

POLITICS

Leadership in a Politically Charged Age

What social psychology
and relationship
science can teach us
about conflict in the
workplace—and how
to manage it

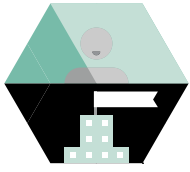
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ABOUT THE ART

Mitch Dobrowner travels throughout the western United States to photograph the intense power and beauty of storms.

In April 2021 two employees serving on a diversity, equity, and inclusion committee at the software company Basecamp posted an apology on the company's internal chat platform.

Along with others at Basecamp, the two had previously contributed to the so-called Best Names Ever list, an internal compilation of “funny sounding” customer names. Now they argued that such a practice was deeply problematic, serving to uphold systems of racial supremacy and extreme actions such as hate speech and genocide.

Their words ignited a firestorm at the company. Another employee dismissed the comparison to genocide as absurd and denied the existence of white supremacy at Basecamp. The CEO, Jason Fried, apologized for having allowed the Best Names Ever list to continue but warned against “catastrophizing.” As tensions escalated, Fried instituted a ban on discussing politics at work, disbanded all committees at the company, including the DEI committee, and offered a severance package to any employee who felt uncomfortable with the new policy. A tense all-hands meeting followed, during which he was asked to publicly denounce white supremacy. He demurred, saying, “I’m not here to share my personal views on anything. I’m horrified when one group dominates another. I think it’s absolutely the most disgusting thing in the world...I can’t say that’s happening here. [I don’t] know what to say about specific terms. I don’t know how to satisfy





IDEA IN BRIEF

THE PROBLEM

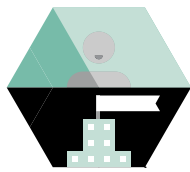
Employees in a politically charged work environment often disagree about how to handle practical and strategic matters. Left unchecked, those differences can lead to conflicts that spiral out of control. Many leaders don't know how to cope.

THE ROOT CAUSES

People see and interpret information in ways that serve their political allegiances, and that tendency is not random: Those on the left are more inclined to notice bias, but primarily against socially disadvantaged groups. Those on the right are less inclined to notice bias across the board.

THE WAY FORWARD

Leaders can adopt a two-part strategy for managing political conflict in the workplace: Following the practices outlined in this article, they can develop norms and procedures for averting conflicts altogether while also making plans for managing them when they arise.



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that right now.” Soon afterward at least 20 of the company’s 57 employees accepted the severance offer.

Although losing a third of one’s workforce is a rare outcome, the kind of conflict that roiled Basecamp is increasingly familiar. In June 2020 hundreds of Facebook employees staged a virtual walkout—temporarily logging off work and leaving an out-of-office message explaining why—in opposition to the company’s decision not to remove inflammatory posts by President Trump during protests following the murder of George Floyd. Two months later more than 200 employees at Pinterest reacted similarly in solidarity with three former coworkers who had accused the company of racial and gender discrimination. In October 2021 a group of Netflix employees protested the company’s decision not to remove the comedian Dave Chappelle’s comedy special “The Closer,” which they saw as offensive to the trans community, from its platform.

Many employees today believe that their companies are not going far enough to address social injustice. Some even feel they’re being punished for engaging in the effort. Writing in December 2020, Timnit Gebru, a well-respected AI researcher at Google, captured the mood. “Your life starts getting worse when you start advocating for underrepresented people,” she argued in a widely circulated email that would soon lead to her controversial departure.

Not everybody shares that outlook. Some employees have felt for years that companies are going too far. In 2017, for example, a Google engineer named James Damore wrote a memo that went viral accusing the company of creating an “ideological echo chamber” and practicing reverse discrimination. That same year the organizers of a UN roundtable to discuss the backlash against diversity initiatives in the tech industry conducted a survey in which 35% of respondents reported feeling that companies’ increased focus on diversity was producing a bias against white men.

How can employees at the same companies have such differing perceptions of office climate and culture? Why are discussions in the workplace about diversity and other political issues often so fraught? What can managers do to make sure they aren’t caught flat-footed by politically rooted conflict at work?

