

BostonWorks

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

Navigating the politics of talking politics at work

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Never talk about politics or religion among friends or coworkers. It's sound advice based on the simple notion that those subjects are the ones for which people harbor the most hardcore passion and conviction.

This rule of thumb seems especially relevant in today's workplace, where offending a colleague with strong opinions can have drastic consequences on your career, or at the very least, your daily peace of mind.

Still, with the recent New Hampshire primary, Boston hosting the 2004 Democratic National Convention, and a presidential race this fall, there's plenty to keep tongues wagging and the area around the office water cooler humming. It's also easy to see how office banter regarding current events can boil over.

In a Monster.com survey last year, 30 percent of those polled said "don't ask, don't tell" is the best policy when it comes to talking politics in the workplace. Forty-six percent suggested "listen, but keep your opinions to yourself."

But if we don't talk about politics at work, where will we discuss it? The office is a modern-day center of community. It's where many of us spend our days and where we make our friends and stay connected. But sharing an employer isn't the same thing as sharing a political affiliation.

I work in a design firm, where some observers might assume we're all a bunch of black-turtleneck-wearing, bleeding-heart liberals. It's not true. Oh sure, some of us do indeed wear black turtlenecks and sip chai, but I'm comfortable stating that our political sympathies run the full spectrum between left and right.

Because our inclinations run in such different directions in my office, we're sensitive to the possibility that our political discussions may get heated. The old

rule — don't talk about politics — remains a good idea. But this code of conduct doesn't apply when it comes to e-mail.

Last autumn, a coworker sent an e-mail through the company server to the staff lambasting US Attorney General John Ashcroft and encouraged everyone to attend a rally protesting his visit to Boston.

It took only 10 minutes for another staff member — ironically, a young Republican who often wears black turtlenecks — to zap a reaction to our in-boxes: a 10,000-word essay, clipped from an online journal, lauding the achievements of Ashcroft and the Patriot Act.

This exchange of partisan e-mails bothered me. Like most people, I receive several humorous e-mails each day. I read them, chuckle, and then move on. But a political e-mail sticks in my craw. It is heavier than a joke, which flashes up on the screen and then is gone. It's a distraction when I'm trying to focus on work.

I'm not opposed to chatting with my coworkers about politics provided we've both agreed to take part in a discussion. But when I'm sitting at my desk, I would prefer not receiving random notes telling me that John Ashcroft, or any other political figure, is a punk.

Internet pundits call it scud mail: e-mail fired off into a cluster of people, without any intended target, and without any foresight or concern about the reaction it might provoke. And that's a dangerous practice in a work environment.

When one looks at what Democratic contender Howard Dean's presidential campaign has achieved by using a website, it's hard to argue with the value of the Internet in modern politics. But opting to peruse the Dean website, for example, is different than receiving spam from his campaign. The distinction between these forms of political dialogue is the line between voluntary discussion and unsolicited opinion.

My boss recommends that we clearly



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label the subject of our non-work-related e-mails so recipients have the freedom to delete without reading them. He's a pretty open-minded guy, and his policy is grounded in the recognition that workers are going to discuss politics and other

passionate subjects from time to time. A manager can't realistically put a moratorium on chewing the political fat.

Still, when we're sitting around scouring the Internet for political ammunition to use when responding to other argu-

mentative e-mails, we are robbing him of our time, for which he pays us handsomely. And I feel a bit guilty for the number of minutes my deskmate and I spend bashing one candidate or another. Maybe there should be a line on our weekly timesheet for "Talking Politics."

My boss is a strong believer in the power of advocacy, having spent his formative years in the politically charged atmosphere of Berkeley, Calif. "A little political debate is a good thing at any level of a democracy," he once said. "And it happens all too little in a society where less than 50 percent of people bother to vote."

My employer's expectation, I think, is that our office will have a culture where diverse opinions are respected and where conflict is contained by maturity. I agree with him, but it's not going to blossom through our DSL line. Political debate requires verbal dialogue and a thoughtful exchange of ideas, not articles pasted into an e-mail and fired off.

The Democratic National Convention, to be held at the FleetCenter this July, will turn Boston into a hotbed of political energy and media coverage. Opinions and ideas will be fiercely debated. My office is located just a block from the FleetCenter, putting us in the thick of things. The excitement will be hard to ignore.

The challenge for me and my coworkers will be to talk about politics without letting emotions get out of control and to respect those times when others don't want to chatter about the latest political gossip. There are standards of professionalism and common courtesy that can be easily broken when you toss fervent civic opinions into a team of working colleagues.

You want to talk politics with me? Leave my e-mail alone and let's talk face to face.

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