

Bitter Presidential Race Breeds Workplace Tensions

Bosses mediate political disputes, struggling to keep employees civil and productive



Jeremy Brandt, CEO of WeBuyHouses.com, says he doesn't want to stop all political conversation in the workplace. His main issue, he says, is pushing unsolicited opinions 'in an aggressive manner.' PHOTO: MATTHEW BUSCH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **JOHN SIMONS** and **RACHEL FEINTZEIG**

There was no mincing words. "You either let her go, or I go," a senior executive at FrescoData told the company's human-resources manager earlier this month.

The executive supports Republican Donald Trump for president. The co-worker he says he can no longer work with has made no secret of her plan to vote for Democrat Hillary Clinton.

"These candidates have made this a major pain for us to deal with the HR issues," said Tony Raval, chief executive of the email marketing company. "We've never had this situation before that we would have to make a call on firing someone over this."

The divisiveness of this year's presidential campaign has seeped into American workplaces, raising tensions among co-workers and forcing bosses to mediate disputes.

With the Nov. 8 election just 13 days away, some bosses and employees say they are white-knuckling through, trying to keep things civil and maintain a semblance of productivity.

ENLARGE

More than half of the HR professionals surveyed this month by the Society for Human Resource Management said they had observed more hostility among co-workers than in previous election years, up sharply from the one-quarter who reported an uptick in political acrimony in the group's June survey.

Mr. Raval and others said they expect things to return to normal by the start of the holiday season.

The dispute at FrescoData began a few days before the Sept. 26 presidential debate, when a conversation about the coming face-off turned into a shouting match in the employee kitchen at the company's Newport Beach, Calif., headquarters. The senior executive "got aggressive and started banging on the table," and later taunted his colleague on Facebook, Mr. Raval said.

He said the woman took the Facebook posts to FrescoData's human-resources department, and said the razzing needed to stop.

Mr. Raval had sent his staff a memo in early September forbidding political discussions in the office, but it went unheeded. Now, he has to decide what to do about a veteran executive responsible for much of the company's sales.

Discussion of some public policy issues, such as wages, benefits and working conditions, is protected speech, according to the National Labor Relations Board. That makes many companies reluctant to ban political conversations altogether. But some topics raised in the current campaign affect various racial, religious and ethnic groups, potentially leaving some employees "feeling discriminated against or bullied," said SHRM.

Jeremy Brandt, CEO of WeBuyHouses.com, has had to referee between the sales and marketing departments of his Dallas-area company after some incidents this summer, when members of the largely Trump-supporting sales team burst into the marketing department shouting "crooked Hillary," Mr. Trump's nickname for his rival. The marketing team, most of whom support Mrs. Clinton, told the CEO they were fed up.

Mr. Brandt met with a few employees one-on-one. "My main issue is the pushing of unsolicited opinion, and doing it in an aggressive manner," he said. "I don't want to stop all political conversations in the workplace."

Even if leaders wanted to ban political exchanges, there's little chance it would stick. "It's the biggest and best reality show that we've ever seen," said Jeanne Meister, a workplace consultant whose clients include Microsoft Corp., American Express, Cisco Systems and QVC Inc. "It's impacting business as usual." She said her clients likened the morning after the debates to the day after the Super Bowl, when absences typically run high and productivity suffers as workers cluster to talk about the event.

Alex Goldstein, a sales manager for a technology company in Northern New Jersey, has endured "subtle ribbing" at work for his support of Mr. Trump. Colleagues haven't tried to change his mind, he said. "They more or less just make fun of me or shake their head at me like I'm hopeless or something."

When Mr. Goldstein, 26, let slip to his boss that he had attended a Trump rally in Syracuse, N.Y., "It was awkward," he recalled.

Conflicts aside, productivity is taking a hit as discussions of the latest campaign twists consume working hours, said Ms. Meister, the consultant. Her clients are pondering what to do about the day after the election. Some have decided not to hold important meetings or launch marketing campaigns on Nov. 9, assuming everyone's attention will be elsewhere, she said.

WeBuyHouses.com's Mr. Brandt said he expects a return to normal once the election is over—but not right away. It may take three or four weeks, he said.



Jeremy Brandt, CEO of WeBuyHouses.com, center, playing WhirlyBall with his co-workers, Chris Brandt, left, and Dev Horn, right, during the company's happy hour last Thursday. He also has had to play referee between the sales and marketing departments after some politically charged incidents. *PHOTO: MATTHEW BUSCH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

FrescoData's Mr. Raval plans to wait until after the vote to make the call about his senior manager.

Sydney Hunt, a hospital worker in Indiana, said she is keeping her mind on work, avoiding election talk and loudly political co-workers.

When the emergency room's TV blared news of lewd comments Mr. Trump made in 2005, a co-worker began telling Ms. Hunt she felt the incident wasn't a big deal. Ms. Hunt, who backs Mrs. Clinton, said it was better not to talk about the subject.

The woman gave her a look, but most people have been understanding when she asks them to change the subject, she said. "I feel like I'm a better employee when I'm not talking about it."

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