Not long ago such questions lay at the periphery of corporate life. But today they’re central. In recent decades,

especially but not exclusively in the United States, we’ve witnessed a surge in the proportion of people who believe in the importance of “bringing your whole self to work” and whose identities are deeply entwined with their political allegiances—that is, with their politics-relevant group memberships and ideological convictions.

Potentially explosive new forms of leadership crisis are emerging as a result of this surge. When employees at a company have differing political allegiances, they often disagree about how to handle practices such as hiring and DEI efforts, or about what strategies to adopt when it comes to outside investments, lobbying, and political donations. Left unchecked, those differences can lead to conflicts that spiral out of control, as the leaders of Basecamp learned.

Because this is a new and rapidly evolving problem, many leaders feel ill-equipped to cope with it. Consider Netflix’s co-CEO Ted Sarandos, who acknowledged that he “screwed up” internal communications regarding the Dave Chappelle comedy special, even as he stood by his decision to keep it online. In the wake of an explosive conflict reminiscent of the one that engulfed Basecamp, Coinbase’s CEO, Brian Armstrong, said, “I really did not know what to say about it for a long time, and I’m still not sure I do.” After struggling to cope with a crisis that erupted at Redfin in 2020, following the company’s endorsement of the Black Lives Matter movement, the CEO, Glenn Kelman, summed up how many leaders today feel about managing political conflict in the workplace, saying simply, “I wasn’t trained to do that.” Adding to the challenge, leaders aren’t simply tasked with reacting to occasional flare-ups that start inside their organization; as they feel more pressure to take a public stand on political issues, such as the January 6 Capitol riot and Georgia’s voting laws, the chances that some employees will object to those stances increase.

Our goal in writing this article is to provide a primer for managers on coping with politically charged conflict at work. We are business school professors whose research focuses on intergroup conflict (Nour) and intimate relationships (Eli). Drawing on the collective wisdom of those research traditions, we’ll provide a framework to help managers understand when and how politically charged conflict can arise and how it can be dangerously corrosive. We’ll also explain how they can manage such conflict more effectively and even harness its potential to strengthen the workplace.

Distorted Perceptions

Political allegiance tends to distort how we perceive and interpret facts. Although we may believe that we consider facts dispassionately when making up our minds, a growing body of research suggests that we often deploy them selectively in



An important truth must be accounted for when dealing with conflict in the workplace: We notice and interpret information in ways that serve our political allegiances.

defense of our worldview or group interest—a process known as *motivated reasoning*. Consider the results of a 2012 study in which right-leaning and left-leaning individuals watched a video of police officers assertively shutting down a political protest. Although they had seen the same video, the two camps interpreted it differently according to what they'd been told before watching. Right-leaning viewers were more likely to conclude that the police's actions had violated the protestors' rights when they believed it was an anti-abortion protest than when they believed it was an anti-military protest. Left-leaning individuals exhibited the opposite pattern.

The issue extends well beyond perceptions of protests. When employees with differing ideological outlooks are presented with the same evidence about contentious issues, they're likely to attend to and interpret it differently and will then experience their perceptions as singular truths. This tendency, called *naive realism*, helps to explain the bewilderment, frustration, and anger that people often feel when others perceive things differently.

One of us (Nour) recently coauthored a paper that focused on how people's ideological beliefs about the desirability of social equality shape their attention to—and accuracy in detecting—inequality. This is a good example of motivated reasoning. The paper reviewed the results of five studies. In one of them participants were shown one of two videos of a panel of speakers. In one version the men spoke more than the women did; in the other the women spoke more. Who noticed the unequal distribution of speaking time? When participants watched the video in which women were afforded less speaking time, left-leaners were significantly more likely than right-leaners to mention unequal treatment and significantly more accurate when estimating the distribution of speaking time. But when participants watched the video in which *men* spoke less, the left-leaners' assessments were no better than those of the right-leaners.

