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CAREER COUCH

That Campaign Button Can Sting You at Work

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By Matt Villano

Q. *As the presidential elections heat up, many of your co-workers are openly advocating certain candidates. Are these displays of affiliation appropriate in the office?*



A. That depends on your employer. Bruce Barry, professor of management and sociology at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, said that while some companies regard political debate as building team spirit, others view it as a distraction or worse.

“Especially during this election, there’s no question that people get passionate about politics,” said Mr. Barry, author of “Speechless: The Erosion of Free Expression in the American Workplace” (Berrett-Koehler, 2007). “The real question, at least for employers, is whether or not they want that passion in the workplace during the course of an ordinary day.”

But visible demonstrations may not be acceptable at businesses where there is contact with the public or where the company otherwise sees itself as needing to show political neutrality.

Q. *What kinds of political advocacy are most common at work?*

A. Some employees wear buttons. Others tack signs to their cubicles. In rare cases, employees even post fliers and send e-mail messages soliciting like-minded colleagues to support candidates at rallies and other face-to-face get-togethers. But perhaps the most common form of expression is simple conversation.

These political discussions and displays can be beneficial to company culture, said Todd Dewett, associate professor of management at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio.

“The mantra on diversity is that a blend of tolerance and learning and openness is the best perspective,” he said. “In the workplace, as is the case anywhere, a healthy democracy is only healthy to the degree that it has challenging and differing opinions.”

Q. *What’s the best way for employees to share political perspectives?*

A. Above all else, be respectful. Bill Catlette, a human resources consultant based in Collierville, Tenn., says that there’s a huge difference between supporting one candidate and bashing the other side.

“The best kind of advocacy focuses on the positive,” he said. “When people feel like they’re being harassed or browbeaten, things can get ugly pretty fast.”

Q. *How do you know when political discourse has gone too far?*

A. The moment that political discussions prevent employees from fulfilling their day-to-day responsibilities, something needs to change.

Aaron Witsoe, president of Creative Business Resources, a human resources outsourcing company in Phoenix, suggested that most politics-oriented conversations during the workday be limited to no more than five minutes, so as not to arouse suspicion that someone is slacking off.

In some states, legal issues surround certain types of political advocacy. Daniel I. Prywes, a partner in the Washington offices of the law firm Bryan Cave, says that while soliciting participation in political events may be permissible, soliciting money to support a particular campaign is not, and it may be in violation of federal election laws.

Q. *To what extent can companies limit political expression in the workplace?*

A. Just as the New York Knicks have enacted a policy that prohibits fans from publicly heckling the embattled coach Isiah Thomas, so, too, can private companies limit political expression at work. Both are cases of free speech: On private property, individual rights protected by the First Amendment do not necessarily apply.

Jonathan A. Segal, vice chairman of the employment services group at the New York offices of the law firm WolfBlock, said that this was the most common misconception about policies intended to curtail communication about politics (and other sensitive subjects) at work. "People get into heated political arguments with colleagues at work and they think, 'I can do this. The First Amendment is behind me.' But they're wrong," he said. "The law generally in most states doesn't prohibit discrimination based on political speech."

He noted that employees of government agencies could be an exception. Because the organizations are part of state or federal governments, ordinary constitutional protections do apply.

Q. *Can you be fired for expressing political opinions at work?*

A. You can. Perhaps the most famous example of this was during the last presidential election, when Lynne Gobbell of Moulton, Ala., was fired from her job at Enviromate, a company that makes housing insulation, for driving to work in a car with a bumper sticker supporting the Democratic ticket of John Kerry and John Edwards.

In that case, Ms. Gobbell wasn't aware of her company's policy about political expression until it was too late. The lesson, at least according to Karissa Thacker, a management consultant in Rehoboth Beach, Del., is that employees who feel the need to express political opinions at work should inquire about their company's policies before speaking up.

“When in doubt, keep your mouth shut,” Ms. Thacker said. “Why take a risk? You can always debate politics with your friends in your personal life.”