

Series 1 of 2: Boundaries

Political Boundaries in the workplace

Be careful with politics at your place of business.

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Here's your paycheck. Now vote for the candidate the company endorses!

Ok, no one actually SAYS that, right? In an election year, all kinds of lines can be crossed when it comes to politics. While it's not usually that blatant, some business owners are taking politics and the assumption of free speech into their own hands at work by attempting to "educate/or sway" employees on the candidate or the policies of their liking. Employees can overstep boundaries by offending others with their political opinions and comments.

Setting appropriate workplace boundaries is important for any business. In an election year, it's especially relevant. When discussing political opinions, office chatter that's usually light and friendly can quickly become hostile and offensive. In extreme circumstances there could be legal repercussions.

In one recent example, Mike White, the owner of the Milwaukee manufacturing company Rite-Hite, ended up at the center of an angry media storm as a result of an email he sent to his 1,400 employees that seemed to support Mitt Romney and warned of "personal consequences" if Obama was elected. While there have been other corporate heads that have also made sure their employees understand the benefits of supporting a specific candidate, this one reminds us that politics is an area in which business owners still need to tread lightly.

What can you do?

- Know what you can and cannot do in the workplace (it may be forbidden to wear political attire, for instance, or decorate your workspace with your candidate's flyers)
- Know what you can and cannot do after hours (although your friends and coworkers may share your political views, one errant Facebook posting could offend a client or be shared with people who may not share your views)

- Keep in mind that civil conversations might be fine, but arguments are not. (your coworkers are still people, and it's unlikely you'll change their opinions by yelling at them. Stay away from heated issues)
- Know when to change the subject or to leave the conversation (it's always better to avoid ruining a good work atmosphere or respected client relationship over politics. It's definitely better than handling an ensuing lawsuit because you offended someone)

The election is almost here. Get through it with your business relationships intact. A vote for a peaceful and respectful workplace is always good for business!

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