in drama. “But it's the drama that necessitates the excessive force!” he responded. I excoriated him for using cultural stereotypes to justify government policy. We almost came to blows when a colleague took notice and told a joke to deescalate the situation.

This incident showed me that even the most heated exchanges in the workplace can be managed.

The next event occurred when I was a couple of years into a new position with a respected organization. A seemingly trivial matter revealed some extreme polarization in that workplace. Two coworkers in my department were discussing a just-published interview with then-president Barack Obama. One said she was offended by Obama's criticism of a popular musician; the other said she was offended by the *musician's* behavior. The first employee announced that Obama should only focus on "presidential" things, which the second interpreted to be an insult of Obama as "unpresidential." Soon their argument became racially charged, and the employees had to be separated.

Witnessing this incident taught me two things: that the origins of polarization can be oblique and that left unchecked, polarization can result in disaster.

The third moment happened in 2016 during the presidential campaigns of two polarizing candidates, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. The latter's comment characterizing some of the former's followers as "deplorables" had just been reported in the news. I was attending a conference where two staff members were having a conversation regarding the matter. Things were relatively cordial until one called the other a "deplorable" and went on a tirade about "right-wing monsters." Before long, they were trading invectives; soon enough, these two grown adults—who should have known better—actually began to assault one another! In an effort to defuse the situation before security was called in, I did the only thing I could think of at the moment: I hopped on a chair and broke into song to make people laugh. Startled, the debaters ended their combat and calmed down.

This incident proved to me the value of humor and absurdity in quelling a potential calamity. When things go awry, it's often a good idea to divert people's attention with something harmless, thereby highlighting the harmful nature of what *had* been capturing their attention.

Thanks to these incidents, my inner organizational psychologist came to embrace the notion of studying conflict, and my outer HR executive came to embrace the notion of harnessing conflict for good. I embarked on a formal study of workplace polarization, specifically the discussion of taboo topics, which would culminate in this book. The year 2020 began innocuously enough as the project took shape.

As the months went by, however, things went awry all over the world: the COVID-19 pandemic, social lockdowns, economic disruption, widespread unemployment, stressed essential workers, people dying. In the United States, additional crises exploded over racial injustice, clashes between protesters and police, a divisive presidential election, an insurrection in the Capitol, and more.

The study of how people talk about polarizing topics became far more serious than I could have imagined. What is the HR perspective on conflict in the workplace in the wake of *so much* of it? (And what *is* the workplace now, in the digital/social media era, during an ongoing public health emergency requiring people to be physically apart for their own safety?)

This year's myriad catastrophes have provided novel challenges for everyone, shining a light on the many rips in the fabric of our fragile society. I can never pretend to understand the life experiences of people who are not like me—Black people, or women, or Asian people, or Muslim people, or people with disabilities, or poor people, or so many others—when they are accosted by bigots, treated unfairly by law enforcement, not considered for job opportunities, or denied access to the privileges to which they are entitled as human beings. Yet I can listen and learn; I can stand with oppressed and marginalized communities in word and spirit; and I can act to bring about equality and justice to the best of my ability, thanks to my position as a professional specializing in the study of people in the workplace.

Organizations around the globe are trying different approaches to respond to crises and show that they care about the disadvantaged and destroyed. But announcements and promises are easy to

pick apart. It is much more useful to evaluate these organizations' actions, which speak louder than their words.

Many businesses have pledged to contribute funds to various causes and establish new programming for their customers and employees, making headlines both good and bad. Lost in the shuffle of such public relations moves, however, is the essence of real change. We must examine these organizations' internal efforts; otherwise, these actions are empty gestures. How do organizations (often led by overwhelmingly monochromatic management) address conflict in their own workplaces? Disagreements among coworkers over taboo topics can serve as a microcosm of conflict in the wider community, even the world.

In the wake of recent social movements (primarily #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and political campaigns) and our accelerating dependence on new technologies (exacerbated by COVID-19's fall-out requiring remote work and social isolation), the workplace will never be the same. While that's the kind of thing people often say when dramatic events cross our collective consciousness for good or ill, the data shows that this time, the change really is permanent. There's no going back.

In today's era of uncertainty, organizations have to do more than protect their immediate business and human interests. They might also have to explore their very ability to survive. Survival means having to sustain, redefine, and reinvent themselves.

The nation seems caught in an endless cycle of conflict. HR directors and managers are barely coping, just like the employers and employees they serve. How do we find a way forward? Without honest study and reflection, we may never do so.

