

CONFLICT

# Don't Let Election Passions Roil Your Workplace

by [Bob Feldman](#)

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After election day, more than 100 million Americans will physically or virtually report to their jobs, one of the few remaining spaces where citizens routinely engage with others who come from diverse backgrounds and hold different viewpoints. Those workplaces are likely to be the first outlet for pent-up emotions at a time of toxic political polarization. More than 25% of voters, according to a recent study, are already convinced that one presidential candidate or the other is “very likely” to cheat to win, and 64% think that it is “probable” that Russia will interfere with the electoral process.

Even in the best-case scenario, in which the race is clearly decided on election night, lingering bitterness and resentments will likely spill into the workplace. But if, as many experts predict, the counting of mail-in ballots continues well beyond November 3, attended by cries of fraud, lawsuits, and possibly even dueling slates of electors (i.e., members of the Electoral College), companies will face the potential of a roiled workplace for weeks and possibly even months. Anxiety, fear, anger, and frustration will boil over in ways managers can't afford to ignore.

What can they do? A new report by the Dialogue Project that is based on a year-long research effort offers advice on how to help employees engage in productive discourse and provides unsettling data about how difficult it can be.

The Dialogue Project was launched in September 2019 by a coalition of corporations, academic institutions, and think tanks that included Google, Bristol Myers Squibb, Southwest Airlines, and the University of Southern California. The project's purpose: to explore how business leaders can contribute to improve civil discourse and reduce polarization in our society.

A 5,000-person global survey executed in July 2020 for the Dialogue Project by Morning Consult shows how difficult it is for people around the world to discuss controversial issues. In the United States, the survey found, "third rail" issues include politics, race relations, and gun control. More than 70% of the 1,000 American respondents said it is hard for them to talk about those topics with people who may hold opposing views. Some 82% of Americans surveyed also said that people should be more respectful in civic conversations. Yet 50% also said "not me" when asked if they'd be willing to invest more time in pursuing such engagement. Only 25% of survey respondents said they had willingly discussed hot-button issues with a person likely to have a different viewpoint.

Americans have their reasons for withdrawing from political discussion — from the old admonition that such conversations never solve anything to the disturbing reality that one American in six has reported being harassed online over a political opinion. As more

people withdraw from discussion, the vacuum is filled by those with extreme views, and the doom loop gains momentum, with even more citizens bowing out of the conversation. The temptation to lash out on social media, often anonymously, only adds to the problem.

If companies are to help their employees keep their conversations from going off the rails and preserve at least the minimally necessary degree of harmony in the workplace, they need to start planning now for what they will say and do in the time running up to November 3, and, depending on what happens that night, what they will say and do afterward.

Fortunately, though we may be in uncharted waters for American politics, we are not entirely without navigational aids. Lessons can be learned from a number of creative, effective initiatives launched to encourage productive discussion on thorny issues. Many of these approaches, which are described in the report, can be adopted whole by other organizations or adapted for home or community use. Here are examples of two of the programs:

The Better Arguments Project is a national civic initiative launched by the Aspen Institute, in conjunction with Allstate and Facing History and Ourselves, a global education program. Participants gather in cities to hear speakers on a controversial topic and then move into smaller groups. Before starting the conversation, they pledge to respect five core principles of productive discussion: 1) take nothing off the table, 2) be present and listen to learn, 3) connect and respect, 4) be honest and welcome honesty from others, and 5) make space for new ideas and room to transform.

At General Mills, the Courageous Conversations series, now in its fifth year, demonstrates that people are willing to talk about tough topics if they feel heard and respected. During a Courageous Conversations event, General Mills employees gather to listen to a speaker and then break into tables of 10 people. Each table is assigned an employee-facilitator who is trained to keep the discussion both respectful and on point. The first Courageous Conversation attracted only 30 participants. Now, the conversations attracts as many as

3,000 employees and are conducted online. Employees report “bringing home” the techniques learned through Courageous Conversations to smaller gatherings and even to family dinners.

The Dialogue Project’s report describes a variety of other initiatives and offers the perspectives of business and nonprofit leaders on what can be done to improve the quality and utility of our civil discourse. Taken together, they offer some useful guidance for this challenging political season.

