



The Unlock: Leading in a Politically Charged Workplace

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Introduction

In an era of heightened political polarization, the boundaries between personal beliefs and workplace culture are increasingly blurred. Employees bring their personal values into their professional environments, and these values often coincide with political perspectives and leanings.

This creates challenges for leaders who seek to be inclusive and need to maintain productivity of an increasingly divided workforce. Titans across industries have always been involved in political fodder; it is often in an industry's best interest to engage with and influence new administrations. But with CEO trust at an all-time low, employees are calling to question how negotiable company values and priorities are to political agendas. It turns out, politics aren't only being talked about in the workplace, they are shaping our workplace experiences and company cultures. The latest insights from the Pulse of the U.S. Workforce reveals how political dynamics impact workplace culture, employee trust, and productivity. This brief examines the financial, reputational, and cultural impacts of corporate political positioning, offering data-driven, human-centric strategies to help leaders navigate these challenges effectively.

Political Affiliation as a Meta Identity

According to John Dick, Founder and CEO of Civic Science, “Political affiliation often serves as a proxy for deeper values and beliefs, influencing perspectives on workplace culture, leadership, and engagement.” Similarly, Dr. Sumona De Graaf, Founder/CEO of idealis Advisory, echoes the sentiment, stating that “Political identity is not just about policy preferences but reflects broader attitudes on social justice, economic priorities, and institutional trust.”

This phenomenon is evident in the Pulse of the U.S. Workforce data with over 200,000 respondents from across the U.S., which shows that employees with similar political affiliations tend to cluster together in their workplace attitudes and expectations.

- Employees who identify as politically conservative are more likely to prioritize stability and individual accountability, whereas liberal employees emphasize inclusivity and social responsibility.
- Political alignment correlates with job satisfaction and trust in leadership, with employees feeling more engaged when they perceive their workplace culture aligns with their broader worldview.
- Workplace dynamics often mirror broader societal divisions, requiring leaders to be proactive in fostering cohesion across differences in perspectives.
- Political leaning and political party affiliation don't always coincide; while workers' personal identities may be fixed, their political identities and expression of their political ideologies shift often.

45%

of U.S. Workers sampled lean moderate in their views suggesting that people are less declarative than the polls may suggest and are open to shifting perspectives.

How Talking Politics Impacts Employee Trust and Engagement

Political tensions in the workplace can erode productivity and trust in leadership. The American Psychological Association has identified political discourse as a chronic stressor, and our recent Pulse data supports this:

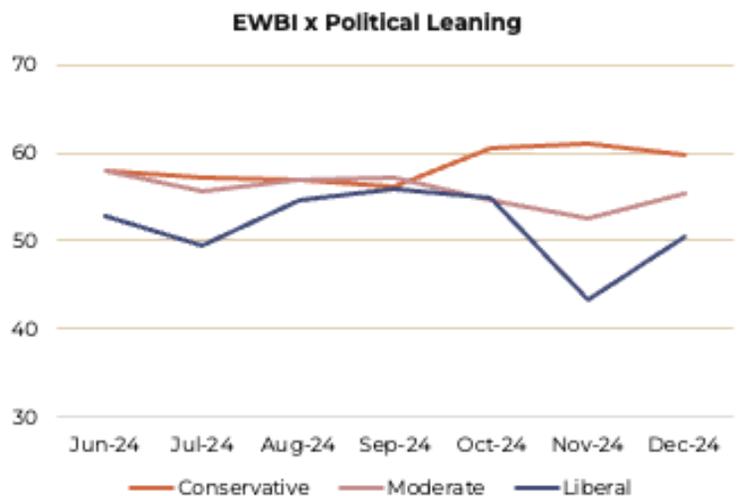
- 60% of employees believe heated political discussions impact productivity at work.
- Leaders report a stronger impact on productivity compared to non-leaders (67% vs. 58%).
- Younger employees (ages 18-34) and racial minorities express higher levels of concern regarding political discussions at work.

Concern tends to uptick during moments of significant political upheaval. After the 2016 election, for example, the Washington Post reported 30% of surveyed employees found their colleagues spent more time talking about politics than work., and 30% of workers said they had been less productive since the election.

Our recent Pulse of the U.S. Workforce quarterly report displayed how emotional well-being fluctuates based on political leaning.

The Emotional Well-Being Index (EWBI) tracked how levels of stress, fear, worry, and sadness shifted and correlated with whether one’s party is in power.

There’s a silver lining: workplaces have the potential to be productive spaces for cross-political engagement, given the diverse political perspectives that are existent in the workforce. Research published by The Journal of Politics suggests that structured workplace discussions can foster better understanding across ideological divides. The challenge for leaders is to manage political discourse in a way that minimizes workplace disruption while fostering a culture of respect and inclusion.



When To Take a Stance As Leaders and Companies

Beyond internal culture, leaders must also decide whether and how to position their organizations in broader political rhetoric. While 58% of Americans in a 2023 CNBC survey stated that companies should avoid taking political stances, there is a renewed calling for companies to express their views from stakeholders, and with it, a need to consider costs and benefits to a company's reputation and financial performance:

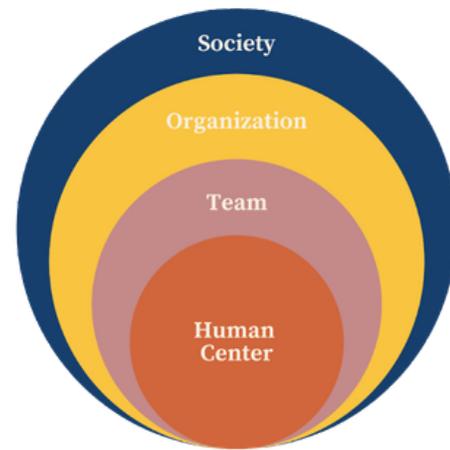
- Companies that take a stance misaligned with their key stakeholders see, on average, a 2.45% decline in stock value.
- In contrast, organizations that align with their stakeholders' values experience a 0.71% stock price increase, emphasizing the importance of strategic alignment.
- 70% of employees prefer working for companies that reflect their values, reinforcing the importance of authenticity and clarity in values in corporate decision-making.
- Consumer expectations increasingly mirror employee expectations, as 78% of consumers believe companies should take a stance on social issues that align with their brand identity.

