

Dear HR Knowledge, can business owners put the kibosh on political discussions at work?

This is a complicated matter. It seems like our appetites for politics are only becoming stronger every day. Despite the advice that we're not supposed to talk religion or politics at the office, politics pops up at work with increasing frequency these days.

If HR sends a memo asking employees not to discuss politics or religion in the workplace, you may find some employees citing the First Amendment. However, employers have a right to regulate workplace behavior and do have leeway to curb office chats – but it's not infinite. First, some states give more latitude to employee discussions than does federal law. Also, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) grants nonsupervisory employees the right to discuss a variety of wage and wage-related topics, and sometimes the line between NLRA discussions and politics can be thin.

Many offices have guidelines that prohibit wearing political clothing or bringing campaign material into work. The same goes for sending out political emails to workers or using work time to tweet or blog about your views. Play it safe and tell your employees to leave campaigning for the weekend.

Even after work, when talking politics is technically OK, it's still in your best interest to tread lightly. As unfair or unreasonable as it may seem, discovering your personal politics can quickly change someone's opinion of you and even of your work. Making a heated comment on Facebook or during happy hour – even if it's funny – can easily offend someone, tarnishing the hard-earned reputation you've built for yourself.

But let's face it, a little political talk at the water cooler happens. If you see that political chitchat is getting intense or confrontational, it's time to walk away or, as the manager or HR, intervene and get the employees to head back to their workstations with a friendly reminder that they will need to “agree to disagree.”

Also remember that your clients and vendors may be turned off by something you say. A good rule of thumb: Pretend everyone around you is in the opposite camp and plan your political comments accordingly, even after hours.

About HR Knowledge

Founded in 2001, HR Knowledge, Inc. is a privately funded company providing integrated outsourced HR services tailored to our clients' needs. Our full array of offerings includes managed payroll, employee benefits administration, and HR consulting and support



services, such as training, compliance, custom-built software solutions, and Hiring Process Management™, our comprehensive recruitment service that takes you from finding to onboarding new talent. Our major markets are fast-growing small- and medium-sized businesses, many of which are venture-capital-backed; foreign companies expanding into the states; and charter schools. Partnering with HR Knowledge can reduce your administrative costs, minimize your legal risk, help you find and develop talent, and alleviate the HR burden so that you can focus on your core business.

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