The United States is divided right now, but we have always had to cope with polarizing figures, topics, and issues throughout society. It is not a new or unique phenomenon. Whether we like it or not, the adages atop this chapter, advising against talk about controversial or sensitive topics in the workplace, are no longer effective—or even applicable. The topics are no longer even limited to politics, sex,

religion, race, and private life. Any polarizing issue can be taboo—money, age, health, divorce, one’s relatives, and so on—if it causes coworkers to engage in debates, arguments, or disagreements.

Let me recount one more incident involving workplace conflict. It, too, has deepened my interest in polarization as a subject for serious scholarship (which, at the time, was already underway in the form of work on this book). It also gives me hope.

Last summer, at the end of a workday, I was walking around the office and came across three colleagues having a spirited conversation about the events surrounding the heinous murder of George Floyd. Two of the participants, parents of young adults who are Black, focused on the need to reform the criminal justice system, particularly law enforcement. The third participant had a different, more nuanced perspective as the parent of a young Black man who is himself a local law enforcement officer. Black lives matter, she said, but blue lives should be respected.

As the discussion progressed, the participants shared some harsh responses to the others’ expressed opinions. One described how all the men in her household have been affected by aggressive law enforcement actions. The mother of the law officer described how her son catches hell from citizens as well as his peers on the police force. None of the three held back.

Eventually, the conversation ended. Surprisingly—to me—they walked away with a newfound respect for one another.

A week later, I followed up to ask these colleagues more specifically how they felt about their conversation. (After all, I was knee-deep in reviewing survey responses about taboo topics.) All three indicated that the experience was positive and helped them feel more welcome in the organization. This was striking because two of them had been there for over twenty years and one was still a first-year employee.

I dove in, trying to identify what it was about their talk that they found so productive. The police officer’s parent provided the crystallizing insight: though she could not disagree more on the issue

of law enforcement with her two coworkers, she appreciated their willingness to discuss the topic and the fact that they did not mask their opinions in front of her.

That was why they all felt a sense of belonging in the organization, I realized.

Each of the participants in the conversation experienced their true selves with one another, sharing their opinions while not letting those opinions become entrenched. They developed a new skill: *real listening* during tough talk. They may never agree on the topics they argued over, but they will likely look back on their engagement with one another as an aspect of belonging to a truly inclusive culture. To this day, I am moved by their conversation.

Most leaders will advise against talking about polarizing topics. Previous employers have told me never to discuss politics in the workplace, as it might offend others. I myself have instructed staff not to discuss vaccine mandates and related issues. Conventional wisdom is to avoid any topic likely to elicit conflict.

My colleagues' conversation taught me to ignore that conventional wisdom; they showed me that true inclusion depends on productive conflict. With this book I seek to open the eyes of other business leaders and provide a recipe for making any taboo talk the key to productive conflict. This will result in a much better workplace.

My friend Johnny C. Taylor Jr., president and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and author of *Reset: A Leader's Guide to Work in an Age of Upheaval*,¹ preaches the concept of a "challenge culture." He references a "hot bench"—a phrase from the legal world describing how judges vigorously question the lawyers arguing in front of them. A hot bench is designed to make one a better leader, but I think it can do the same for the organization. Time will tell, but we all may come out better by leveraging conflict to get through these hellish times. As Winston Churchill said, "If you're going through hell, keep going."

¹ Johnny C. Taylor Jr., *Reset: A Leader's Guide to Work in an Age of Upheaval* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2021).

To fully understand the power of polarization, we need to understand where and why it happens. The dangers are usually obvious, but just as often, they are subtle. HR professionals know that it is essential to prevent or defuse dangerous situations among employees, from entry-level to executive, and among all stakeholders, including clients, customers, vendors, contractors, and the community as a whole. Finding the best ways to accomplish that task is the purpose of this book.

The HR profession can serve as a guide to reinvention. We can help workers and the workplace survive and *thrive* in the face of conflict.

I enlisted SHRM to help me to gather the data. To compile quantitative information, we conducted several surveys of American workers, HR professionals, and people managers. The science behind these surveys and what they revealed will be discussed in Chapter 2 (and documented more thoroughly in Appendix A).

To collect qualitative data, we asked HR professionals who have encountered polarizing interactions in the workplace to share their actual experiences in dealing with them. These incidents are recounted and organized by topic in Part II. Among the questions that the participants attempted to answer, and which this book will attempt to analyze, are the following:

- » How do conversations about taboo topics set off sparks that can light a tinderbox?
- » What are the most common hot-button issues?
- » What do people do when caught in the middle of conflict?
- » How do managers deal with unpleasant and upsetting interactions?
- » How do participants and witnesses get beyond them?
- » What does real conflict resolution look like?
- » What happens when conflict is *not* resolved?