Talking Taboo

Making the Most of
Polarizing Discussions at Work

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Chapter 6

Race, Religion, Ethnicity, and Nationality

There's a reason our elders advised caution when discussing race, religion, national origin, and similarly tricky and treacherous topics. They continue to pose challenges for employers, whether the spark for debate among employees originates inside or outside the workplace. Difficult, often emotionally charged conversations feature prominently in these stories, whose outcomes were at opposite ends of the scale. Many address questions that are also intrinsically political, such as immigration, civil wars, cultural bias, and the Black Lives Matter movement.

EMOTIONS OVERWHELM BUT LEAD TO ENLIGHTENMENT

Summary

A street demonstration against police brutality takes place in front of an office building. Employees watch from inside and make ignorant, insensitive comments. The sole Black employee in the group attempts to educate them, but eventually she overreacts. She is mortified but has opened their eyes and minds. This incident, though minor, has an excellent resolution.

Yet another unarmed Black person was killed by police, which was highlighted once more on the news and social media. Demonstrators and protesters started to hold small rallies every day

on the boulevard where my office is located. One day, a crowd of over a thousand people gathered directly in front of the building to rally against police violence and to demand justice.

I work on the tenth floor of the building. My coworkers gathered at the window behind my desk, looking down at the rally. There were three White people, a Filipino-American person, and someone who was born in India, among them my supervisor and my subordinate. As the only Black woman on my entire floor, I knew right away I was entering a precarious situation.

Their chatter began: "Why are they there?" "This is ridiculous." "The police were doing their jobs." "I saw the video, and he didn't do what he was told." I felt a tightness in my throat as I listened to my coworkers revealing their ignorance about an issue of great concern to Black people.

I tried to keep away from the window, stay quiet, and get back to work. But as the talk continued, I could no longer ignore it. If I remained quiet, I'd be the kind of person I despise. I had to respond; I had to provide a Black point of view.

I knew their comments stemmed from inherent bias, which most people aren't even aware of. They were unconsciously exposing their biases out loud. But how would they feel if I pointed this out to them? Presenting people with uncomfortable topics and ideas is awkward, and I had to continue working with them.

I thought about my upbringing. I was taught that it was more important to educate someone about a bad situation than to leave it be. If I could correct what my coworkers were saying, I could dispel their false rhetoric and possibly change their minds. Changing or opening even one person's mind was what mattered.

Defending myself and my culture became that moment's priority, even though I was at work. I had no choice but to speak up. But I also knew I had to do so in a professional and respectful manner that didn't compromise my role in the company or with my colleagues (even though *their* comments were neither professional nor respectful).

Once I came to this realization and made my decision, I tried to gather myself so I wouldn't become too emotional when I spoke. I wanted to educate the chatterers with facts and data, not emotion.

I turned to my coworkers at the window and began describing recent events through a Black person's lens. I talked about the history, stigma, and lingering mistrust among Black people, White people, and police. As I went on, though, what I had hoped would be a conversation became a tirade. I wasn't yelling, just ranting in sheer emotional frustration. Then I started to cry, thinking about all the dead Black children, teenagers, fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters.

After my rant and tears, everyone got quiet. My coworkers left the window, each touching my shoulder as they went back to their desks. I was mortified by my outburst, especially since my supervisor and my direct report were present.

It was late afternoon, so I just left the office, trying to figure out how to come back to work the next day. I was worried about being known as the "crazy Black lady."

A text from my supervisor later on saved the day. A text is only words, void of emotion or tone. It is semipersonal, but the gesture of sending it is still intimate.

My supervisor (who is not Black) said she didn't realize how deep it all goes. She hadn't had all the facts. She could tell by my emotional reaction how traumatic the issues were. She thanked me for saying something. I texted back to thank her for understanding.

I considered approaching my coworkers when I got back to the office to let them know I wasn't mad at them—but they beat me to it. I got texts from everyone, apologizing to me for not being sensitive or empathetic. There were no awkward interactions.

The aftereffects of the incident have been positive. I no longer hear employees who are not Black chattering about Black culture and issues. When rallies occur in front of our building (as they still do), people look out the window quietly. The company even started posting information about the various rallies, with links to research

on what each demonstration is for or against. The company also regularly sends around the policy on workplace conduct, which specifically directs employees to avoid political conversations.

Looking back at the incident, I think about how I might have saved myself and my coworkers from temporary embarrassment and discomfort. I could have spoken to them individually or privately after the rally occurred. I could have not looked out the window at all. But then we never would have begun to learn how to be empathetic to the people and causes right in front of us.

Lessons Learned

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. In this case, an employee courageously spoke up to confront her colleagues who were commenting in ignorance. The issue was personal to her, and she expressed herself in a way that helped them understand, providing them with a real example of empathy. The effect was positive even though the speaker herself had been unsure of how her message was received.

