

The background of the cover is a collage of crumpled white paper. Overlaid on this are several silhouettes of human heads in profile, facing each other as if in conversation. The silhouettes on the left are a deep red color, while those on the right are a dark blue color. The central text is contained within a white rectangular box.

# POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS PLAYBOOK

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A GUIDE TO NAVIGATING POLITICAL  
DIALOGUE FOR ENHANCED LEARNING AND  
UNDERSTANDING IN THE WORKPLACE

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to SHRM's Political Conversations Playbook, a guide designed to empower you with the tools and insights necessary to navigate the complex landscape of political discussions in the workplace. In today's diverse and dynamic work environment, conversations about politics and social issues are inevitable and challenging. This playbook is crafted to help you take control and engage in these discussions proactively and constructively. At the same time, you should maintain civility and foster a culture that values inclusivity and respects diverse perspectives.

Politics can touch on deeply held beliefs and personal values, making discussions potentially fraught with tension. Yet, when approached thoughtfully, these conversations can be a powerful catalyst for understanding and collaboration. SHRM's goal is to provide you with practical advice and strategies to manage these discussions with sensitivity and professionalism, ensuring that every voice is heard and respected.

SHRM's guidance in this playbook is grounded in extensive research and analysis, reflecting a deep understanding of workplace trends and employer insights.

Whether you're an employer with questions about establishing fair workplace policies around political expression, a leader hoping to set the tone for respectful dialogue, or a team member seeking to contribute positively to discussions, this playbook is here to guide you. SHRM's approach allows us to embrace the challenges of political conversations as opportunities for learning and understanding. Together, let's build a workplace where diversity of thought is celebrated and every conversation contributes to a more civil and inclusive company culture.

**71%**

of U.S. workers reported having polarizing, political, or controversial conversations at work.<sup>1</sup>

**87%**

of employers are concerned about managing divisive political beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

**8%**

of companies said they have workplace policies on political expression at work.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Source: *Managing Difficult and Political Conversations in the Workplace*, SHRM, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Source: *How to Manage Political Expression at Work*, SHRM, 2024.





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# 1. ESTABLISHING RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Engaging in political conversations in the modern workplace is a choice, but workers are looking for direction from employers to set the ground rules.

**M**any of us were taught to never discuss politics, particularly in the workplace, because it would be perceived as unprofessional conduct. Today, the decision to embrace these traditionally taboo subjects at work is more complex. SHRM believes it's important to recognize, when managed appropriately, that political conversations can coexist with a respectful and productive work environment and culture.

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

**Political party affiliations are not considered a protected class under federal anti-discrimination laws such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, enforced by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. With organizations proactively managing space for these topics, you can maintain a proactive pulse when dialogue is escalating into covered areas.**

Employees increasingly bring their personal values and beliefs to the workplace, and political issues are often intertwined with broader social and economic topics that impact professional life. It's natural for political conversations to arise in a diverse and dynamic workplace. As a result, employees may feel increasingly isolated if employers don't have a clear strategy for encouraging civil dialogue on the topic.

By setting clear expectations, fostering constructive dialogue, and providing the necessary training, organizations can build trust and create an environment where political discussions contribute positively to the workplace culture, leading to a more inclusive and engaged workforce.



### DID YOU KNOW?

It's important to understand who you work with. Millennials and Generation Z are more likely to talk about politics in the workplace.<sup>3</sup>

Visit [SHRM.org](https://www.shrm.org) to access these SHRM members-only resources:

Managing Workplace Conflict >

Prohibited Political Activity Policy >

Political Conversations at Work >

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<sup>3</sup>Source: Politics and Work Don't Mix: ResumeHelp's Politics in the Workplace Study, ResumeHelp, 2024.

## Survey Employees About Political Discourse

- **Conduct Regular Surveys:** Implement engagement surveys integrating questions on how political conversations are being handled. Include specific questions about employees' experiences and perceptions of political discussions in the workplace. Regularly hold conversations with employees to gather real-time feedback.
- **Identify Problem Areas:** Use survey results to pinpoint departments or teams where political discussions may be causing issues. This will help you target training and interventions where they are most needed.

