

Transcription - Talking Politics at Work

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. Today we have a topic that we've been requested to consider and talk about and that's the appropriateness and the divisiveness of discussing politics or using politics, the political arena in terms of the outside political arena, not office politics, at work.

To be precise, this request came to us from the US, so I don't think anybody would be surprised. Of late, it's been very dominant in every conversation, firstly the elections then the new president and so on and so forth. What people are asking us is, that every day they come into the office, there's a topic being discussed and it's being discussed that way, politically, and some people are not comfortable to waste much time on it or let people know what they really think. If they don't let people know what they think, they get picked on for either hiding their feelings or maybe sharing a different viewpoint. So the question to us was, how appropriate is it to do that and what's the best way to behave?

I think if we look at it in terms of our Australian audience as well, it would be situations where perhaps it might be the decisions of the people in Canberra, it might be decisions of your local political organisations, it might be the football in every state in this country, it might be some topic that is perhaps publicly related, like immigration or marriage equality or topics that are in the social area, that are being brought into the work arena. So in that sense we're going to talk about, when we talk about one particular topic of these discussions, we're seeing in it in terms of all of those areas that might be affecting your work discussions or your work time.

This is a really good point because it will also help with how you would present yourself or how you would interact on whatever topics. So let's say it is the political discussion, about the politics of the day, and somebody says, "What do you think? I think you should always feel comfortable to be yourself and say, "I don't feel comfortable discussing it or I don't really like to discuss it or to be honest I feel we're spending too much time on it at work." The other thing is, build it in so it's not about whatever they're saying, so you say, "I would be giving you the same view and the same approach if we're talking about the TV show on last night" or the football game. It's about your general view about what you should discuss at work and not be pushed into participating when you don't want to.

I think that then leads us back a step to thinking about actually being prepared for the situation because it is going to occur and it's going to occur more than once in your working life and more than once a day sometimes. So why not be prepared for the situation? Why not have, just as we recommend you have, an audio logo that presents you quickly and easily to other people you're meeting, why not have an audio response for this situation so that you've thought about it beforehand, you're not put on the spot so that when you are asked what you think, out comes your standard response, which is, "well as you would know or as you may not know (depending on the situation), I am not comfortable taking part in discussions that are outside of the work environment situation when I am at work. I'm happy to (if you are), I'm happy to discuss these sorts of things in the social environment but I don't do it at work". Be very, very specific about the decision that you've made so that there's no opportunity for them to be injured to say, "Oh, but what are you really thinking about?" So not

just give a yes or no, the response is, "I don't (you just keep repeating it), I don't, discuss these things at work." Simple, you just say it with a smile, you move on, you don't stand there waiting for the test match of words to happen, you make your statement and you move on to work. If you make your statement and you stand around while they're all still talking, then you're taking part in the conversation.

Yes.

Whether you're saying anything or not, you're allowing that conversation to continue. So you've got your actions that've got to be as strong of your words and they don't have to be strong in a negative sense, but they have to have strength in them. So be clear but also use humor. I mean, it's okay to smile and say, for example, they're discussing last night's master chef and they say, "Oh, who did you want to pick? What did you think?" My answer is always (it's the truth) "I don't know, we don't have TV, we haven't had a television for 15 years, I don't know what you're talking about." Then people will stop asking that. They do look at me strangely, like, you don't have a TV? They just can't get past that and it doesn't matter how many times you say it.

This is another important thing. It doesn't matter how many times you say it, people will forget that's your viewpoint, that's your standpoint. Invariably, when you are in the conversation about no television, people will say, "Didn't you see, well, aren't you worried about this?" And I think, "No, because I didn't see it, because I don't have a TV, or I didn't read it, either, because I get my news a different way."

Or you say, "Look, you know that I'm not really interested in car racing, or football, or house renovations, or whatever the topic is." Again, like Kim says, "Well, I am interested, but really not now." There was an example that someone gave me, and that is, it was to do with, in the football season, in Australia, that is. As predictable as it is, every Monday, after the weekend, at least there will be an hour at work of discussing the games, who won, who lost what they're afraid of, what they didn't do, etc. And that goes on and on. It got to the point that some people would be really annoyed in the time it's taking, others are annoyed because the topic today is very boring, and others because they're getting too passionate about it. All the things that we said can work from time to time for different things. In this case, they agreed on a structured approach. The structured approach was, this is going to happen, we are going to discuss it, let's say what time, how long and then it will stop and it is finished. So you might say, it's going to be a lunchtime, it's going to be a morning tea, or whatever they're structuring, they agreed on specifics. Any difference of opinion? They had ground rules. So they had time, they had duration and they had ground rules about you don't pick on other people because they have a different view or you don't mock or anything, so nothing hostile. You just give your opinion and move on.

That can work in any situation and that's a good approach in a broader sense.

That's a very good approach because it does build a team, not so much build a team, but it does allow people to get to know others in the organisation in an environment that is not work related. So it almost takes the place of the social interaction that might happen at the pub afterwards, it's a safer environment in that it still at work. That could be a good approach for some things but it might also be that you would need to have very strict ground

rules because it could get out of hand and who's going to manage it and who's going to monitor it and the sense of safety in that environment, when you start to talk about your personal views.