Bias is inherent in each of us, yet we are rarely encouraged to think about how our biases affect others or how we interact with them. By speaking up, this employee enabled her coworkers to recognize their biases, which they had revealed by making strong statements from an uninformed position.

In your workplace, consider adding communications and training on the interplay of personal biases and colleague interactions. Such education is especially helpful where interactions are often out of alignment with the organization's principles, values, policies, or culture.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *belonging* (the organization provides all staff with a sense of belonging), *openness* (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives), and *entrenchment* (the organization encourages staff to understand others' perspectives,

refrain from making judgments, and prevent our opinions from becoming entrenched and weaponized). In a difficult situation, the first factor took a giant leap forward at this organization, which should continue supporting the changes that resulted.

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?).

TEAM-BUILDING EVENTS: WHO'S IN, WHO'S OUT

Summary

A temporary-to-permanent contractor is judgmental and disapproving of those who do not share her religious beliefs, especially when it comes to company-sponsored team-building events. Employees are resentful when the company changes the events to be more inclusive; their resentment grows when it stops sponsoring or funding noninclusive events. While the temp is not hired permanently, possibly because of her beliefs, she was nonetheless the catalyst for permanently altering the company's team-building culture.

A contract worker was hired on a temporary-to-permanent basis at my company. She was very religious and extremely vocal and condescending about it. From day one, the contractor criticized certain behaviors that she did not engage in because of her faith. She considered unacceptable (in the office and, presumably, anywhere) the consumption of alcohol, celebrations of birthdays, and even the observance of some holidays. Employees felt judged for wanting to do things she did not approve of.

The organization had regularly sponsored and funded company-wide parties, happy hours, competitions, and other team-building events, to which everyone was invited. The contractor made it clear when she would not be able to attend certain events because of her beliefs. The announcement of any activity became an opportunity for her to voice her objections.

Over time, the company made various changes to events to make them more inclusive so that everyone, including the contractor, could participate in them. ("Fall Potluck" was the new name for Thanksgiving dinner, for example.) Many employees felt that they were being forced to conform to the contractor's beliefs.

The company continued to fund and announce activities for all staff. Now it started to provide separate funding for individual (not company-wide) events. In this way, employees could choose which events to participate in. Some employees decided to simply not invite the contractor to their individually funded activities.

Eventually the company no longer funded any noninclusive events, all-staff or individual. Any other events would not be funded, sponsored, or even announced by the company.

Many employees decided to continue engaging in certain activities anyway, funding them with their own money. The situation divided the office. Many people found the changes offensive. Activities meant to bring everyone together did just the opposite. Events that were not planned to be inclusive resulted in people splitting off into their own events. The goals of team building were lost.

After a year, the temp-to-perm contractor was not offered the permanent position. The reason given was that she was "not a good match." I think the reason was the situation with the team-building events. She had not been considered for the job solely on her merits. This was unfortunate, because she was a good employee as far as the work was concerned. Religious freedom in the workplace means that people should not be treated differently or denied employment because they don't have the same beliefs as their coworkers.

The contractor herself never filed a complaint about not being hired, whether due to her religion or anything else. This was probably because she remained oblivious to how people felt about her or about the changes for which she was the catalyst.

On the other hand, the company was not obligated to accommodate every last one of her beliefs. What's more, she was, in fact, judgmental and condescending, and indeed someone with her personality would not fit in well with us as a permanent employee.

Lessons Learned

There was no indication here that the contractor was treated differently because of her religious beliefs. By constantly voicing her disapproval in a condescending manner, however, she seemed to expect *others* to behave differently.

The company did attempt to accommodate her beliefs by changing aspects of its events, which raised hackles. The company made those events more inclusive, which helped it realize that greater inclusion was the way to go. It demonstrated its commitment to the new policy in stages, changing how events were funded, then finally funding and sponsoring only company-wide events that complied with the policy.

Employees remained free to attend their own events, in-house or outside. The change they resented was the company's decision to not sponsor or fund them. While the all-staff and individual activities had team-building value, they were really social events, and the company could not be expected to continue sponsoring or funding them when they no longer aligned with its evolving inclusion policy.

Employees found the cutoff of company funding and sponsorship for events offensive. Due to her religious beliefs, the contractor found the events offensive. She expressed her objections poorly, but the company listened objectively. It found exclusionary events offensive and responded by taking steps toward greater inclusion. No one is entitled to a hierarchy of offenses. There are plenty

of team-building activities an organization can offer to which few people can raise objections. Be creative!

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). This company altered the activities that caused conflict, but it has work to do to build, bolster, and reinforce the culture it desires.

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?).

DO RACIAL SLURS EVER "NOT MEAN ANYTHING"?

