Open Political Discussion at Work Can Have Benefits, Drawbacks

By Christine Arrington

Political discussion at work can actually strengthen an employee’s job satisfaction and commitment to the organization, but only if the discussion is characterized as “an exchange of perspectives” with “give and take,” rather than as “political pressuring” to agree with a supervisor’s political ideas. This was the surprising preliminary finding of an innovative, nationally representative study of couples in which both the employee and spouse were surveyed on how political discussions at work can impact the work and home life of employees.

The Utah State University study, completed on Nov. 1, was conducted by two professors at the Jon M. Huntsman School of Business; one author is a human resources expert, Merideth J. Ferguson, Ph.D., assistant professor of management at the Utah State University Huntsman School of Business, and the other author is an expert on the First Amendment and ethics, John Ferguson, J.D., lecturer of management at the Utah State University Huntsman School of Business.

Perhaps even more surprising than the potential significant benefits was that political discussions at work can affect the employee’s life outside of work, including family life -- open political discussions can have a positive effect on family life, and “political pressuring” conversations can have negative effects. The possible negative effects of “coercive” political discussions at work include:

- Engaging in “deviance directed at the supervisor”
- Experiencing work-family conflict
- The spouse’s concluding that the employee intends to look elsewhere for work
- If the political pressure comes from coworkers, employees considering ways of getting revenge on the coworkers

Even though many workplaces have policies restricting political speech, fully 40% of the sample participants reported that their supervisor pressured them to accept the supervisor’s political ideas and perspective; 55% reported that a coworker pressured them to accept the coworker’s positions. On the positive side, 55% reported that their supervisor engaged them in a “give and take” conversation about politics, with 79% reporting such a conversation with a coworker.

“Employees who are a captive audience to a supervisor’s political expression and feel pressured to agree with the supervisor are more likely to engage in deviance directed at the supervisor and to experience work-family conflict,” said Professor Merideth J. Ferguson.
“So many workplaces have policies in place restricting political speech, but with no real research to support these restrictions,” said Professor John Ferguson. “Many workplaces and workers could be missing out on the benefits of political discussion, especially when that discussion is handled appropriately.”

“Political speech at work is not necessarily a bad thing,” he continued. “In fact, when supervisors engage employees in a political discussion characterized by a sense of ‘give and take,’ those subordinates experience more job satisfaction and higher commitment to the organization.”

The study included 304 workers and their spouses. Workers were employed full-time, had co-workers with whom they regularly interacted, had a supervisor, and had a spouse who agreed to complete a survey. After respondents completed an online survey, they were asked to have their spouse complete a separate survey. The combined responses from the initial contact and the spouse constituted one complete response in the database. Approximately 38% percent of the employees were male with an average age of 43, while 62% of the sample was female with an average age of 44. Of these couples, 60% had children living with them.

“Unlike other forms of expression at work, the study of political expression in the workplace is in its infancy,” said Merideth Ferguson. “These findings demonstrate that both forms of political expression have far-reaching effects, not only for employees but for their families, as well.”