In another study, participants were walked through a series of organizational hiring decisions and were shown information about applicants' GPA, race, hobbies, and place of residence. In one condition the organization was systematically biased against minority candidates; in another it was equivalently biased against white candidates. After viewing the data, participants were asked to say what stood out for them. When the organization was biased against members

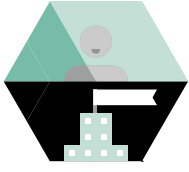
of underrepresented groups, left-leaners were significantly more likely to notice than right-leaners were. But when the organization was equivalently biased against whites, left-leaners were no better than right-leaners at noticing. Participants who noticed bias in either condition were much more likely than others to support bringing in an outside firm to investigate the company's hiring practices. What we pay attention to really matters.

These studies point to two important truths that managers need to account for when dealing with conflict in the workplace. The first is that we notice and interpret information in ways that serve our political allegiances. As the writer Anaïs Nin put it, "We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are." The second is that bias is not random. These studies suggest, for example, that people on the left are especially apt to notice bias, but primarily when it's against socially disadvantaged groups, whereas those on the right are less inclined to notice bias across the board. Intriguingly, right-leaners are apt to treat groups more equally, even as they overlook evidence of unequal treatment.

A Better Way

Given these tendencies, it's little wonder that left-leaning and right-leaning employees so often talk past one another. Productive discourse is possible only when people perceive the same reality. So what are managers supposed to do when they don't?

The task is challenging. Even if edicts against political speech could eliminate the influence of politics at work—which is unlikely, given that political motives will continue to distort perception in subtle yet deep-seated ways—such rules have major costs. For one, the line between political and nonpolitical speech is hazy. Is structural racism merely a topic of abstract political debate, or does it deeply affect a company's internal and external stakeholders and demand immediate action? Are federal masking mandates just grist for the cable TV mill, or do they affect the safety or personal freedom of any employee who's asked to travel for work? And who makes those determinations? In addition, banning political discourse is antithetical to fostering a culture of productive disagreement, which has long been recognized



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as a benefit of cognitive diversity and an effective antidote to the dangers of groupthink. Banning politics also risks alienating large swaths of the talent pool (consider Gen Z's commitment to self-expression and authenticity at work) and renders management vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy. After all, banning politics can itself come across as a forceful statement of support for those who favor the status quo over those who seek to challenge it.

Fortunately, thanks to new research findings and insights, managers have less-draconian methods at their disposal, which we'll discuss in the following section. We recommend using them in a two-part strategy for managing political conflict in the workplace—a strategy that is at once proactive and reactive.

PART 1

Averting Conflict

“The best time to repair the roof,” the saying goes, “is when the sun is shining.” Similarly, it's much easier to develop norms and procedures for navigating political conflict at work *before* a crisis emerges. Here are a few ways to do that.

Start early. Onboarding is a great time to introduce employees to your organizational norms and procedures. Why? Because people will be more receptive to the idea that their political convictions may distort their thinking if they encounter it as an abstract principle rather than in connection with how they're behaving during an argument.

Conflicts are less likely to emerge during onboarding, when employees are new and haven't had time to engage politically with colleagues. So seize the moment. When sensitive issues eventually emerge, encourage employees to approach them with curiosity and in a spirit of generosity while avoiding personal accusations and finger-pointing. Make clear that certain behaviors, such as hate speech and discrimination, are off-limits. Stress that your organization broadly celebrates difference, including in perspective and opinion. Remind everybody who joins the organization that disagreement at work can be positive and productive but that distortion and vilification are corrosive. In doing so, try to sensitize employees to the idea that when it comes to politically charged issues, *everybody's* perceptions are likely to be distorted.

Simply knowing that bias exists, however, is not sufficient to immunize us against it. As early and as consistently as possible, managers must also provide employees with tools that help them first to recognize when they may be engaging in motivated reasoning and then to self-correct.

One helpful approach is to introduce employees to the power of making simple if-then plans. For example: “If I start feeling indignant and morally righteous about a colleague's factual claim, then I'll ask myself whether I might be in the grip of naive realism.” Teach employees to identify potential bias in such situations by asking themselves, “Which parts of that statement did I automatically disagree with?” and “How could I construct the best argument against my perspective if I had to?” Encourage them to think about a political conflict from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for all involved—a strategy known as *self-distancing*. One of us (Eli) and colleagues have shown that when spouses employ this strategy, they enjoy greater marital satisfaction. Coworkers are not spouses, of course, but the core insight holds: Self-distancing can help disputants achieve a more objective, holistic perspective on conflict and, consequently, approach it in a more constructive manner.