**Before Election Day.** While there may not be enough time before November 3 for a company to launch a full-blown program, there are six things to be done right now:

- Consider a message from your CEO (or head of Human Resources) to all employees that acknowledges the challenging days that may lie ahead and encourages employees to take the high road, commits the company to a culture of mutual respect, and emphasizes the importance of corporate values and a harmonious workplace.
- Have HR provide guidance to your organization’s managers on discussion facilitation. There are many tools to help them do this, including the case studies at the Dialogue Project and the Handbook for Facilitating Difficult Conversations in the Classroom.
- Encourage managers throughout your organization to reiterate the CEO’s message by acknowledging the anxiety many people feel and recognizing that passions are running high at this time.
- Discourage unnecessary election pools, political banter, and so on, but do it in a way that doesn’t appear to be censorious or taking sides and makes clear that the goal is to avoid hurtful and aggressive language.
- Encourage everyone to vote, although this year, unfortunately, even that may be interpreted as a form of taking sides.
- Model the behavior you hope to see in others.

**After the election.** There are two radically different scenarios. In one, the election is decided definitively on election day and the losing candidate concedes before everyone returns to work. In the other, the vote count drags on for days or weeks or one or both

sides allege wrongdoing by the other, and the issue lands in the courts or even the U.S. House of Representatives.

Even if the first scenario comes to pass, it doesn't mean calm will immediately prevail. This has been an especially divisive election season after an especially divisive four years. That won't suddenly end at 12:01 a.m. on November 4. Many people on both sides have become convinced that the other side can only win through chicanery, and they will be reluctant to accept the results even if their candidate has. And even if they do accept the results, there is likely to be both lingering bitterness and a determination to continue the battle into the next election cycle.

Leaders might try to take the advice that Richard Brodhead gave after the 2016 election. In an open letter to the Duke University community, Brodhead, who was then the university's president, said: "Whatever positions we held in this contest, we all have a stake in the future health of the national community, so we all need to find ways to lessen negativism and division and to reengage the common good." He went on to emphasize the university's "respect for differences" and said that "we must not simply tolerate difference of opinions but create the conditions for respectful dialogue that allow mutual education to take place."

But what if you cannot say on November 4 that the campaign "has come to an end?" Worse, what if some are pressuring you to say that and others are pressuring you to refrain from saying that?

Here are seven recommendations, drawn from Dialogue Project research, that can help managers and leaders navigate the challenges of a protracted post-election-day conflict:

- Do not remain silent — communicate. The election and its aftermath will be the elephant in the room. It will need to be addressed.
- Acknowledge the difficulty. The most effective initiatives on civil discourse begin with an admission that these conversations may be difficult. Acknowledge that people feel passionately about these issues, and that it can sometimes be difficult to rein in that

passion or for someone to hear contrasting views that they believe differ not only on policy but on core values.

- Listen actively. Each person has a responsibility to be an active listener and respectful of others. It's important to remind people to speak from their own experiences and not to speak for others or for an entire group.
- Model desired behavior. Remember that in times of stress employees carefully watch the words and actions of leaders. Even the casual banter that often precedes in-person or virtual meetings will be scrutinized. Leaders finding themselves in passionate discussions should speak briefly, resist the desire to interrupt, share the conversation time equitably, and emphasize areas of common ground.
- Show leadership through empathy. The day after the election, and likely, for some days after that, will be a time to showcase the softer skills of leadership. Empathize with the challenge we all may face to keep our cool as post-election conflict escalates to its climax.
- Resist the temptation to be the office pundit. Social media and cable news have turned us all into amateur pundits. But holding forth at work with your own predictions and analysis, tempting as the daily drama may make it, will lead others to make inferences about you that may be unhelpful and raise, rather than lower, the political temperature. This may be difficult to avoid entirely if you are in a business that may be significantly affected by the outcome of the election or by the uncertainty itself. But it should be minimized by leaders at all levels.
- Reiterate core values. Depending on how the situation plays out, and especially if there is any kind of civil unrest, it may also be helpful to reiterate company policies regarding harassment, bullying, and so on, and remind people of the importance of not allowing political differences to become disruptive or poison working relationships.

Whichever of the two post-election scenarios plays out, it will be helpful to relate your efforts around respect, empathy, and understanding to the diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts that are likely already underway in your organization. And remember that everything you say and do may become public, possibly with audio and video on social media.

The events of 2020, from the pandemic to the spotlight on racial injustice, make clear that business leaders must now step up to help bridge the divide. The United States, a great nation, has equally great and increasingly urgent problems affecting its people and, as a result, its businesses. Like all crises, this anxious moment in our national life presents not only danger but also opportunities for growth and a change in direction.

As James Momon, a General Mills executive, observes in the Dialogue Project report: “We’re moving into territory where traditionally corporations didn’t tread. But we can never solve problems that we aren’t willing to speak about.” To do that, America’s business leaders must step up to help mend the frayed fabric of civil discourse.



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