Summary

An inadequate response by management to an employee's use of a racial slur results in the incident being forgotten and not made a lesson to others, which allows similar racial microaggressions to continue. This is a major issue for the company, and the outcome is poor.

Some employees were sitting in a warehouse office eating mixed nuts. The warehouse coordinator, a White woman, held up a Brazil nut and said that when she was young, she knew these nuts by another name—an egregious racial slur—which she spoke aloud. Another White employee agreed with her recollection but did not repeat the slur. A third employee, a Black man, was shocked and asked the coordinator to repeat what she said. She told him she

"didn't mean anything by it" and was "just stating a fact" and he was taking the word "out of context."

At some point the warehouse manager, a White man, was advised of the issue. He immediately apologized to the Black employee. The manager did not, however, address the issue with the coordinator who had used the slur, nor did he advise HR of what had happened.

Six months later, the employee felt that he was being treated unfairly and called the HR helpline. During the subsequent HR investigation, this incident came up.

The employee said that while he was grateful that the manager apologized to him, the apology did not resolve his issue with the coordinator who used the racial slur. The manager said he knew the coordinator's behavior was wrong but didn't want to get HR involved, and so he dealt with it a manner he thought appropriate. The coordinator said she never spoke further about the incident because nothing more had happened to her. Everyone in the warehouse—except the employee shocked by the slur—thought the situation had been taken care of.

When the manager who apologized retired not long after the incident, the employee experienced a sense of insecurity and wondered who else might look out for him in the future. To address this incident and other claims of unfair treatment, he turned to HR.

In assessing the matter, HR took into account the culture of the warehouse and issues of accountability—by the coordinator who used the slur as well as by management in its response. Had the coordinator completed training on respectful workplaces? Was she aware of the company's expectations on the use of offensive language? Did management set these expectations for all employees? Did it hold everyone accountable for their actions?

By the time the investigation ended, the coordinator had completed the respectful workplace training. HR and the other managers considered terminating her employment or implementing lesser disciplinary actions. Based on the coordinator's prior record and years of service, however, she was given a second chance. A

final written warning about the inappropriateness of her behavior went into her employment file, stating that if the behavior occurred again, she would be fired. The coordinator also received a telephone coaching session with HR to ensure she understood that the use of certain words is never appropriate in any context.

The matter seemed to conclude with these actions. But they were ineffective. The coordinator did not recognize that what she said was wrong. Neither did her new manager, who, a few months later, gave her the highest possible ratings in her year-end performance review. The racial slur incident and the warning in her file were not even mentioned.

The coordinator experienced no real consequences and continued to show a lack of remorse for her use of seriously offensive language in the workplace. After HR issued its warning and conducted its coaching session, the whole matter just disappeared. How else could the coordinator's manager ignore it in her performance review, let alone rate her so highly?

There should be consequences for one's behavior. The incident meant more to me, in HR, than it did to anyone else in the warehouse or in management, except for the Black employee who heard the racial slur. Even the retired manager who apologized to him did no more than that.

The company should have had a tougher response to the coordinator's language. The coaching session should have at least been conducted in person, which might have made it more meaningful to the coordinator and enabled an HR professional to read and respond to her body language. The coordinator should have been required to participate in repeated trainings on respect, dignity, and empathy.

HR also should have reminded her manager to address the incident in her year-end performance review, since it was part of how she performed that year. Performance ratings are based not only on what we do but on how we do it.

Lessons Learned

Inclusion cannot be achieved without both equity and diversity. Organizations have an obligation to articulate and discuss their approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) with leadership, including what kind of behavior is expected and prohibited. Management must help employees understand how these principles will be observed, measured, and handled if expectations are not met. Communicate with employees and supervisors on an ongoing basis to make sure that policies and procedures are understood and retained.

Find out whether your organization has established parameters for acceptable versus unacceptable behaviors. Include specific guidance about racial slurs and other inappropriate language and the consequences for using them in the workplace. Explain how words have meaning, context, and potential effects on those who read or hear them. Offensive language can affect individuals' feelings of belonging and safety, as well as group morale.

Establish and communicate parameters for handling incidents involving unacceptable behaviors. Consider expanding policies so that they not only acknowledge and correct noncompliant behavior but also cover the consequences of *inaction* (e.g., saying "it didn't mean anything," failing to inform HR, ignoring a warning letter). The company's inaction here caused microaggressions to fester, causing irreparable harm to the organization's culture. The offender never owned up to her behavior and was actually rewarded at year's end with a glowing performance review.

When hurtful behavior happens, don't allow people to make poor after-the-fact excuses for it or do nothing about it. Inaction damages credibility and trust. Focus additional policy guidance on repairing interpersonal working relationships, strengthening the social fabric of the culture, and restoring employees' sense of feeling safe as well as respected.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factor involved here was *conflict management* (the organization resolves conflict rather than buries it). Someone's behavior created a conflict that was not only buried but rewarded, which caused ongoing unresolved damage. This company must take steps to help its people understand the repercussions of their views and actions.

