



# NURTURING A CULTURE OF WORKPLACE CIVILITY

## *Anticipating and Managing Conflicts in a Polarized World*

By Daniel J. Potterton

The culture of modern America is fracturing. Divisive politics dominate our lives and lead to increasing polarization of opinions, driving wedges between friends, families, and co-workers. Conflicts in the political and social spheres have spilled over into the streets, leading to a rise in civil unrest. Thanks in part to 24-hour news coverage and social media, it can be hard to escape messages of conflict, anger, and strife.

Much as we may wish, the workplace is rarely an escape from the issues of everyday life. Places of employment can, if mismanaged, increase conflict among diverse groups of people with differing worldviews who work in close proximity for extended periods of time. As societal awareness grows more pronounced, workplace disagreements become more frequent, more intense, and more personal.

In the past few months, calls to our employee assistance program (EAP) have increased. Many have focused on anxiety over current political and social events or workplace responses to those events. When there is

conflict in the outside world, employees can't just "leave it at the door" – they bring it with them into the workplace. Having a way to deal with it alleviates anxiety and prevents potential further conflicts within the workspace.

Now more than ever, workplace civility is vital to both preventing and managing workplace conflicts. HR managers are responsible for knowing what steps to take to foster a civil workplace culture and control conflict before it happens, using the civil environment they've created to resolve conflict when it does arise.

### CREATING CIVIL CULTURE

There are many ways HR managers can encourage workplace civility—some steps are preventative, others are responsive. Working to prevent conflict in the workplace minimizes the number of situations that escalate into conflict, but no workplace is perfect. Having procedures in place to deal with conflicts that do arise helps maintain a productive, safe, and respectful work environment for all employees.

### Diversity in Action

Workplace diversity is important for any business, as it provides the opportunity for

multiple ideas, opinions, and viewpoints to be heard and accommodated for in business strategy. Hiring people with diverse appearances, thoughts, and approaches to work encourages all employees to share their ideas and feelings. There's nothing wrong with healthy discussion in the workplace, or even agreeing to disagree. These conversations lead to better strategy and business goals. The problem is when discussions cross the line from respectful debate to heated argument.

### Sensitive Topics

Sometimes, the best way to avoid workplace conflict is to avoid political discussion. Politics can be deeply personal, and even comments simply meant to foster workplace discussion might feel confrontational, leading to lower productivity and feelings of isolation or bullying.

Employers, too, should be careful of such discussions, as employees may fear "angering the boss" over political disagreements and dread reprisals for their opinions. HR managers can help foster a civil workplace by minimizing political discussion among employees.

## Training and Education

Even if HR managers encourage less political discussion, many political or current event-related conversations are too widespread to be avoided. Controversies of a national scale, or civil unrest that directly affects an organization's community, often lead to political opinion surfacing at work. HR managers can pre-empt these prickly situations by initiating civility training and workshops.

Civility training should lay out clear expectations for workplace behavior and serve as an opportunity to engage employees about what actions or topics of discussion are inappropriate for a workplace setting. Employees will feel they are being listened to on very personal matters, and a comfortable consensus will be reached on how to deal with debate. The right training can help de-escalate a tense situation.

## Supervision

Once expectations are set for keeping employees civil in the workplace, HR managers should be sure to supervise these behaviors in practice and train other managers to do the same. Members of the leadership team are models of proper behavior, and the more they employ their workplace civility training, the more their employees will follow suit.

HR managers and other supervisors who adhere to their civility training will not only be modeling good behavior, but will be more prepared to deal with uncivil behavior as it arises. In turn, managers should be attentive to their workplace culture at all times. Oftentimes, a finger on the pulse of workplace culture will allow supervisors to step in as mediators early in a conflict, minimizing the damage done to productivity and workplace morale.

## EAP ASSISTANCE

EAPs have been around for over 50 years and are a major part of any HR manager's toolbox. Traditional EAP services, such as short-term counseling and referral services, have evolved to meet the needs of a changing workforce and can be the key to maintaining workplace civility.

Through employer-provided EAP services, employees are connected with a counselor who will help them handle feelings of anxiety over current events. Employees with lower-level concerns can call their toll-free EAP phone number and talk to a trained representative capable of coaching them through frustrations with the social and political climate, or concerns over workplace interactions.

Modern companies offer standalone EAP services that provide additional resources to assist with fostering a culture of workplace civility. These EAPs, more robust than those offered through an employers' health insurance benefit, provide conflict prevention and resolution services that are vital during times of extreme conflict or unrest.

Standalone EAPs offer employers more options for counseling services and can supply mediators to facilitate on-site conflict management. These services help de-escalate heated situations while maintaining a higher level of professionalism and civility in the workplace. In addition, employers can consult with a dedicated account manager to discuss solutions for dealing with conflict or harassment in their workplace, supporting the efforts of HR managers to build a civil workplace community prepared to handle conflict.

## STAYING ALERT

Whether working on their own, or utilizing the services of an EAP, HR managers must remain aware of many factors influencing the workplace. They should not only consistently monitor workplace civility, but also external events in the community and the larger political and social spheres. Knowing that an event or recent statement may have an effect on employees helps pre-empt heated workplace conflicts and keeps the workspace civil and respectful.

HR managers must always be conscious of the fact that some events may present physical dangers to workplace safety, and keeping employees up-to-date on what's going on in their communities is crucial. Civil unrest affects more than conversations between co-workers;

it affects workplace accessibility and the safety of employees attempting to get to work. Managers who understand the impact of civil unrest on employee's lives, both emotionally and physically, are best equipped to deal with conflicts as they arise.

## FOCUSED ON TODAY, PREPARED FOR TOMORROW

Today's HR managers must be conscious of how future events or clashing opinions may lead to conflict, effectively communicating expectations for workplace civility and updating policies for an evolving outside world. Continuing to monitor those expectations day-to-day ensures all employees are living up to behavioral standards and allows managers to stop conflict or harassment before it escalates.

Such balancing acts become more complicated as political and social struggles personally affect the millions of employees who bring their tensions, fears, and anxieties into the workplace. Carefully maintaining a civil culture, however, is worth the tremendous effort and will be rewarded with a happy, productive workforce that feels respected and protected from harassment and conflict. HR managers prove themselves invaluable workplace assets by fostering this kind of accepting, safe, and civil culture. **HR**



*Dan Potterton, COO, has oversight for all customer facing functions of FEI Behavioral Health. He oversees account management and is responsible for oversight and strategic direction of Crisis Management Services. Dan has more than 25 years' experience in the healthcare and EAP/managed care industry. Prior to his appointment at FEI, he worked as an independent healthcare business consultant to complex health care systems and venture capital firms. Prior to this, Mr. Potterton was executive vice president with CareAdvantage, managing the company's multistate operations and consulting services. Dan also served as president of Cigna Behavioral Health, one of the largest behavioral care management and employee assistance programs (EAP).*

*FEI has a 35-year history in enhancing workforce resiliency by offering a full spectrum of solutions, from EAP and organizational development to workplace violence prevention and crisis management. One of the most successful social enterprises in America, FEI is wholly owned by the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, a national network of social sector organizations working to achieve its vision of a healthy and equitable society.*