DIFFICULT AND POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

Key findings from a SHRM research report and accompanying framework for creating a workplace where workers are equipped to navigate difficult and political conversations effectively.

PURPOSE

The U.S. is experiencing deep divisions across political, social, and cultural lines. In this challenging ecosystem, business leaders and HR professionals cannot avoid or eliminate difficult or political conversations in the workplace, even with established policies. However, they can cultivate an organizational culture that empowers workers to navigate these conversations effectively. To better understand the nature and dynamics of both difficult and political conversations, SHRM conducted research to address these topics and explore how organizations can establish their culture as a catalyst for successfully navigating these discussions.

POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS KEY FINDINGS

1. Nearly three-quarters of workers (71%) reported having political conversations at work, which mostly occurred in informal workplace settings (83%) or outside the workplace (35%).

2. Workers who rated their workplace high on civility and psychological safety during political conversations were likely to remain with their current organization for nearly two years longer on average than those who rated their organization low on these areas. In addition, these workers were more likely to be satisfied with their job, have greater trust with their co-workers and managers, and agree that their workplace supports innovation.

3. Workers tended to view political conversations as informative (46% agreed or strongly agreed), but few viewed them as productive (27%).

4. Compared to when civility and psychological safety are low, workers who rated their workplace highly on both during political conversations were:

    • Nearly 4 times more likely to describe political conversations as productive.
    • Over 3.5 times more likely to describe political conversations as informative.

5. When workers found their workplace low on civility and psychological safety during political conversations, they were:

    • Nearly 6.5 times more likely to describe political conversations as frustrating.
    • Over 5.5 times more likely to describe political conversations as uncomfortable.
    • Over 5 times more likely to describe political conversations as pointless.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS KEY FINDINGS

1. More than one-third of workers (39%) reported having difficult conversations at work weekly.

2. Over two-thirds of workers (69%) rated their workplace culture during difficult conversations as highly civil and psychologically safe—slightly more than did so during political conversations (61%).

3. During difficult conversations, workers who rated their workplace highly on civility and psychological safety were more likely to trust others in the workplace and were more likely to say their organization encourages new ideas.

4. Unlike political conversations, workers tended to view difficult conversations as both informative (47%) and productive (43%).

5. Compared to when civility and psychological safety are low, workers who rated their workplace highly on both during difficult conversations were:

    • Nearly 5 times more likely to describe difficult conversations as productive.
    • Over 3 times more likely to describe difficult conversations as informative.

A FRAMEWORK FOR BETTER DIFFICULT AND POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS AT WORK

This research supports a framework of five essential components that organizations can implement to create workplaces where workers are positioned to handle difficult and political conversations successfully.

1. CULTURE
Treat civility and psychological safety as nonnegotiable.

2. ROLE MODELING
Leverage leadership to guide workers and to set a cultural example.

3. TRAINING
Use training opportunities to practice having effective difficult and political conversations.

4. POLICY
Set policies and guidelines that are rooted in civil conduct and psychological safety.

5. CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT
Learn and grow from challenging and contentious experiences.

To download and read the research, visit:
shrm.org/topics-tools/research/difficult-and-political-conversations-in-workplace

Reference SHRM's Political Conversations Playbook for a deeper dive into building out your team's framework: shrm.org/civility

METHODOLOGY

A sample of 1,971 U.S.-based workers was surveyed between July 10 and July 22, 2024, using a third-party online panel. For the purposes of this study, participants were required to be employed by an organization. Those who were self-employed, unemployed, retired, or an independent contractor did not qualify to participate. The data was weighted to reflect the U.S. working population as of April 2024 on the basis of gender, race/ethnicity, and full-time/part-time work status.

ABOUT SHRM

SHRM is a member-driven catalyst for creating better workplaces where people and businesses thrive together. As the trusted authority on all things work, SHRM is the foremost expert, researcher, advocate, and thought leader on issues and innovations impacting today's evolving workplaces. With nearly 340,000 members in 180 countries, SHRM touches the lives of more than 362 million workers and their families globally. Discover more at SHRM.org.