## Communicate Often

- **Address Tension Head-on:** Acknowledge that regardless of an individual's political affiliation or beliefs, tensions are running high throughout the community and many team members may be feeling stress or fear related to external political events.
- **Praise Constructive Contributions:** Encourage managers to recognize and commend employees who engage in political discussions in a respectful and productive manner. Highlighting positive examples helps reinforce a culture where employees feel supported in bringing up and discussing political issues.
- **Reinforce Psychological Safety:** Remind employees that the workplace is a place where everyone should feel safe, welcomed, respected, and included—even when disagreements arise.
- **Encourage Engagement:** Communicate to employees that the company doesn't want to limit healthy dialogue about social issues, but it does have a vested interest in reducing disruptions and maintaining a culture of respect.
- **Provide a Point of View:** Share your organization's vision and strategy for how business will continue following any political event or policy decision. Regardless of any policy shifts or election results, workers will pay close attention to their employer's stance on important issues, nonpartisan or otherwise, so this is a critical opportunity to reinforce company values.

## Encourage Constructive Dissent

- **Support Civil Debate:** Managers should foster an environment where finding common ground is encouraged. During scheduled team building, consider organizing workshops with external facilitators to dive deeper into fostering civil discussions and meaningful dialogue.

## Establish Clear Accountability

- **Define Boundaries:** Clearly communicate policies around sharing personal political opinions and sensitive policy viewpoints in the workplace. To protect “brave space”<sup>4</sup> and empower employees to find common ground, consider advising how political opinions and preferences are shared over email, physical office signage, clothing, and other media.
- **Personal Versus Professional:** This is an opportunity to establish clear policies acknowledging that how an individual conducts themselves outside the workplace ultimately reflects upon the company. This can impact guidelines for how people behave in public and on social media channels, which should ensure that individuals feel supported in their right to express their individual freedoms, such as by attending rallies, sharing inoffensive content, or volunteering for a political campaign.

## Empower Employees

- **Encourage Resolution at the Source:** Advise employees to address political disagreements directly with their peers rather than escalating them up the organizational hierarchy. This approach builds confidence and equips employees with the skills to handle political conflicts independently.
- **Highlight Employee Resources:** Talk openly about resources and mental health support available to everyone at your organization. Whether in person or remote, employees should know they have a professional outlet they can reach out to for one-on-one support.

## Provide Training on Civil Political Discussions

- **Offer Skills Development:** Provide training sessions or recommend resources that focus on managing political conversations effectively. Educate employees on handling sensitive political topics without questioning others’ competencies or personal integrity. Training should emphasize the importance of focusing on issues rather than personal attacks.

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<sup>4</sup>A brave space is a supportive environment where people can feel comfortable sharing ideas, learning, and growing together.

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## 2. THE ROLE OF HR AND POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS AT WORK

When politics heat up, few workplaces are immune from the effects of political discussions, and studies show that employee engagement is a key marker for workplace well-being.

Executives around the world said enhancing employee engagement is one of their top five global business strategies.<sup>5</sup> Not only does engagement have the potential to significantly affect employee retention, productivity, and loyalty, but it is also a key link to customer satisfaction, company reputation, and overall stakeholder value. Increasingly, organizations are turning to HR to set the agenda for employee engagement and a commitment to establish a competitive advantage.

According to a recent Gallup poll, **employee engagement is at a historic low, and people's perceptions of being cared about at work have declined sharply since 2020.**<sup>5</sup> This could leave workplaces particularly vulnerable to the potentially corrosive effect of political discussions happening across our daily lives. The data suggests that employee engagement may buffer the potential negative effects of political conversations at work.

HR plays a critical role in proactively managing employee engagement, fostering involvement and enthusiasm of employees in their work, and measuring employee perspectives on certain elements of the workplace environment. **HR leaders and professionals have an opportunity to guide the success of this profound workplace transformation and create a culture of trust and engagement** in which employees are open to hearing opposing political viewpoints and feel safe expressing political opinions of their own.

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<sup>5</sup>Source: How to Develop and Sustain Employee Engagement, SHRM, 2018.

### DID YOU KNOW?

- Engaged employees are half as likely to say they have felt uncomfortable because of political discussions among co-workers.<sup>6</sup>
- Engaged employees are much more likely to say they have felt included because of political discussions among co-workers.<sup>6</sup>

Visit [SHRM.org](https://www.shrm.org) to access these SHRM members-only resources:

How to Develop and Sustain Employee Engagement >

6 Ways HR Can Prepare for Workplace Issues Arising from External Protests >

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<sup>6</sup>Source: When Politics Comes to Work: 4 Ways HR Executives Can Promote Civility amid Division, SHRM, 2024.