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?).

HOW TO MAKE CONTROVERSIAL
WORKPLACE COMMENTS WORSE

Summary

An employee objects to his coworkers' discussion of immigration policy, but they mock and ignore him. The employee complains to HR, but the director says she agrees with them and takes no action. Concerned HR staff tell the director's boss, who does nothing about her disregard of the whole matter. This major incident has a poor outcome because it has no outcome.

Around the time the United States was trying to close the borders to immigration, some employees were watching the news on the office TV. They started talking about how they agreed with the policy, specifically that immigrants should not be able to enter the country. An employee who was not born in the United States and who still had family abroad told them that the discussion was inappropriate and they were upsetting him. They laughed and continued talking as before.

The employee came to HR because he felt that his coworkers' comments were racist. He spoke to the HR director, who responded by providing her own opinion: "What is finally happening with the border should have happened a long time ago. I hope you know that." This caused the employee to shut down. The director told him she had no intention of addressing his complaint.

The entire HR department overheard the conversation because the director rarely closed her office door and hadn't this time.

As an HR staff member, I was completely blown away to hear the HR director provide her own input on the topic of immigration. (While I sympathized with the employee, that was not my main concern.) Witnessing her lack of judgment led me and several others in HR to report her to her boss, the chief financial officer (CFO).

The CFO met with us to discuss the interaction we witnessed between the HR director and the employee. He reviewed our concerns and the potential risk to the organization. Then he met with the director, who brushed the whole thing off—she did not see any issues with what she did.

The HR director did not receive disciplinary action of any kind. Everything quickly returned to business as usual. Several weeks later, the employee who voiced his concerns about the comments left the organization.

The whole process was extremely ineffective. HR, in the person of the director, failed to support someone in a time of need. HR staff lost trust in their leadership. The organization lost an employee who might have stayed on for years. The department where the original conversation took place was essentially given the okay to allow such conversations to continue, even if perceived as racist. The HR director was given the okay to share her political opinions with impunity.

A lot of what took place after the incident could have been avoided. HR staff would have continued to respect their leaders. The employee, feeling supported, would have continued to work at the organization.

Lesson Learned

This is a story bursting with missed opportunities for an organization to do the right thing and handle a situation with integrity. Instead, the valid concerns of both an individual employee and a group of employees were disregarded, then mishandled, leading to predictably unfortunate results.

When the employee came to HR about his coworkers' conversation, his concerns should not have been dismissed but should instead have been attended to. HR should have spoken to the coworkers regarding appropriate workplace discussions and warned them of potential disciplinary action if they continued. The HR director should have kept her political opinions to herself. When the HR staff came to the CFO about the director's comment and inaction, he should have reprimanded her, at the very least.

An organization must correct the behaviors of leaders and employees that are misaligned with its culture and values. (One piece of missing information is what this company's culture and values are.) Consider what people's behaviors say about the organization's expectations and policies—especially when witnesses describe these behaviors as shocking and offensive. Offenders must be held accountable for what they do or fail to do.

It is also worth noting that, as shown in Chapter 5, the presence of a television in the workplace can often lead to disruptions.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *conflict management* (the organization resolves conflict rather than buries it), *openness* (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives), and *belonging* (the organization provides all staff with a sense of belonging). Courage was clearly lacking at this organization. People here repeatedly failed to do the right thing and either aggravated the situation or avoided dealing with it.

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?).

CONFEDERATE FLAGS AND OTHER HATEFUL DISPLAYS

Summary

A private company enforces its prohibition of displays of offensive materials, whether on vehicles in its parking lot or on employees' clothing in the office, because they violate the company's values of respect and inclusiveness. This major occurrence has a good outcome.

Several employees of a private company were concerned when they saw vehicles in the parking lot displaying Confederate flags, and they filed complaints with HR.

The company does not allow on its property the display of materials considered to be offensive and hostile to other employees. The prohibition covers decals on vehicles on the worksite as well as clothing worn in the workplace. Such displays violate our company's code of ethics and its values of respect, trust, and inclusiveness.

The employees who displayed these materials felt that the company was violating their freedom of speech by barring their vehicles from its parking lot.

The HR department had to educate the workforce as to the prohibition of hateful displays. We involved the legal department to make sure that the company was not violating any laws or facing any other risks by prohibiting such materials on its private property.

We also wanted senior leadership to be involved and requested that all communications on the matter flow from them. Once

counsel gave the okay, top management sent out an email to the entire organization, stating that our company is inclusive and will not allow displays on its property that others may view as hateful.