You know, if it was a political one, for instance, that talking about your personal views and then missing out on a promotion, you'd have to think, "I wonder if it was what I said at that morning tea meeting we had." It might well spill over to the work politics side of things. So whilst it's a very good plan, it has to be managed very, very carefully. The ground rules have to start off with their respect and certainly, in the example that was given to me, they're talking about the respect is, first of all, we respect the right of the people who do not want to participate and with the people who don't want to participate, we respect the fact that the others do want to participate and not to make some comment about, "Oh, they're having that football discussion this morning." Within that is the sort of things that Kim said and that is saying, "Okay, so we just, whenever it gets very opposite ends, we agree to disagree and move on." The fact that you're limited to 10 minutes, 5 minutes, whatever it is, that would be a good thing because it just saves you getting too deep into it. If you want to talk about it more, do it in your own time, outside work.

The extension of that is that you have a forum time. You have a set time each week that is, would generally be, over a lunchtime. Say it's Monday lunchtime and Monday lunchtime is forum time and once a month it's football, once a month it's politics, once a month it's the topics of note that are in the news and that gets advertised so anybody can come along. People might not necessarily be interested in every discussion that you're having, but might be interested in hearing the views of others and not contributing their own, but in hearing the views of others and broadening their knowledge that way, might come along to some of those forums. It's a way of professionalising a situation that is detracting from the professionalism in the workplace.

I think that's quite good because you might be, you know, once you know the topic, you think, I know nothing about that, I don't think I'll be interested but have I got any idea? You might turn up and say, oh, not for me, oh, I'm actually interested in that. Now they talked about this, I might watch it or whatever, you know? It's just another way of getting information and of learning about things in an environment that is not pressuring you to produce a result necessarily. What do you know? This might also lead, this concept and this idea, might lead to innovation within the workplace because it's informal, because it is by the team members. It might end up saying, let's talk about everything digital. Let's talk about everything technology and where do you think this is going to go? Guess what happens when people start talking? So there's a very, very plus side, not just a downside for these things.

It also gives you the opportunity to garner ideas from other areas. We've talked in previous podcasts about not always looking for a solution to an issue within your own industry, within your own environment, within your own team, but to look at anything and everything. Our idea might work for this thing that we have to do and actually expose yourself to a broader range of opportunities and of ideas to bring back into the workplace.

I think we covered most of the angles of that. Is there any more?

Yeah, I guess the only other angle is that when you're in these situations and you do feel

like you've been put on the spot, you haven't yet developed your response, your measured response, or you don't feel confident about developing that measured response, or you've tried it out and it's just not working, in that sense, and perhaps it's not the right words. We might talk about how you write that measure response and how you practice that measured response and also a little bit about how you deal with the emotion of that situation if you're in that situation now and you haven't yet developed this response that I suggested you have in your toolbox. So if you look first of all at the emotive side of it, how do you deal with the emotions that are in that discussion, as they always are, and the reactions that you have, the emotions that come from you when you're caught up in a situation where there is a discussion happening that you don't want to be part of, that you feel you are being forced to be part of?

I guess we're going back to what you said earlier and the importance of being prepared, being prepared so you aren't taken totally unaware and then acting emotionally whether out of passion, anger, or because you hate the topic, whatever it is. What about for people who have been in this situation, they're listening to us now and they say, well, this happened to me last week and I blew up or I took a stand and now all these people think that I'm an idiot or how can I, when I've always taken part, even reluctantly in these discussions, now turn up this week and say, I'm not doing this anymore? What is the path that these people have to follow so that they can do that with confidence? How do they let go of their history of being part of the conversation and of thinking that they were doing the thing that was important, not necessarily right, but important in the work environment by taking part in those situations to now say, not going to do it anymore? They know there's going to be some sort of negative reaction to the stand that they take now.

Well, to me, I know it would be uncomfortable. I know that. But that wouldn't stop me because I would just let it be known this is how I think now, this is how I'm going to move forward. It's ripping the bandaid off quickly. Short term pain for long term gain. That's what you have to do. You do it the right way. You prepare yourself and you present it in the right way. You don't present it in an antagonistic way. Then the reaction of the other people really isn't your concern, I have to say. It's a bit like other people's opinions. They're not any business of yours. That's their opinion and it shouldn't relate to what you do or how you do it. You should be true to yourself. You should be true to the ideals that you have set for yourself.

So if we look then, at preparing your response, you do it the way I suggest you write any speech and you write down all the sentences you want to say and you cut them up. You physically write them down on a piece of paper and then cut them up and then move them around until they're in an order that you think is right and then you re-type it up so that you can practice it. You don't read it when you're talking to them. It doesn't have to be long, it doesn't have to be a justification, it can just be, as I said off the top of my head at the beginning of this podcast, "I appreciate you that you want my opinion. I do have to tell you..." Don't say "but" in between those two sentences. The reason I suggest that is that whenever we say "but", the only thing people remember is what comes after "but". So you never say "thank you for that, but.." because they don't remember that you said thank you, all they remember is the things you said after it, which generally is not as complimentary as the thank you in the beginning.

You say "I appreciate" because you do appreciate the fact that they are seeking your opinion

or your view, "I appreciate that you have given me the opportunity to take part in this discussion. I have to tell you that I've made a decision to not take part in these discussions during work time. I'm happy to have a conversation with you during our forum times, after hours, outside of work hours", whatever other situation fits in there or not if you're not going to do it at all. "That will be my stance from now on."

I think the most important thing is that you smile or you give some indication in your body language that you're not angry or antagonistic and you walk away. Walking away is the biggest thing that you can do because, as I said, if you stand there you're part of the conversation. Nothing else to add?

No, I'm very happy with that.

We might leave our discussion there at that point and we will talk to you again soon. I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.