

Respect in the Workplace

There has been a surge in conversations about race, policing, politics, and justice since the death of George Floyd on May 30. While the death of George Floyd sparked the current movement, names such as Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and Trayvon Martin have also been center stage in the media. How does this impact the workplace?

Starting the dialogue

Employers have a duty to their employees to facilitate respectful conversations and discussions. These topics are deeply emotional which can make the conversations feel difficult. Kwame Christian from the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity shares “Deep inside everybody, there’s an internal scale of justice. Everybody has a deep belief of what’s right and wrong. When that’s out of balance, it hurts us deeply.” The fear of saying the wrong thing or being misunderstood frequently prevents people from saying anything at all. The risk of keeping silent is much greater than the risk of starting these crucial conversations.

Keeping the peace

Acknowledging these are difficult conversations is a great place to start. Validate the other persons feelings and ask open ended questions to foster constructive dialogue. Speak with compassion and sincerity to create trust. “That’s an interesting point, but I have a few questions about that...” allows you to acknowledge you heard the person while still asking your questions. If the conversation starts to turn into a disagreement, encourage your employees to monitor their use of words and recognize what could be considered insensitive or dismissive.

Leaderships role

Employers can do everything right and there will still be contentious discussions, whether it is about race, politics, or the like. Johnny Taylor, President and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) says it is up to companies to “create inclusive cultures of civility where difference isn’t a disruption.”

Leaders in a company should determine if they are equipped and prepared to facilitate the conversation and a messaging plan to communicate their plan company-wide. If you do not have qualified leaders to do so, reach out to your consulting team or employment attorney to discuss alternate methods. In the meantime, provide your employees with appropriate resources so they can educate and help themselves. Current resources being utilized are employee assistance programs, diversity and inclusion discussion groups, and counseling hotlines. Employees should be encouraged to do their own research before making it the responsibility of someone else to educate them.

Messaging is also key. As an employer, you have a responsibility to choose your words carefully. Many companies are releasing statements to their employee base without reading their message from another’s point of view. What may seem reasonable to you, may be offensive to someone else. Having multiple people, including your attorney, review communication before distributing is essential.

Final thoughts

Race, politics, civility, and social injustice are just a handful of the potential water cooler talks you can expect as employees are beginning to return to the workplace. While stopping them is not an option, you can help ensure they happen in a respectful manner. Your consulting team is available for additional resources and guidance.