Addressing these concerns quickly resulted in an increase in employee morale. Most people were pleased to see the company reiterate its policy, values, and code of ethics. The mass email was more effective than having individual managers meet with their own staffs to explain why displaying the Confederate flag is inappropriate.

Lessons Learned

The world is well past the time for tolerating hateful displays that dis-respect individuals or groups. If your organization has not acted to preclude these occurrences, start by emulating this company, which backed its commitment to inclusion by having measures already in place and then taking action when a violation did occur.

Institute a policy and communicate it broadly. Set expectations from the top down. In the case of a triggering incident, first remind employees about the policy, then engage leadership to support and communicate with the entire staff, as this organization did.

Decide how to handle pushback that comes in the form of free speech arguments. Educate your workforce, not only about prohib-ited displays, actions, behaviors, and words but also how actions taken by a private company differ from actions taken by a govern-ment entity—which is where the First Amendment comes in. Legal counsel can assist in explaining these differences to laypersons.

How does an organization move its inclusion policies and proce-dures from good to great? Consider whether they have substance—and teeth. Simply repeating a commitment to equity and fair treatment may not be enough. Make the additional commitment to enforcing and reinforcing policies and procedures with actions.

To avoid future problems, take steps to focus on improving morale and issues of safety, security, and belonging for everyone. Lastly, consider how executive involvement also helps to build trust in the organization.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *entrenchment* (the organization encourages staff to understand others' perspectives, refrain from making judgments, and prevent our opinions from becoming entrenched and weaponized) and *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). This organization was taking steps to encourage enlightenment, respect, and understanding within its workforce.

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?) and the *RK* question (what refined knowledge can arise from these experiences and outcomes?).

LANGUAGE AND BIAS IN POLITICAL NEWS COVERAGE

Summary

During a presidential election in a multilingual, multiethnic, politically volatile country, an international news organization's two language-specific news teams appear to report more favorably on the candidate who speaks their coverage language. Although the incident is minor, it unfortunately does not have a good outcome.

I worked at an international news organization in a country whose two official languages are spoken by its two major ethnic populations. Of the two candidates running in a volatile presidential election, one was a speaker of Language A, and the other was a speaker of Language B. The situation was tense, and people were bitterly divided.

I was assigned to the organization's national unit for news coverage in this country. We had two news teams, one responsible for coverage in Language A and the other for coverage in Language B. The organization was committed to delivering news in an impartial and independent manner. However, the Language A and Language B reporting teams had their own biases and preferences.

Problems started to surface. The Language A team seemed to interpret and broadcast news in favor of the Language A–speaking candidate, and the Language B team seemed to interpret and broadcast news in favor of the Language B–speaking candidate. I felt that the organization was losing its values of impartiality and independence.

I raised the issue with the head of the national unit, and we discussed the need to cover the election in a professional and unbiased manner. I shared specific articles that demonstrated how an election-related event was being interpreted differently by the two news teams depending on their language. It was important that the different language services within the larger organization were not considered divided in their views.

In the meantime, the results of the election were being withheld due to allegations of fraud by both candidates. The head of the national news unit immediately called the two language teams to discuss the matter in an urgent open meeting.

The unit head felt that, given the sensitivity of the language differences and political situation in the country, the two news teams could no longer be left to make their own decisions. A temporary independent committee would be set up to edit and monitor each team's articles and production materials before they went live on the organization's website and TV programs.

The committee was empowered and worked effectively. Every morning, both news teams, Language A and Language B, would meet and discuss key matters relating to the elections and how they were going to cover them. The national unit head was constantly in touch with both teams and stressed the importance of impartiality

in the organization's news coverage, urging all team members not to allow their personal or political preferences to cloud their professional judgment.

The news outcome was satisfactory, as there now seemed to be fewer differences in the way the two language teams covered the elections.

The employees of the news organization covering this country, however, were negatively affected by the whole situation. There was a bitter feeling between the two language-specific news teams. Even "neutral" employees began to be seen as part of one team or the other. Friendships and collaboration suffered. People started to view each other with a sense of doubt.

We needed to instill a culture promoting the ability to act in an honest and nonpolitical manner. We should have considered long-term training on language differences and the importance of impartiality, in addition to empowering the temporary committee.

Lessons Learned

When behavior does not align with an organization's stated values and perspectives or with its commitments to stakeholders (including the workforce), a course correction is required. Here, a recommended solution was anchored to the company's principles, but irreparable damage was already underway and continued due to the biases of the people implementing that solution.

Even when an outcome is satisfactory in terms of having met intended goals, leaders may also have to handle unintended consequences—namely, when bias erodes trust. Taking additional actions to increase collaboration can help minimize the effects of unexpected fallout and rebuild trust.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *openness* (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives) and *entrenchment* (the organization encourages staff to understand others' perspectives, refrain

from making judgments, and prevent our opinions from becoming entrenched and weaponized). Because this dispute was very public, this organization will need to rebuild its brand and reputation, even as it works to improve its internal environment for staff.

