



# How to have constructive conversations about the US election at work



REUTERS/CHRIS ALUKA BERRY

Even the basic steps can be helpful in times of high stress.

## FROM OUR OBSESSION

### The Office

Whether we work in cubicles, the C-suite, or a home office, we're always navigating the people and cultural norms shaping our workday.



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If it was never completely possible to leave politics at the door to your workplace, now the idea is probably laughable. In the US, especially, the political has become deeply personal—and everything, including a deadly virus—is charged with partisan significance.

Work, meanwhile, is one of the main settings where we now process shock, fear, or sadness over extreme changes or tragic events, in addition to doing our actual jobs.

But how do you do that without ratcheting up the tension or unintentionally excluding and offending people in what's arguably the most divisive election year yet?

No matter how the election plays out, some people will be experiencing grief, fatigue, anxiety, skepticism, or flat-out terror. Even among colleagues who share political affiliations, there's no "right" reaction to this election.

For the conscientious among us, which ideally should cover everyone we work with, one option is to lean on the pillars of nonviolent communication, a process for interacting with people that emphasizes mutual respect and shifts the tone of discussions away from boiling points. The approach was created by the late psychologist Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s, and has been adapted and applied in regions with entrenched warfare, in workplaces, and in everyday interpersonal conflicts.

## **Stick to the basics for now**

Dian Killian, a Brooklyn-based workplace communication consultant and certified trainer with the international Center for Nonviolent Communication, talked to Quartz in 2016 about how the process works. In a nutshell, she told us then, it involves four steps:

- 1** Observe and recap what another person is saying without attaching judgement;
- 2** Describe your emotions, but do not debate points (though you may get there in time);
- 3** Identify a universal need, like a yearning for community or autonomy; and
- 4** Make a request related to one of the needs. For example, if you're looking for a shared reality, you might ask someone: "Would you be willing to read this article I found interesting about immigrants and the economy?"

It can take years to become fluent in this method, and it will feel awkward and forced until you get there. However, just getting the basics down could be particularly helpful during a week like this one —so Quartz called on Killian once more for some tips for mindful discussions at work. Here's what she had to say.

## **Check in with yourself first**

Self-empathy, or what Killian calls workplace self-management, is an essential part of communication when the room is heated. “People are thinking that because it’s communication, it has to involve a conversation with someone else,” says Killian, “but the most important work you can do in these challenging times, in my opinion, is an inside job.”

Focusing on other people and the mistakes you believe they’re making is the fastest route to saying something you’ll later regret, she says. Instead, look at how you’re managing your own pain, anxiety, and reactions, because that’s going to impact how you behave.

Pay special attention to the parts of you that can get triggered, says Killian. “When people are engaging in strong reactions—like road rage-strong reactivity—often younger parts are getting triggered,” she says, “And those parts need a lot of empathy. Often, they need us, as an adult, to say what you would say to a two-, three-, or four-year-old: ‘This is really hard. This is scary.’”

In the case of this election, people are being asked to cope with multiple layers of uncertainty—about who will win, when we’ll know for sure, what it will mean to the economy, where the pandemic is going, if we’ll have affordable healthcare, and that’s just for starters —and it’s unsettling for many of us.

## **Name what you see**

If you're leading a meeting after the election, says Killian, "I think it'd be very helpful just to name what's going on for people in a way that's respectful of the differences that might be in the room."

Ignoring or banning any discussion of the proverbial elephant may feel like a more neutral response, but in effect you're disregarding what's actually happening and minimizing what people are feeling.

She suggests something simple: "I know we have a full agenda today, and I just want to name that, regardless of how you see things happening in the world of what your political beliefs are, this is a challenging week for many of us."

As a colleague or manager, you can support people on an individual level by naming what you see, just identifying the expression on someone's face, and making yourself available for a conversation. Don't assign a label or guess what's going on for someone else. "You can leave it up to that person to say what they want to say," she says.

## Recap what you hear

If and when you're feeling grounded enough to talk to someone else about how they're functioning, or not functioning, try simply recapping what you hear from them, says Killian.

Recapping, which is usually called "mirroring" in psychotherapy-speak, is "literally letting the other person know what you've heard them say," says Killian. "That is amazingly, surprisingly powerful, because if we are upset as human beings, our most basic human need in that moment is to be heard."

You don't need to echo back what someone says verbatim, but make sure it's obvious that you get it. After a few recaps, you might also ask if what you're saying back to them accurately reflects what they wanted to communicate.

## Only seek common ground in a way that's honest for you

Taking a difficult conversation deeper might mean venturing into territory in which you try to name what a person seems to need, and look for goals you share.

For instance, if someone at work is upset because they believe late ballots should not be counted, you might make them feel heard by saying, “I hear you saying you’re concerned about paper ballots that are still being counted in Pennsylvania.”

Then you might add: “I’m also really concerned; I wish we had a clear decision by now,” says Killian. You don’t have to leave your own thoughts out of the conversation just because you disagree. You can still express something like, “I’m glad the ballots are being counted because I value democracy. Even though it’s painful to not know, I really want confidence that everyone’s vote is going to be counted.”

## Don't try to work with facts

Facts and science should settle many debates, but we’ve seen, certainly over the past four years, how they’ve instead been cheapened or made to seem untrustworthy. Even that’s not why Killian suggests not hurtling facts and figures at someone when you’re in disagreement.

Offering people information or data that differs from what they believe is “where you get into conflict energy very quickly,” she says. “The other person will experience and judge it as pushback or criticism, and in your mind, you think you’re just providing information.”

Rosenberg therefore developed a rule of thumb that essentially boils down to empathy over education. The most immediate need that people have is to be heard, and once that has happened, the situation often deescalates quickly.