

Handling Political Conversations in the Office

Sarah Sawyer: Welcome to this week's OK at Work with myself, Sarah Sawyer, my colleague Russell Burger. We're the attorneys at Offit Kurman. And today we are talking about politics in the workplace. So we have Election Day coming up, and that often leads to a lot of buzz around candidates and politics and different things going on, which, I mean, that buzz is already always happening I think kinda in the way the news cycle works these days.

But it'll definitely be heightened during this time and more people will be thinking about the fact that they're voting and the candidates and different things that are going on. It might come up in the break room, it might come up in day-to-day operations. So what should employers be thinking about, Russell, as these topics inevitably come up from time to time if not more frequently right now in the workplace with employees?

Russell Berger: Yeah well First off, in a [00:01:00] limited number of jurisdictions, certainly not all of them, political speech might be protected activity. So not something that would be a basis for any kind of adverse action in the workplace. It's more of a DC issue than many other jurisdictions for obvious reasons.

So that's kinda the first thing to think about. But I think, importantly I like to look at it from the standpoint of, as an employer, People are going to have all sorts of different beliefs about any number of topics, some of which are more controversial topics than others.

And that's okay. What I want people that are working under my employ to focus on is doing the job, doing the task at hand. While a little bit of discourse might be fine in the workplace what we don't want it to do is to become a distraction. We want the focus at work to be on getting the job done and working as a team to do so.

It's a totally appropriate thing to, cut off or limit political debate at the workplace by refocusing on the objectives of the organization. Say, "Hey, look, this is [00:02:00] not a comment on your beliefs or the person you're arguing this with beliefs, but our focus right now has gotta be on, getting this order filled, getting this job done, accomplishing what it is we need to accomplish today so that our business stays on track and we're hitting our business objectives."

And so we wanna bring the focus back to that and delicately move it away from what can become certainly heated political debate.

Sarah Sawyer: What could be helpful with that too is if you've got good policies in place around these types of things. Just also adjacent to this topic is also, obviously if people are publishing things online about their views and opinions and things.

Making sure that they're not doing so under the company page or noting the company, or making sure that it's their opinions that are being shared. And we've talked about this before. It's been a long time.

But as far as who might follow your employees on social media platforms and those types of things, that's its own whole episode. But this is a time where when those things happen in the

workplace, having policies, having trained [00:03:00] managers having people prepared to deal with those types of situations will be really important.

So that exactly what you're saying, Russell, the focus is more on let's make sure that we're focused on work at work, and the goals of the company, and goals of your position, and goals of what you're doing, verse focusing on those things. And so you wanna make sure people are prepared to handle that, especially your managers, if you're not handling it yourself directly.

That you've got good policies in place, and so that it is evenly handled, and it's not felt like it's targeting someone's specific view.

Russell Berger: Yeah, Absolutely. Again we want people to be engaged in the workplace and doing a good job at what it is their job is. So anything that detracts from that is, something to be managed past or through.

And again, it's not to make people feel bad about what they, believe. It's not gonna help the organization at all. It's to get them refocused on, what the task at hand is, and, not get hung up on an issue that is not [00:04:00] directly related to the organization.

And to your point to not make it appear as though the organization is taking a position on something either. If, the management team decides to do that, the management team decides to do that, that's fine in most circumstances. But it's not something that you want, just any employee in the organization to do and without careful thought and consideration at the management level.

Sarah Sawyer: Yeah. Well, great points, Russell. Thanks. We'll see you next time.

Russell Berger: Thanks, Sarah.