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 LINGERING EFFECTS OF A LEADER'S INFLAMMATORY COMMENTS

Summary

During a meeting with his project team, a manager makes inflammatory political comments; they are especially hurtful to one team member, who expresses disgust and leaves. Despite HR's ongoing efforts, negative effects on the organization and individuals stemming from this significant incident persist. The outcome is inconclusive and therefore poor.

A five-member team gathered for a meeting in our company's conference room to discuss their work on a major project for a client. The team manager, to whom they all reported, brought up recent political events in a neighboring country. He spoke disparagingly about the citizens of that country as "corrupt to the core," saying the international community should "let them kill one another." The manager was fully aware that a key team member, an engineer, had roots in that country, including a close relative who was killed there by foreign-backed forces.

The manager's words were so unthinkable that initially no one could say a word. After a few minutes, the engineer uttered an

expletive and left the room. The whole exchange took minutes, but its effects are still unresolved, months later.

HR's immediate priority was to stop a very dangerous situation. I've seen similar situations result in physical fights, and I seriously feared that possibility here. I ended the meeting.

I talked to the manager who made the disparaging comments; he was very defensive. Then I had private conversations with the team members. They all said they were baffled by the manager's remarks and thought he was way out of line, but they did nothing at the time. From their overall reactions and body language, I concluded that their inaction was because they felt a threat to their job security from the manager.

The team was unable to do any work because the key person, the engineer, was absent. I considered several options for what to do (or not do) next: not interfering further; expressing my opinion; or having a follow-up discussion with the manager, the team, or both.

Not interfering further might have allowed violence to erupt. Expressing my opinion would diminish the perception of my impartiality—an impartial HR department gains more trust. As for having a follow-up discussion with the manager, he said he would refuse to participate unless his direct supervisor was present; I determined that including the team there would be inappropriate.

After looking at the parties' dynamics, I launched an HR investigation, escalating it to the division level and involving management and the legal department.

Several issues had to be addressed. An unsolicited political comment was made during work by a manager in a position of power over others, who, at the time, were unable to choose whether or not to participate in a political discussion. The manager had a history of disagreements with the employee who left the room, toward whom he had obviously acted vengefully. The manager's comment was unacceptable, and his inhumane views were intended to be deeply hurtful.

The incident is still being investigated, but numerous organizational and personal consequences have already arisen from it:

» The engineer suffered impacts to his health, including depression and increased blood pressure.
» The team members lost trust in their manager, seeing how he used someone's personal weak points to go after them.
» The manager no longer has credibility and has been suspended from working on new projects.
» The existing project was delayed because the engineer refused to work with the manager. A substitute engineer was brought in temporarily, but the project client found the substitute unsatisfactory.
» The team broke up, which meant clients had to deal with unfamiliar team members and uncertainty on their projects.
» The disruptions led to loss of revenue for the company.
» The manager has threatened legal action in response to any disciplinary measures that may be taken against him.

Looking back, this manager and this engineer should never have been assigned to work on the same team or project.

But even that may not have mattered. After all, a vengeful person (even one not in a position of power) will always find a way to inflict pain on someone they don't like.

Lessons Learned

It is critical to understand the need to identify vengeful persons in an organization. Once identified, move them into a position from which they cannot perform their vengeance—or move them out of the organization.

A toxic approach to interpersonal relationships such as that displayed by this manager cannot be tolerated in any organization whose culture values differences among people.

It is equally important to consider all the serious, negative side effects of toxic behavior—both immediate and long-lasting—on organizational risk, competitive advantage, client relations, leadership credibility, employee trust, and individuals' health.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *conflict management* (the organization resolves conflict rather than buries it), *entrenchment* (the organization encourages staff to understand others' perspectives, refrain from making judgments, and prevent our opinions from becoming entrenched and weaponized), and *belonging* (the organization provides all staff with a sense of belonging). This organization will have to conduct many additional conversations to repair the damage caused by the leader's behavior, which affected the workplace culture and the psychological safety of employees.

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?) and the *RK* question (what refined knowledge can arise from these experiences and outcomes?).

LISTENING IMPROVES MORALE

Summary

To counter low workforce morale during nationwide social unrest over racial issues unaddressed by management, the company sets up a committee to listen to employees' concerns and acknowledge their feelings. It also relaunches its DE&I council, with good results. This is a major incident with an excellent outcome.

Morale was down at one of our plant sites in response to the deaths of several Black people at the hands of police and subsequent nationwide social unrest. Employees felt that company leaders were not addressing in a timely manner either what had occurred (the murders) or what was occurring (the protests).