## **Emphasize a Culture of Respect and Inclusion**

HR leaders should provide resources to managers and model healthy communication strategies. These include a daily practice of active listening while seeking to understand others' points of view. Modeling these behaviors can inspire employees to follow suit and reinforce a culture of respect and inclusion in which every voice is heard and valued.

Ensuring that every employee understands how their organization's values translate into daily interactions can help create workplaces where colleagues treat each other with empathy, even amid disagreements. Leaders can reiterate the organization's values and ensure every employee knows how those values translate to the way colleagues are expected to treat one another.

## **Foster Trust and Understanding Between Colleagues**

HR can help create an environment where people feel safe to respectfully voice differing views without fear of retaliation or dismissal. They can encourage colleagues to get to know one another as individuals and appreciate their commonalities and differences. Engaged employees tend to share trust and have close relationships, which may mitigate the negative effects of differing opinions.

When workers see their workplace as highly civil and psychologically safe during political conversations, they were more likely to say they trust their co-workers and their manager/supervisor than workers who did not rate their workplace high on these areas during these discussions. In fact, 73% of workers who rated their workplace highly on civility and psychological safety agreed or strongly agreed that they trust their co-workers, and 72% of these workers said the same about their manager or supervisor.<sup>7</sup>

## **Set Expectations for How Conversations Should Be Managed**

Establish ground rules for respectful and civil behavior, as well as systems to address disrespect or intolerance. If guidelines are in place for managing these discussions at work, ensure they are well communicated and understood by every employee.

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<sup>7</sup>Source: *Managing Difficult and Political Conversations in the Workplace*, SHRM, October 2024.

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# 3. UNDERSTANDING THE FULL IMPACT OF POLITICS AT WORK

It's critical to understand the full scope and impact of political issues to safeguard company culture and reputation.

Political conversations in the workplace can have significant and multifaceted impacts on both employees and organizations. These discussions can foster inclusivity and diverse perspectives, but they also carry potential risks that may affect employee morale, company reputation, and overall business success. It is important that employers do not simply dismiss or ignore the reality that political conversations are happening more frequently in the workplace.

SHRM believes that by balancing open dialogue with respectful and professional conduct, organizations can mitigate negative effects and leverage political conversations to enhance their workplace culture and overall success—strengthening inclusion and diversity.

**Uncivil interactions across the workplace cost businesses over \$2 billion per day.<sup>8</sup>**

**84%** of employers believe discussions about politics will adversely affect employee engagement.<sup>9</sup>

**79%** of employers said political discussions adversely affect productivity.<sup>9</sup>

**61%** of employees said they experience stress and frustration when political discussions occur between themselves and people with whom they disagree.<sup>10</sup>

Visit [SHRM.org](https://www.shrm.org) to access this SHRM members-only resource:

[How to Manage Political Discussions in the Workplace >](#)

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<sup>8</sup>Source: Q3 Civility Index, SHRM, 2024.

<sup>9</sup>Source: How to Manage Political Expression at Work, SHRM, 2024.

<sup>10</sup>Source: When Politics Comes to Work: 4 Ways HR Executives Can Promote Civility amid Division, SHRM, 2024.



## Impact on Employee Morale and Well-Being

### *Positive Outcomes:*

- **Enhanced Inclusivity:**  
Allowing political discussions can make employees feel valued and heard, particularly if the conversations align with their personal values and beliefs.
- **Increased Engagement:**  
When managed well, political dialogue can stimulate engagement by showing that the company is attuned to broader social issues and respects diverse viewpoints.

### *Unintended Outcomes:*

- **Increased Tension and Stress:**  
Political conversations can sometimes become heated, leading to stress and anxiety among employees, especially if discussions are not managed respectfully.
- **Exclusion and Alienation:**  
Employees who hold minority or opposing views may feel marginalized or excluded, which can impact their overall job satisfaction and sense of belonging.

## Impact on Company Reputation

### *Positive Outcomes:*

- **Positive Public Image:**  
Companies that navigate political conversations well can build a reputation for being inclusive and open-minded, enhancing their brand as a progressive and socially responsible organization.

