BY JUAN JOHNSON

When Polarized Politics Enters the Workplace

We can teach managers and employees how to have productive dialogue around challenging issues.

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The impact of government policies on business performance has long been of concern to corporate leaders. Interest rate levels, regulatory requirements, and corporate tax rates, among other influences, can greatly impact business cost structures, product pricing, profit levels and return on investment. But there is another aspect of our political environment that can seep into workplace cultures and stifle productivity and business performance: polarized political perspectives. Scarcely a day goes by when we don't see a plethora of articles lamenting the polarization and dysfunctional environment on Capitol Hill. But we're also increasingly seeing flare-ups in the workplace around issues not directly related to business but of great concern to employees. The problem is that employees are sometimes passionately at odds on these issues, leading to workplace tension and lost productivity.

NPR recently reported that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg issued an internal memo regarding "several recent instances of people crossing out 'black lives matter' on signature walls at the company's headquarters and writing 'all lives matter' instead." According to the report, Zuckerberg wrote, "I was already very disappointed by this disrespectful behavior before, but after my communication, I now consider this malicious as well. There are specific issues affecting the black community in the United States, coming from a history of oppression and racism. 'Black lives matter' doesn't mean other lives don't – it's simply asking that the black community also achieves the justice they deserve."

Not surprising, when one scrolls down to the "comments" section on NPR's web site, it's immediately noted that not everyone agreed with Zuckerberg's action. While Facebook's issue received broad media coverage, it would not be surprising to find that similar episodes are occurring at many organizations around any number of issues: same-sex marriage, Confederate monuments, prayer in schools, illegal immigration, etc. Much has been written about the increased polarization of American politics, but

a 2014 Pew Research Center report provided shocking validation. According to the report, "92 percent of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, versus 64 percent in 1994. And 94 percent of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican, versus 70 percent in 1994." It shouldn't come as a surprise that these strong attitudes are infiltrating the workplace. The question for business leaders is, "What do we do about it?"

The good news is that through leadership development and all-inclusive diversity education programs, we can teach managers and employees how to have productive dialogue around challenging issues. This is not to suggest that we should advocate that employees have conversations about politically charged issues just for the sake of conversation. First and foremost, we want workers fully engaged in efficiently and effectively accomplishing their work assignments. Having said that, we also want a workforce that can productively discuss complex issues that impact their work. For example, managers of health benefit programs need to be able to discuss how to adjust benefits in response to the Affordable Care Act, without dissolving into arguments about the merits of "ObamaCare."

So, how do we do this? We need to build organizational cultures that are open and respectful of varied perspectives. And we need to teach employees skills for communicating effectively with colleagues whose views may vary. Much of the tension in employee interaction results not from what we say, but how we say it. For example, in a workshop I conducted for the leadership team of an organization, we were discussing the importance of building broadly diverse candidate pools to achieve the representative workforce expected by stakeholders. One of the leaders explained that they typically didn't need to do a lot of recruiting because over the years they had developed a strong network and resumes typically came through this network. During this discussion a female executive expressed frustrations about the difficulty of succeeding in the organization as a female and an ethnic minority.

She exclaimed, "You all don't know how hard it is for a woman here. And especially a woman of color. Because you are white males you have all the privileges and you just don't know how hard it is for someone like me." At this point, a Caucasian male executive responded, "I have to speak out here: I really hate when someone says I'm privileged. That word drives me crazy. I work really hard, and I feel like that word just completely diminishes my hard work." At this point there was palpable tension in the room.

As facilitator, I stepped in to offer the following observation, directed to the Caucasian male: "I'm sure you did work hard to get where you are. Getting into any professional school is no cakewalk. Then completing your degree, getting employed by this prestigious organization, and finally, working your way into the leadership ranks…I imagine that took a lot of hard work and no one is taking that away from you. My understanding, from your colleague's observation about privilege, is that given the demographics of the organization, it's possible that the network that's been used over the years for sourcing talent may not be available to many people

with her ethnic background." At this point his response was, "Well, when you put it like that, I completely agree with you." The points I made were consistent with those of his female colleague. He simply was able to hear them better once his perspective was validated. This is one of the tools for productive dialogue. We must deliberately practice hearing, understanding and appropriately validating other perspectives.

One more example that ties back to "black lives matter." After delivering a speech to a group of attorneys and judges about developing all-inclusive diversity strategies, I received a question about the "black lives matter" movement. This from a Caucasian male: "Whenever I hear the phrase 'black lives matter' I feel really bothered. I don't feel like I can say what I'm feeling because I fear how it might be taken. What I want to say every time I hear that is, 'it's not just black lives, ALL lives matter.' Don't you agree with that, and if so, what do I say to those people that say 'black lives matter?'

My response to the question was, "Absolutely, ALL lives matter." I continued: "If you want to engage those folks

who are declaring, 'black lives matter,' my suggestion is that you first validate their declaration. I'd suggest the first thing you say is, 'absolutely, black lives matter. We have historical and contemporary issues of injustice and it is imperative that we address them. Absolutely, black lives matter. Now, at this point, you've provided your colleague much-needed validation. Then, I think you could add, indeed, all lives matter and it would likely be received much better. Caucasian lives matter; ethnic lives matter; gay lives matter; people with different mental and physical abilities lives matter; poor lives matter; religious minority lives matter; indeed ALL lives matter."

If we want to keep the polarized tone of Capital Hill from seeping into our workplace environments, we need to create organizational cultures that are open and respective of diverse perspectives.

How is it that we've come to a point where when one person says, "black lives matter" and another person says, "all lives matter," that those are seen as competing perspectives? Obviously, both are true.