

Politics and Religion at Work

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By Alvin Clay

Early in most of our careers, we were given a cardinal rule by some well-meaning person: "Never discuss religion or politics in the workplace." The idea is: the purpose of business is business.

If we discuss religion or politics, we will have disagreements with our colleagues -- or even our customers -- and that will create unwanted tensions, even hostility. That's bad for business.

So keep it sterile, folks. Leave your opinions about life's most important issues at home.

What a shame. Most of us spend at least half of our waking hours at work. Most of our discourse with other adults happens at work. We build meaningful relationships with our colleagues -- relationships that endure even when we go our separate ways to other places of employment or retirement.

Are we to avoid all discussion of meaningful topics in the interest of a more collegial and efficient working environment? Are we to pretend that our opinions on strategic or tactical business matters are not shaped by our political views or our moral code? And, perhaps most sadly of all, is it an accepted fact that we cannot work with those with whom we disagree? When it comes to our religious and moral beliefs, are they so shallow that they can be compartmentalized and stricken from such a significant portion of our lives?

Let's talk politics first. There are some ground rules. Corporations cannot legally use their funds to support candidates for public office. An employer should not apply pressure on employees as to how they should vote or to whom they should contribute funds. But that doesn't mean that businesses cannot have a point of view on public policy, particularly as it may affect their business or the lives of their customers.

Can a medical practice, a pharmaceutical company, or an insurance company have a point of view on proposed changes in health care? Can financial advisers have a point of view on changes in tax policies or investment regulations? Isn't it reasonable that they would have views and that their views should be expressed?

It is perfectly reasonable that employees of these businesses would discuss these matters with colleagues and customers. They represent an informed point of view. Their biases are so obvious, intelligent listeners will filter the information with an appropriate degree of skepticism and then form their own judgments.

Now religion. If there is an organized religion, or even a "disorganized" system of beliefs that suggests adherents only practice their faith in private, or within the

confines of their place of worship, I don't know what it would be. For most of us, we attend our places of worship for the expressed purpose of gaining inspiration, insight, and rules as to how we should behave in the outside world.:

We are to be honest and forthright. We are to treat others with dignity and respect. We are to have a keen desire for accountability and for justice, augmented by compassion. As to the discussion of moral issues and doctrinal differences, what better place than the lunch table with colleagues you know and care for?

I once told a Jewish colleague that he was one of the most Christian people I had ever met. He took no offense. Another time, I had a fascinating discussion with a colleague who described himself as a "devout atheist" as to what it was that made him such a good and caring person. These candid discussions drew us closer together as friends and as a working team.

Because of the role I play in the Catholic Church, colleagues and other business associates will often ask me questions about church teaching or church politics. They know they will get a straight answer without judgment. I think this level of discourse produces a healthier work environment.

The workplace is an important part of our lives - not just a means to an end. If we follow some basic principles, we can elevate our discourse at work and make our work hours a time of enrichment.

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