

These 8 simple phrases can help you avoid awkward political conversations at work

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Political talk at work is getting harder and harder to avoid. [In one recent survey](#), 64 percent of workers polled said political conversations in the office have become more heated within the last decade.

Learning what to say when political talk arises is key to keeping professional relationships strong and getting quality work done. Heated discussions can leave employees frustrated, distrustful and unproductive, says Audra Jenkins, chief diversity and inclusion officer at Randstad US, an HR consulting firm.

“Not having a framework for how you want the conversation to unfold is what gets people in trouble,” adds Stacey Engle, executive vice president at Fierce Conversations, a training company that teaches organizations how to have effective discourse.

With midterm election results likely driving some of today’s workplace debates, [CNBC Make It](#) has compiled a list of responses to help you navigate any tricky political talk.

1. When you want to change the subject

What to say: “Can I interrupt? We need to talk about XYZ.”

Why it’s effective: With this approach, you’re shifting attention to non-political topics that colleagues will also want to talk about. This might be a piece of celebrity gossip or an update about a mutual friend. “It’s a really easy way to shift gears in a discussion without sounding too obvious,” says Jenkins. This response indicates that you’re engaged in the conversation with your colleague, but allows you to sidestep an uncomfortable topic by inserting a new, but equally timely subject matter.

If all else fails, you can also bring up an important work project. This approach “not only changes the conversation, it gives you a way to exit it,” Jenkins says.

2. When you want to respectfully disagree

What to say: “I differ in opinion, but that’s an interesting point you make.”

Why it’s effective: This response is a respectful way to disagree with someone, yet still lets your colleague feel heard. This approach can also dilute any potential argument about differing views, says Jenkins.

3. When you need a break

What to say: “This isn’t something I want to talk about any more. Can we move on?”

Why it’s effective: Few people will push back once you’ve clearly communicated you want to talk about something else. You can use this phrase whether you want to stop a conversation in its tracks or put it on pause, revisiting it once you are ready to have a more thought-provoking discussion, says Engle.

4. When you’re feeling uncomfortable

What to say: “For my own reasons, I’d rather not discuss this topic. Mind if we ditch it?”

Why it’s effective: By explaining you have a personal connection to a political story, you signal that you trust your coworkers, a step that can strengthen bonds. Furthermore, your teammates will appreciate knowing they’ve caused you discomfort so they can stop. By being direct and authentic, says Jenkins, “you can address how you are feeling and not be awkward.”

5. When you’re distressed and want to shut a conversation down

What to say: “I respectfully disagree on this topic and think it would be best if we avoided it moving forward.”

Why it’s effective: This phrase provides calm and respectful feedback, says Engle, while making your expectations and views clear. People struggle with interpreting non-verbal signs so it’s helpful to ask for what you want. What one person considers a “spirited conversation may be someone else’s ‘tense’ or ‘combative,’” adds Jenkins.

6. When your co-worker gets emotional

What to say: “I see that this is a topic you feel strongly about. I am starting to feel a bit uncomfortable, can we talk about something else?”

Why it’s effective: Your co-worker might not realize how emotional he or she has become. This response allows you to describe your reality “that you are watching your coworker become emotional” without placing blame on that co-worker, says Jenkins. “If you can describe what is happening for you personally, then you can move forward in a way that honors both of you,” she says.

7. When your boss is talking politics

What to say: Both experts say that the same respectful language you'd use with a colleague applies to your boss.

Why it's effective: "You generally cannot go wrong if you're respectful and brief in your response to some else's differing opinion," says Jenkins. However, there may be instances where you feel that it could be problematic to disagree with your superiors, she adds. "Every situation is different," says Jenkins, so make sure that you "evaluate the situation at hand."

8. When you're the one who wants to talk politics

What to say: "I am interested in getting your thoughts on X. Is that something you'd be interested in discussing with me?"

Why it's effective: This simple question can get the conversation started and gauge your colleague's willingness to talk. Asking for permission gives co-workers an opportunity to opt out of the discussion, so you don't create an awkward situation for someone else.

It's also a great way to share your intention for the conversation, says Engle, and ensures that you're both on the same page. She recommends adding the phrase, "I really respect your opinion on X" or specifically sharing why and what you would like to discuss with that person.

Some people genuinely want to discuss politics in the office. According to a [Randstad US](#) survey, 49 percent of respondents enjoy hashing out political differences with colleagues at work. Plus, diverse ideas and perspectives are what make a company's culture great, explains Jenkins. "Political discussion at work shouldn't be stifled, as it's sometimes very valuable and educational."

If you choose to get political, be sensitive, and respectful. And remember: If you find yourself getting too deep in any one political conversation, it's probably time to get back to work.

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