

How to Support Employees After the Election

Katie Navarra | November 3, 2020 | SHRM



Employees are dreading going to work on Nov. 4. In a survey by Reflective of 1,000 U.S. employees—conducted earlier this year—54 percent of participants said that if their candidate loses this election, it will impact their performance at work. Another 29 percent felt that office politics would make it difficult to go to work the day after the election. Tensions in the workplace have risen since then.

"Even more concerning long term, most Millennials [57 percent] are somewhat or very concerned that disagreeing with the political views of their bosses or co-workers could negatively bias their performance review," said Reflective's Chief Human Resource Officer Rachel Ernst.

This election season, more than any other, HR professionals must focus on how to support employees and guide conversations to prevent explosive interactions and de-escalate disputes.

Create Conversations

Preparing employees for post-election workplace interactions started months ago for some companies.

"We were having [virtual] town hall meetings every two weeks to remind employees about our policy about Election Day and how to be respectful of others," said Kelli Kombat, global human resources director at the International Trademark Association.

With tensions and anxieties at an all-time high, the chances for controversial conversations have increased. Ernst encourages HR leaders to revisit their diversity and inclusion guidelines and lean into the work already completed on creating an inclusive environment.

Using active listening, showing empathy and sharing the mental health resources offered through an employee assistance program are the first steps. Providing employees guidance for navigating post-election conversations is key.

Ernst offers these strategies to guide employees' conversations:

- Speak from your own experience.
- Never invalidate someone else's experience.
- Remind employees they are responsible for their statements and actions, and the impact that they have on their colleagues.
- Be nonpartisan and objective while also being authentic. Share feelings rather than opinions.

A recent article in the **Harvard Business Review** recommends three strategies for avoiding heated debates. Curiosity, boundaries and humility keep controversial conversations from boiling over. Listening to understand, speaking respectfully and showing empathy will only go so far. Review your company's employee handbook on how to respond should a discussion intensify.

Recognize Anxieties

In past election years, people might have said going to work post-Election Day was hard because they stayed up late watching the results. This year, the COVID-19 pandemic, social unrest and racial injustice have created all-new hardships.

There are plenty of ways to show support without asserting a political agenda. Lindsay Lagreid, senior advisor of the Limeade Institute, said the most important thing companies can do is visibly show that they care about employees' well-being.

"Having the CEO or another well-known leader post a video that acknowledges the situation and encourages them to take care of themselves is helpful," Lagreid said. "Letting leaders know it's OK to talk about the emotional impact of the election and encouraging managers to check in with employees and take the time to ask, 'How are you doing, really?' is important."

Give Space

Seven weeks ago, Leia Rollag started her role as head of people at WildBit. Company leaders encouraged her to get creative in supporting employees leading up to, during and after the election. The company operates on a four-day workweek and considered closing Nov. 3 and 4. The global company decided to remain open but designate those dates as "no-meeting days."

"We are recommending people lean into the four-day workweek and the culture we have with a flexible schedule," she said. "I lean a lot on the NeuroLeadership Institute, which has done research on the brain and has the **SCARF** model, which gives you tips on how to work around [conflicts] and reduce the threat response."

WildBit also created a Slack channel to give team members space to talk about civic engagement experiences. Even though the team is separated from each other physically, its members can interact with one another about issues that matter to them. So far, though, Rollag says it hasn't been widely used.

Leaders at KNACK suspended customer-facing content releases on Nov. 3 and 4 to provide the team space and grace to vote, volunteer or engage in self-care, according to Elizabeth Dunn, the company's operations lead. They also granted staff permission to notify customers of slower service.

"[We have an] instant messaging system we use within our software that allows users to reach out to our support folks in order to chat in real time," Dunn said. "We generally use this system to let users know that they might experience delays in response times during holidays, but we were able to employ those same tactics for the election and plan to leave those notices live through Nov. 4."