Executives were extremely concerned that the noticeable drop in morale could affect productivity at the plant. HR partnered with senior leadership to try to find an appropriate way to understand and manage the issues raised by the employees.

The company created a committee whose mandate was to listen to employees about how they felt, to address their concerns, and to consider their recommendations for actions the company could take to improve engagement and morale. The goal was for everyone to feel heard, respected, and supported.

This "listening" committee held several meetings so that all employees could attend and communicate their views. It made a positive impact because the feedback shared during the meetings was passed on to senior management and HR. Executives began to host their own meetings to discuss these topics and come up with solutions.

In the meantime, the company relaunched and rebranded its dormant DE&I council, giving it new focus. The council and HR continue to educate employees through team-building activities and training to ensure that they know our work environment is built on the values of respect and trust.

Productivity was not affected at the site that had been experiencing low morale. Work there remains on track.

Lessons Learned

"I hear you" is a popular thing to say when one needs to show empathy, but *hearing* is not *listening*. Truly listening requires a level of commitment and transparency that may cause discomfort. In this case, the organization really did listen to its employees and was able to take the pulse of its workforce culture. Any organization should

adopt similar measures if it needs to establish or rebuild a culture based on openness, belonging, respect, and trust:

» Address events that are having a negative effect on employees in a timely manner.

» Ask employees what the organization can do or how it can help.

» Be engaged and transparent.

» Let employees talk about their experiences, then follow up with them to confirm what they said or follow up on what they talked about.

» Share employees' feedback with senior leadership.

» Secure executives' buy-in and sponsorship to effect change.

» Continue to communicate with employees to update them on how the organization is addressing their concerns with actions.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *belonging* (the organization provides all staff with a sense of belonging), *openness* (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives), and *entrenchment* (the organization encourages staff to understand others' perspectives, refrain from making judgments, and prevent our opinions from becoming entrenched and weaponized). This organization took important steps to help employees understand rather than judge others in their interactions. This will aid its efforts to learn from employees what steps to take to improve the workplace itself.

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?) and the *RK* question (what refined knowledge can arise from these experiences and outcomes?).

WALKING ON EGGSHELLS TO AVOID AN ARGUMENT

Summary

A manager who is an immigrant is easily offended when the topic of immigration comes up for discussion; what's worse, she sometimes baits people into arguing about it. Coworkers gradually become uncomfortable talking to her at all. HR confronts the manager respectfully and helps her understand her responsibilities. An excellent outcome is achieved at the end of this somewhat minor incident.

A manager who had immigrated to the United States was well known around the office for taking any discussion of national immigration policy personally, especially as these issues were currently in the news. Sometimes she seemed to bait people into discussing the topic of immigration just so she could insert her opinion. If they did not agree with her, the discussion would turn into an argument.

Over time, the manager's behavior made *any* conversations with her uncomfortable. Employees felt they had to be extra careful about what they said in her presence so as not to provoke a response.

HR recognized the growing risk that discussions between the manager and those who disagreed with her, especially on hot-button issues, could trigger ever-greater problems. Such escalations could jeopardize working relationships and lead to decreased productivity.

I planned to have an honest, respectful, empathetic conversation with the manager. The topic of immigration clearly affected her emotionally, but she needed to understand why it was not an appropriate topic for discussion in the workplace.

Because the manager's behavior struck me as more reactive than aggressive, I thought she deserved an opportunity to change her ways. I consulted her supervisor, with whom she worked closely, for some insight into the right approach to take. I didn't want her to

feel attacked. HR also had to be circumspect because the manager's age, sex, and ethnicity placed her in a protected class.

I took the manager aside and explained that certain subjects of discussion tend to create uncomfortable situations and unnecessary conflicts in the office. I asked her to refrain from engaging with coworkers on these topics.

I pointed out that because she is in a leadership role, she has a responsibility to represent the company in a positive manner and that her comments on these controversial topics could be inter-preted—or misinterpreted—to create a negative representation.

Finally, I warned her that if her behavior continued, HR would take further action.

The manager said she understood where the company and HR were coming from and promised to be more careful regarding the topics she discussed in the workplace. HR no longer received any complaints about her.

Lessons Learned

How many of us in the working world have had to deal with people in positions of authority with explosive, polarizing personalities whom everyone else must accommodate, forced to tap-dance around their bad behavior and the uncomfortable situations they instigated?

HR handled this disruptive manager effectively by confronting her respectfully, informing her of what the organization expects of its leaders, and clearly explaining the consequences if her behav-ior recurred.

All levels of employees should be informed of the specific topics that the organization considers unsuitable for workplace conver-sation and the reasons they are to be avoided. When everyone understands the "what" and "why" in advance, some problematic behaviors might be prevented altogether.

