CREATING A WORKPLACE CULTURE THAT WELCOMES SENSITIVE DISCUSSIONS

Your workforce may want an open dialogue on hot-button topics. But without an inclusive and trusting environment, tensions may rise. Here’s how to create a culture where workers feel comfortable discussing delicate topics.

Association professionals are beginning to return to a shared workspace—and they’re doing so in a social landscape that’s different from what it was when they left. While political divisions over the past few years have led some workplaces to curb discussion of hot-button topics, 2020 and 2021 have seen a massive uptick in awareness of DEI concerns and other social issues. As a result, many professionals want to talk about these things at work and look to their organizations for support. And limiting discussion on these topics may allow inequity to persist in your own workplace.

That said, these discussions can cause friction between employees, so organizations and their leaders should work to develop a culture that leads to constructive conversation and makes workers feel safe talking about sensitive issues. Consider these tips to help facilitate these dialogues.

BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST
Without a culture of trust and inclusiveness, employees may not even feel comfortable having difficult conversations. And that isn’t uncommon: A report from the Society for Human Resource Management found that 33 percent of all U.S. workers and 45 percent of Black workers say their workplace discourages discussion of an important—and sensitive—topic: racial justice. The same report revealed that 32 percent of all HR professionals and 47 percent of Black HR professionals feel unsafe voicing their perspective on racial justice issues. To help build trust among employees and create a level of comfort around discussing sensitive issues, organizations could consider offering diversity training and other less formal ways for staff to gather. Leaders can then reinforce this idea by showing an active commitment to diversity initiatives and connecting with employees by making an effort to know them on a personal level.

LEAD WITH EMPATHY
When employees are in distress or passionate about a touchy topic, don’t shut them down and tell them work isn’t the place to vent. Instead, be an active listener and acknowledge their feelings. Be prepared to “hold space” for that employee—the act of being physically, mentally, and emotionally present for someone so that the person can be vulnerable and know he or she is in...
a judgment-free space. Doing so will show employees that they’re in an inclusive environment and can express themselves at work.

**ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION, NOT AN ARGUMENT**

If you’re driving a conversation about a sensitive topic at work, remind participants that they are there to share ideas and learn, not win an argument. Create times and spaces for employees to engage in structured, moderated conversations with ground rules that address being respectful, listening to others, giving all participants a voice, and critiquing ideas instead of individuals. You can apply the same ground rules on company messaging channels if employees discuss issues with each other online. For example, you could assign certain employees to moderate these channels to keep conversations civil and on topic without silencing workers.

Google did something similar during the pandemic, urging its employees to moderate internal message boards to keep conversations respectful while still allowing users to hit on delicate topics. Moderator training is key if you go this route, as you don’t want moderators overstepping their boundaries and removing messages based on personal biases or in an effort to shut down uncomfortable conversation for the sake of the company.

**CELEBRATE DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES**

Teams can actually become more productive when they highlight and accept each other’s differences rather than hide from them. A workplace that showcases employees’ different backgrounds, cultures, experiences, and perspectives creates an inclusive community where everyone feels comfortable speaking up. You can start with such initiatives as offering educational opportunities where employees share their own history and establishing a calendar that highlights a number of cultural traditions.

**MICHAEL HICKEY ~ a contributor to Associations Now**