You can also remind employees that their counterparts in disagreements are equally likely to be compromised by naive realism. Being mindful of this fact can make it easier to avoid demonizing the other side. Employees can put things on a more productive path by saying something like “We're each naturally going to see this from our own perspective. Why don't we move beyond arguing about who's right and try to come up with a strategy we can both endorse?”

Focus on common metrics. Another way to head off conflict is to have concrete measures in place for evaluating progress on goals such as reducing hiring bias and increasing workplace diversity. Clarifying such metrics helps an organization articulate its values and hold itself accountable to them. It also helps focus employees' attention on common data points, thereby reducing the risk that they'll engage in motivated reasoning.

Suppose three employees are reflecting on company hiring outcomes. Each one—absent an organizationally prioritized metric—could selectively attend to the evidence and walk away with a singular impression of whether the hiring process is biased. The first might focus on the fact that one of three accepted offers was made to a minority candidate (“A full 33% of our hires belong to minority groups!”). The second might focus on the fact that only one of the 10 final-round interviewees was from an under-represented group (“Only 10% of our final candidates were members of a minority!”). And the third, consciously or unconsciously, might consider race an irrelevant criterion and so fail to note it. The three employees might not realize



that their counterparts had focused on different data, and a conflict spiral might begin.

By proactively emphasizing a particular metric for evaluation—in the situation above, perhaps the number of minority candidates interviewed—organizations can direct attention to common data points and minimize the chances that employees will talk past one another. For example, Harvard Business School employs scribes to provide professors with regular reports on the gender and national origin of the students they call on in class, and the Kellogg School of Management tracks and reports data on the gender composition of guest speakers. Such efforts both articulate values and focus faculty members' attention on those dimensions. You're likely to engage in debate even as you choose the metrics you want to use, which creates some risk of conflict, of course. But flying blind is even riskier.

Channel disagreement productively. In addition to norm setting, managers can create structures that make politically motivated disagreement less impulsive and corrosive and more thoughtful and productive. Consider how Harmon Brothers, a digital marketing firm, addressed the issue. Rather

than banning political debate on Slack, the CEO, Benton Crane, instituted a new rule: Employees may post whatever political content they wish, but they must pair it with a video in which they explain their thoughts about what they've posted. Anyone who wants to respond must do the same. The conversations that take place within this structure, Crane reports, are more carefully considered than they would otherwise be, because the costs of entry are greater. This policy has substantially reduced contentious political debate at Harmon Brothers, without undermining autonomy with a ban.

PART 2

Addressing Conflict

Even with strong proactive measures in place, toxic political conflicts will arise in the workplace, and when they do, you'll need a plan for coping effectively with them. We've devised a process for doing that.

Set the stage. To start, a manager (or a trained facilitator) should convene employees for a conversation about political conflict in the workplace. The manager should



review the measures that the organization already has in place and should explain the concepts of motivated reasoning and naive realism, making clear that anybody can fall prey to them. They should also remind employees that they're all on the same team even if they disagree, and that vilifying colleagues for their opinions is unacceptable.

Exchange views. At this stage managers should begin an open discussion, offering participants an opportunity to articulate their own perspectives without interruption. In guiding the discussion, managers should enforce clear norms for both speakers and listeners: Speakers don't critique the other side; they simply explain why they find an issue so important and how they arrived at their perspective. Listeners don't agree or disagree with the speakers' views but, rather, listen without interrupting. The goal is to help partisans achieve a clear understanding of the other side's perspective, which provides a solid foundation for constructive discussion.

After everybody has had a chance to speak, managers should express gratitude to all who spoke for sharing their perspectives in a respectful way and to all who listened for

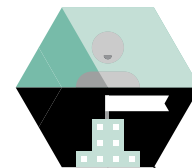
affording speakers the space to do so. If relevant, they should also clarify any organizational information or overlooked data points that might pertain to the discussion.