A more inclusive attitude toward workplace discussions (espe-cially when contentious issues are in the news and people are bound to talk about them) might involve HR proactively communicating

future conversational boundaries. Envision how such a plan would play out in light of the personalities of potential participants involved, and fine tune accordingly.

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). This organization should continue its efforts at encouraging people to seek common ground and discouraging them from baiting others or being baited into conflicts based on disconnects between their worldviews.

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?).

PROSELYTIZING A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE

Summary

An employee who conducts trainings proselytizes her captive audiences of trainees about her religion, making them feel uncomfortable but unable to leave. The HR director talks to the trainer about mutual respect and universal human values and convinces her to end this alienating practice. This minor incident is handled effectively and has a good outcome, but questions remain.

Over the course of a one-on-one training session, the trainer tried to get to know the newly hired trainee. Among her inquiries, she specifically asked about his religious affiliation. The trainee

responded that he was not religious and tried to change the subject. The trainer made several attempts to bring the conversation back to religion by sharing her personal experiences with her faith, and each time the trainee redirected. At the end of the session as the trainee was leaving, the trainer told him he needed to embrace her beliefs or face divine punishment.

The trainee was taken aback and came to see me in HR. He found the trainer's statements offensive early on in their session but felt that, as a new hire, he could not simply leave. His past experiences with religion were bad, he explained, which made proselytization especially uncomfortable. He was now seriously considering leaving our employment.

I decided to interview other recent hires who had had sessions with this trainer. They, too, recounted similar conversations—how she was very vocal about her faith and that everyone should follow it. These trainees were also uncomfortable, as they did not share the trainer's faith.

HR's priority was to make sure this practice did not continue. I met with the trainer for a candid discussion about what happened. She acknowledged that these conversations took place as the trainees had described. She characterized them as "sharing the Word," stating that her faith was very important to her and her mission was to spread her religion far and wide.

After I acknowledged the importance of her beliefs to her, I explained that not everyone shared them. She had to be respectful of others and recognize that their beliefs were equally important. I advised her of the discomfort felt by her coworkers, noting that, as her trainees, they felt unable to end the conversations and leave because they occurred during training sessions.

The trainer became upset and reiterated that such conversations were part of her religious mission. I reiterated that I understood her feelings, but the company has to make sure that all of its employees feel safe and supported in the workplace. Having a coworker lecture them on religion did not do that.

I asked her to put herself in the trainees' place. How would she feel if they counseled *her* to join one of *their* faiths? The trainer admitted she would not like this.

The trainer then pointed out that she and the company's founders shared the same religion. The company's stated values were to be respectful, supportive, open, and honest and to show genuine care and concern. She argued that because these religious values are espoused by the company, she should be able to share them in this workplace.

These are human values, I responded—how all people should treat each other. I told her that the implications of her argument were hurtful to me because I, too, adhered to these values, even though I did not adhere to her religion. I explained that the founders knew it was important to be considerate of everyone who worked for the company.

The trainer reflected for a moment and agreed that one did not have to follow her religion to have these values. She said she would pray about our conversation.

A few days later, the trainer called to thank me. After much prayer, she said, she understood that while it was important to her to spread her beliefs, she realized how that could be upsetting to others who might feel pressured. She also said she came to appreciate the term "human values" as "a great way to look at them."

Taking any disciplinary action in response to the trainer's behavior would have been ineffective. She would have felt attacked for her religious beliefs, likely responding with animosity. Our candid conversation, on the other hand, gave her the opportunity to think more deeply about the situation. There were no more reports of her proselytizing trainees or anyone else.

A year or two later, the trainer asked me if she could start a religious study group onsite and announce it via company email. She stressed that she did not want any employees to feel pressured to join. She would follow up only with people who inquired further. I commended her for figuring out how to gauge her coworkers' interest in her faith while still being respectful of them.

Lessons Learned

Being compassionate and reasonable with others can help introduce them to new ideas, even if their existing ideas are firmly held. Here, through patient argument, an HR professional sought common ground with a firm believer in a certain viewpoint, primarily by showing the believer that at least some of her principles were not unique to her viewpoint. The parties were able to reach a mutually respectful resolution to the conflict.

The question remains, though—what if the trainer was unconvinced by the HR director's argument? It is likely, then, that she would have continued engaging in behavior that made her trainees uncomfortable.

Unwelcome discussions of religion in the workplace present an inherently problematic conflict. It is important to sustain a high level of recognition and openness in interactions among groups of employees with differing religions and philosophies.

Empathy/Polarization Index

The key factors involved here were *belonging* (the organization provides all staff with a sense of belonging), *openness* (the organization fosters openness to different perspectives), and *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 organization was able to undo some of the damage caused by the trainer's polarizing disregard for others' belief by helping to open her mind, which led to a positive impact on the culture.

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?).