### *Unintended Outcomes:*

- **Reputational Risks:**  
Poorly handled political discussions can lead to negative publicity, particularly if conflicts become public, if they escalate into a larger issue or violation of workplace laws, or if employees share grievances on social media. This can damage the company's reputation and deter potential talent or customers.
- **Perception of Bias:** If political conversations are perceived as being unfairly managed or biased, it can lead to accusations of favoritism or discrimination, harming the company's public image.

## Impact on Business Success

### *Positive Outcomes:*

- **Enhanced Innovation:**  
Companies that navigate political conversations well can build a reputation for being inclusive and open-minded, enhancing their brand as a progressive and socially responsible organization.

Workers who rated their workplace high on both civility and psychological safety during political conversations were more likely than workers who did not rate their workplaces high to say their organization supports innovative actions. In fact, 66% of workers who rated their workplace high on civility and psychological safety agreed or strongly agreed that their organization encourages employees to present new ideas. In addition, 65% of these workers agreed or strongly agreed that their organization supports turning new ideas into action.<sup>11</sup>

### *Unintended Outcomes:*

- **Distraction from Core Objectives:**  
Political discussions that become contentious can distract from core business goals, leading to decreased productivity and focus.
- **Increased Turnover:**  
Prolonged or poorly managed political conflict can lead to higher employee turnover because those who feel uncomfortable or unsupported may seek employment elsewhere. This can exacerbate talent shortages and affect the bottom line with increased recruitment and training costs.

About 20% of workers who have had political conversations in the workplace agreed or strongly agreed that these conversations are uncomfortable. Workers who described their workplace as low on civility and psychological safety were also over five times more likely to agree or strongly agree that political conversations are uncomfortable than those who rated their workplace high on civility and psychological safety. Finally, workers who described their workplace as low on civility and psychological safety reported intending to stay with their organization for nearly two years less than workers who rated these areas highly.

<sup>11</sup>Source: *Managing Difficult and Political Conversations in the Workplace*, SHRM, 2024.

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# 4. STEPS TO ENCOURAGE CIVIL CONVERSATIONS AT WORK

At SHRM, we believe civility is a cornerstone of workplace culture that allows people and business to thrive. Let's disagree, let's debate, but let's keep it civil.

SHRM believes everyone can play a role in transforming workplaces to be more civil, one conversation at a time. To encourage civil conversations in the workplace, SHRM has developed a practical guide for leaders and managers. This guide is part of SHRM's Civility Starter Kit, and when combined with the kit's Cards Against Incivility, these resources offer a turnkey opportunity to equip teams with the skills needed to practice civil conversations. This guide offers five clear, actionable steps to turn tough talks into teamwork, discord into dialogue, and conflict into opportunity, ultimately setting teams up for success. It also highlights additional resources to help team members maintain civility at work.

By actively cultivating civil environments within individual teams, we can collectively ensure respect, empathy, and the productive exchange of ideas and opinions across departments and throughout organizations. Every leader and team has a crucial role to play, and fostering civility is a commitment the entire organization must embrace.

**Visit [SHRM.org](https://www.shrm.org) to access these SHRM members-only resources:**

**SHRM Civility Starter Kit >**

*The SHRM Civility Starter Kit contains the latest SHRM Civility Index and new tools for fostering civil conversations. Use it as your guide to cultivate a more civil and productive workplace.*

**Fostering Civil Conversations at Work Video Tutorial and Host Guide >**

## **1. Educate Yourself**

It is crucial to equip yourself with knowledge and understanding of the current state of civility and incivility in both the workplace and society at large.

## **2. Establish a Shared Understanding of Civility**

Building a strong foundation for team civility starts with a shared understanding of civility, often called a shared mental model. By ensuring everyone agrees on civil and uncivil behavior, your team can communicate and resolve disagreements better.

## **3. Identify Team Norms for Mutual Respect**

After developing a shared understanding of civility, establishing clear team norms for mutual respect will further guide your team's interactions. These norms will define how your team interacts, communicates, and resolves conflicts in a civil manner. These norms are specific behaviors expected from everyone in the group.

## **4. Promote a Culture of Civility**

With shared definitions of civility and team norms for mutual respect in place, you can actively cultivate a culture of civility within your team. This culture reflects employee expectations of how leadership and managers utilize policies, procedures, and practices to maintain a respectful and civil work environment. These behaviors are expected not only from leaders but also from team members.

