

Managing Conflict and Controversy in the Workplace

Sarah Sawyer: Welcome to this week's OK at Work with myself, Sarah Sawyer, my colleague Russell Berger, both attorneys at Offit Kurman, and today we are talking about managing conflict and controversy in the workplace. So, obviously 2026 has started with no shortage of news headlines and controversies and, exciting topics to read about that many people disagree on, and lots of different opinions and thoughts and those types of things.

So, all over social media, all over news. Lots going on there. And sometimes obviously since workplaces are filled with people with differing backgrounds and differing views, sometimes that can seep into the workday and the workplace and conversations between colleagues. So what are some things, Russell, that, employers should be keeping an eye out for or considering knowing that those [00:01:00] things might occur in the workplace?

Russell Berger: Yeah, it's funny, we just ended up selecting this topic right after we did the relationships in the workplace episode because it's similar in the sense that, people are people and, normal human things are going to come up, especially when you spend a lot of time at workplace.

You spend a lot of time with colleagues whether it's, the relationship itself. Or, debate and discourse over, what might be a hot button issue in the world that's becoming, increasingly polarized and hot button. So, to say well, look, let's not allow anything that's controversial in the workplace is not a realistic way to go about, I think what is realistic though is, there's a time and a place for these conversations and you may allow some of it in your workplace as long as it's respectful and appropriate for the environment that you're in. But I think, an ongoing point that needs to be made, similar to the relationship issue is, look this is work.

The number one job here is to do your job and whatever [00:02:00] that work is, and these things can't be a distraction. Again, whether it's a relationship or whether it's, discourse on a hot button issue it can't be disruptive to the work process. And if it's the kind of thing that causes others to get distracted, if it creates an issue, you can respectfully ask employees, say, look like we understand this is important to you, and we're not telling you to not express yourself, but in this context, in the workplace here, it's disruptive. It's getting in the way of all of us getting our jobs done. And so we've gotta tone it down here. And if you wanna say whatever you wanna say outside of work on social media, as long as you're not putting words into the company's mouth, the business's mouth then your making clear that you're doing this on your own an independent way, then again, there's still some limits to that too, but that's, most times gonna be okay.

Sarah Sawyer: Yeah, it's good to have, obviously, policies around this and train your managers as well on handling these issues and [00:03:00] what to do in these situations.

Because they can be sensitive and people can get frustrated by these conversations. So it's Definitely something to be prepared for and handle delicately because obviously sometimes in the handling of these issues, that can also in itself create a distraction and disruption depending on how it's handled, how it's messaged and making sure that whoever's having these conversations and enforcing these policies, are prepared to do so and do so in a way that minimizes disruption gets to the core points that you're mentioning, Russell, about why those conversations are being had and what's permissible and what's not, because otherwise, sometimes if it's not handled tactfully, it can actually create the opposite effect.

It still needs to be addressed one way or the other. But this is an area where obviously being really thoughtful on the approach is gonna really matter.

Russell Berger: Yeah this isn't about stifling someone's freedom of speech or their right to have an opinion or to even express that opinion.

It's about managing it in the workplace. And, I find it's helpful to [00:04:00] just get back to, look, we're all here because, in our business we do X, Y, and Z, and this is getting in the way of us doing X, Y, and Z. And if you tie it back to, operations of the business and what supports the best, most efficient most successful operations, then that's usually a good compass for how you navigate the situations where these issues come up.

Sarah Sawyer: Yeah. And applying it evenly in the sense that obviously some of these hot button topics and issues can involve politics, for instance. And so, really thinking about, well, this is the goal, this is what we're doing across the board as it relates to certain topics or types of discussions that might be controversial.

Or might be an issue and just trying to also keep in mind, applying that equally across the board, making sure that you're being mindful of, I mean, that's true with anything that we talk about really as it relates to HR policies and managing people is, that's something to always be keeping in mind, no matter what you're doing is just zooming out to the full picture of how [00:05:00] you're handling things and how that, appears and how it's being handled, in the broader sense, not just in this one narrow issue.

Russell Berger: Yeah. Yeah. Well, and along those lines, I think one major point is as the leader, as the manager you can't say, well, I'm gonna jump into this because I disagree. Right? I've got my own hot take. I wanna get off my chest. You have to set the example of, this is the workplace, this is what we're focused on.

Of course, I'm an intelligent person that's aware of what's going on in the world, and I have opinions about it, but this just isn't the place for to be sharing them and as the leader I am going to model that.

Sarah Sawyer: Yeah. Well, thanks Russell and we'll see you next time.

Russell Berger: Thanks Sarah.