Start problem-solving. Next managers should empower disputants to work together toward a resolution, perhaps in collaboration with management or other stakeholders. In explaining this step they should underscore the classic negotiation wisdom of focusing on all parties' interests and seeking creative solutions that make everybody better off. By analogy, they might discuss the idea of *adversarial collaboration*, a relatively recent innovation in the realm of scientific discovery whereby researchers with conflicting perspectives on an issue collaborate on a project to adjudicate between and reconcile their views rather than sniping at each other in separate publications.

Similarly, if managers are working with employees who have conflicting perspectives on bias in current hiring practices, they might task those employees with designing a new or a tweaked process—and associated metrics for tracking success—that everybody agrees would help ensure fairness. In the process, they should encourage the employees to start



Managers should underscore the classic negotiation wisdom of seeking creative solutions that make everybody better off.



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by identifying areas of agreement that will build trust. For example, even if employees disagree on the best metric for judging whether the organization is sufficiently diverse, all of them, no matter what their political outlook, are likely to favor identifying the best possible pool of applicants. That might yield ideas about how to build a pipeline of highly qualified candidates of all stripes, including members of minority groups who may be overlooked by existing recruiting mechanisms. Working in this vein, companies such as Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley partner with America Needs You, which supports—and can connect them with—qualified first-generation college students.

To maximize the likelihood that such challenging conversations will yield constructive results, managers should emphasize the value of harnessing disagreement to achieve innovation, in part by offering meaningful rewards for effective solutions—even partial ones—that are jointly endorsed by individuals who were previously on opposite sides of an issue.

Even if managers incentivize collaboration along these lines, there's no guarantee that employees' efforts will generate consensus or useful policy recommendations. Indeed, working to find solutions carries some risk of making disagreements worse. That said, encouraging employees to strive for constructive resolution will always be a better bet than simply hoping that the conflict will resolve itself. And with this approach, employees are likely to appreciate that managers have given them a voice and empowered them to work collectively toward a resolution. To keep the conflict under control, managers can encourage employees with differing positions on an issue to recognize when their conversations seem to be yielding diminishing returns and they might be better off just agreeing to disagree.

Implement changes. Fortunately, disputants engaging in collaborative efforts will often produce concrete proposals. The company isn't obligated to implement them, of course, but insofar as the disputants have collaborated in good faith, managers should accommodate their proposals to the degree possible and articulate clearly why they have (or have not) made changes. They should also acknowledge that whatever they've decided is unlikely to fully satisfy all parties but is intended to serve as a step in the right direction—one that can be evaluated over time.

WE CLOSE WITH a few thoughts that managers might keep in mind when implementing our suggestions. The first is that they must remember that they, too, are susceptible to distorted thinking as a result of their political convictions. To facilitate an evenhanded and clear-eyed approach to dealing with politically charged conflict in the workplace, they should be humble and apply the same strategies to themselves that they encourage their employees to use. Such efforts are especially important because attitudes often differ across generations. Issues that inflame the passions of the younger generation may strike the old guard as benign at best or irritating at worst. No generation has a monopoly on the truth, but managers should beware of discounting perspectives that don't resonate with their worldview.

They will also need to heed the importance of process. Jason Fried, Basecamp's chief executive, found himself in trouble not only because of the policy decision he'd made but also for the way he announced it: publicly and unilaterally, in an online blog post, without any advance notice to his employees. That suggested that the company's employees were not his primary audience—a decision that alienated many of them and, ironically, made the changes seem political.

Finally, managers must attend to constantly shifting social norms and political currents to stay ahead of the curve. Two decades ago Dave Chappelle's jokes about trans people and Basecamp's Best Names Ever list would not have been as controversial as they are today. Similarly, metrics or targets that seemed appropriate then may seem paltry or excessive now. Even if managers can work with employees to set policies or establish procedures that satisfy the competing demands of the moment, politically charged conflict is a moving target, and leaders must keep their eyes on it. ©

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