## **5. Become a Catalyst for Civility**

Remember, fostering civility is an ongoing process, and doing so will further cement civility as a norm and expectation in your workplace culture.



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# 5. POLICY, NOT POLITICS

SHRM is setting the tone for driving lasting change at work by serving as an advocate, expert, and thought leader on policy, not politics.

**A**s the voice of its members, SHRM focuses on policy—not politics—to impact legislation. Our members represent the backbone of the business community and rely on SHRM to pursue nonpartisan public policy efforts and elevate the voice of HR in discussions on policies affecting the world of work.

HR professionals sit at the intersection of work, workers, and the workplace, providing SHRM with the unique voice, policy perspective, and technical expertise necessary to successfully advocate major policy issues.

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

**More than 95% of Fortune 500 companies rely on SHRM as their go-to resource for all things work and as their business partner in creating next-generation workplaces.**



HR professionals and business executives expect SHRM to be a vocal advocate for key labor, employment, and safety issues, including six core policy areas:

## **Workforce Development**

Supporting effective workforce development strategies and investments to enhance a skilled and competitive workforce.

## **Workplace Inclusion**

Advancing healthy work cultures to foster inclusion and diversity.

## **Workplace Flexibility and Leave**

Enacting paid leave and workplace flexibility solutions to meet the needs of the modern workforce and workplace.

## **Workplace Immigration**

Modernizing the U.S. immigration system to better enable the nation to compete globally for the best talent.

## **Workplace Health Care**

Strengthening and improving the employer-based health care system.

## **Workplace Governance**

Promoting clear, balanced rules and guidance on governance issues to create better workplaces.

**Visit [SHRM.org](https://www.shrm.org) to access these SHRM members-only resources:**

**SHRM Advocacy >**

**SHRM Policy Tracking Tools >**

*Stay up-to-date on the latest workplace policy issues within your state.*

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# 6. HOW TO PROMOTE CIVILITY AMID DIVISION

As political discord heats up, even when we've taken proactive steps to prevent uncivil behavior from spilling over into the workplace, conflict can arise. SHRM has actionable steps to help resolve conflict when it does flare up.

**D**ivisive. Polarized. Toxic. It's no surprise that these are among the top words U.S. residents use to describe the current state of politics in the U.S., according to a recent Pew Research Center survey.<sup>12</sup> And in the workplace, HR executives are on the front lines of setting the tone—and the policies—to make sure political polarization doesn't spark uncivil behavior, conflict, or even violence among employees.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- More than a third of workers said they believe political elections will trigger additional incivility in the workplace.<sup>13</sup>

Visit [SHRM.org](https://www.shrm.org) to access these SHRM members-only resources:

Conflict Resolution Training >

How Do We Mediate a 'Cease-Fire' Between Employees? >

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<sup>12</sup>Source: *Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics*, Pew Research Center, 2023.

<sup>13</sup>Source: *When Politics Comes to Work: 4 Ways HR Executives Can Promote Civility amid Division*, SHRM, 2024.



## 10 Steps to Resolving Conflict

When faced with having to defuse an employee conflict resulting from deep-rooted disagreement and escalated passions on a certain topic, it's critical to have an action plan to resolve the conflict and restore civility and respect. All workplace conflicts impact more than just the people engaged in discord, so a swift resolution will benefit the entire team and help build confidence and trust in your leadership as well as the company culture.

1. Schedule a meeting to address the problem in person, preferably at a neutral place.
2. Set ground rules. Ask all parties to treat each other with respect and empathy and listen to understand where the other person is coming from.
3. Ask each participant to describe the conflict, including desired outcomes. Direct participants to use “I” statements, not “you” statements, to take ownership of the dialogue versus having an accusatory tone. Each participant should focus on specific behaviors and problems rather than attacking other participants’ personal character.
4. Ask participants to restate what others have said to ensure everyone is listening to and understanding what is being communicated.
5. Summarize the conflict based on what you have heard and obtain agreement from participants.
6. Brainstorm solutions. Discuss all the options in a positive manner.
7. Rule out any options that participants agree are unworkable.
8. Summarize all possible options for a solution.
9. Make sure all parties agree on the next steps.
10. Close the meeting by asking participants to shake hands, apologize, and thank each other for working to resolve the conflict.





Learn More About the Political Conversations  
Research Report on SHRM's Website

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**SHRM.org**