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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

POLITICS IN THE WORKPLACE CAN BE RECIPE FOR DISASTER

Employers have vested interest in keeping discourse civil

CHICAGO, February 18, 2016 – With presidential primaries in full swing and campaign rhetoric seemingly more divisive than ever, the potential for political dustups in the office is increasing, along with the subsequent damage to morale, productivity and workplace harmony.

While companies should not attempt to ban political discussion in the office, according to one employment and workplace authority, they can set guidelines to mitigate the risk of harmless debates turning into ongoing conflicts that threaten to disrupt operations.

“As workplaces become increasingly collaborative, the importance of maintaining harmony cannot be understated. While one’s First Amendment right to freedom of speech does not apply in the private sector, most employers would not go so far as to prohibit political speech. However, in the spirit of creating a safe and comfortable work setting, employers should recognize the pitfalls of unchecked political discourse and establish some limits,” said John A. Challenger, chief executive officer of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc., a global outplacement and executive coaching consultancy.

“At the very least, unfettered political discussion in the workplace can pit workers against each other, lowering morale and productivity. In extreme situations, the conflict could escalate and the company could end up in a harassment or hostile work environment lawsuit,” he added.

According to a 2012 CareerBuilder Survey, 36 percent of workers discuss politics openly. About 23 percent of respondents indicated that a political discussion had become heated and roughly 10 percent said their opinion of a co-worker changed upon learning of his or her political views.

“If anything, politics has become more divisive over the last four years. People’s views on controversial issues such as immigration and gun control appear to be more extreme, more steadfast and openly shared on social media and in personal interactions,” said Challenger.

The increased division can be seen in a 2014 survey by Pew Research Center, which found that the share of Republicans who have *very* unfavorable views of the Democratic Party has more than doubled over the last 20 years from 17 percent to 43 percent. Likewise, the percentage of Democrats with very unfavorable opinions of the GOP has gone from 16 percent to 38 percent over the same period.

“Having to deal with a co-worker’s political views is one thing, but employees are now just as likely to hear the political views of their employer. Of course, this type of political campaigning comes with entirely different set of pressures,” said Challenger.

Up until 2010, corporations were barred from urging employees to support specific politicians. That changed with the Supreme Court’s Citizens United ruling, which lifted the ban on corporate spending for campaigns and candidates, and removed restrictions on trying to influence employees’ votes.

“While corporations may have won the right to lobby employees to vote a particular way, they should understand that such activities could have a negative impact on employee loyalty and result in increased turnover. That risk may not have been as high in 2012, but with unemployment now sinking below 5.0 percent nationwide, attracting and retaining skilled workers is far more difficult,” said Challenger.

Most companies in the private sector do not have a formal policy about political discussions in the workplace, according to Challenger.

“For the most part, employees have to monitor their own behavior. Supervisors should also be particularly careful about engaging subordinates in political debates, which could leave them vulnerable to discrimination lawsuits,” said Challenger.

Challenger, Gray & Christmas issued the following suggestions for keeping political discussions from negatively impacting the workplace.

RULES FOR POLITICAL TALK IN WORKPLACE

Keep it civil: Do not let friendly banter deteriorate into a name-calling shouting match.

Know your colleague: Career-wise, it is probably safer to converse with those who share your views. If unsure about a colleague's views, then avoid political conversations or carefully probe for his or her views.

Do not campaign: Give-and-take conversations are acceptable, but campaigning can be off-putting. If someone expresses discomfort with political discussions, respect his or her wishes.

If you must talk politics, stick to politics: While politics are increasingly entwined with religion, consider that aspect of the debate off limits.

Do not evaluate based on politics: You may not agree with a coworker's political views, but, if you are a supervisor, do not let that influence your assessment of that person's work and/or value to the company.

Source: Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc.®

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