Staying Centered and Aligned as Leaders

To navigate political dynamics effectively, leaders need to think through multiple layers of complexity.

First, employees' core beliefs, values, and motivations fuel their political perspectives and reactions to political discourse. Being clear on where you stand and your comfort level in engaging in complex or contentious conversations is key. Moreover, self-awareness of your readiness for these difficult conversations is helpful. For example, "Do I feel comfortable if my colleagues feel differently about something that I care deeply about?" "Am I ready to accept that my perspective may cause others discomfort?" or "Am I ready to listen and share openly about my views?" If the answer is no, it may be best to avoid heated political discussions, or to invest in strengthening trusted relationships at work so that you can be more comfortable over time.

Next, leaders create the conditions for teams to interact and work together productively. That's why it is critical to consider how you might handle political discussions as they unfold in day-to-day interactions. It is critical for leaders to create an environment of psychological safety while setting clear boundaries for respectful dialogue. This cannot happen if the leader him/herself is not clear-eyed and centered (See above). Significant research has been conducted on psychological safety as a critical foundation for cultivating high-performing teams, as it allows members to openly share ideas and perspectives, admit mistakes, and ask questions without fear of negative consequences. When people feel comfortable and accepted for their point of view, it leads to better collaboration, innovation, and overall team effectiveness.

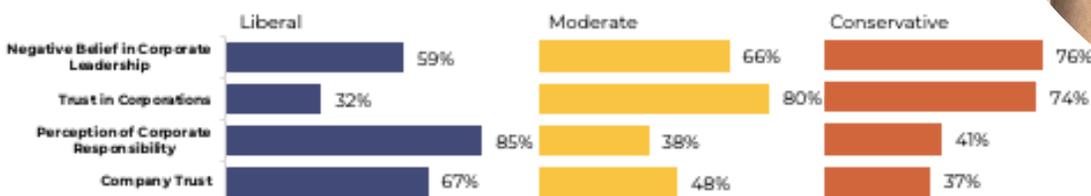


idealism's human-centered leadership model

For executive leaders of organizations, it is essential to remember that a company's stance on political and social issues impacts employee attitudes, consumer sentiment and employer brand. It is why speaking publicly on political topics, issuing public statements, participating in political events, and even contributing to political campaigns are such a hot button topic in corporate boardrooms. In an age of transparency, where employees, consumers, the media and watchdog organizations are monitoring corporate actions, it is critical to ensure company values are strategically aligned to company actions. This can offer a competitive advantage to companies. As Marian Evans shared in her 2024 Forbes article, "loyalty born out of value alignment creates a more cohesive and resilient organizational culture." Knowing this, it is understandable that a big swing in a different direction politically by company leadership or through company policy will create a significant ripple effect on employees and consumers who hold strongly different ideologies from the newly adopted stance.

Finally, organizations are increasingly impacted by broader societal trends and issues. The pressure to adapt and adjust to societal shifts is felt across the organizational landscape, but is perhaps most felt by CEO's, who must consider the external implications of their political positions. For many employees, this may be difficult to understand. For example, a CEO's public appearance with a controversial political figure may cause internal frustration among employees, who see it as a betrayal of the company's values. However, the leader may be making a calculated decision, tied to company strategy and longevity, which could ultimately affect employees' lives and livelihoods. The question that most Boards and CEOs are tackling is: "What is the cost/benefit to the choices I make when navigating a difficult political landscape, and how can I minimize risk for our company and our employees?" The outcome of the choices made has serious implications for trust in top leadership within a company - last year, only 56% of employees surveyed agreed that they trust their CEO. Boards and CEOs who seek to earn their employee (and consumer's) trust must seriously consider the consequences of the political stances they make on behalf of the company.

Keeping the complexity of the context in which leaders are navigating political terrain is critical to breakdown, as the stakes are high at all levels. Leaders can stay centered and lead effectively by guiding their employees individually, maintaining respect and consistency across different contexts, and weaving the thread between decisions made by company leadership and adherence to company values. That might be part of the proverbial water cooler talk in the office in a politically charged workplace.



Leading Through Political Tension in the Workplace

Navigating political differences at work requires effort and intention. Our Pulse of the U.S. Workforce data suggests that politics at work are talked about, and impact workplace outcomes and experiences. It is up to leaders to ensure that these differences are productively managed. When companies invest in cultivating workplace cultures with clear values, boundaries and expectations, leaders can lean against the culture in moments of tension. Below are a few strategies that high performing companies and leaders deploy to manage through the political landscape:

- **Encourage Curiosity** – Cultivating a habit of leading with questions contributes to growth and understanding amongst employees. Leaders can role model thoughtful inquiry—asking team members to clarify their perspectives, reflect on their experiences, or explore alternative viewpoints—which can help uncover common ground and strengthen mutual understanding.
- **Cultivate Empathy** – Strong workplace cultures are built on human connection. Encouraging employees to share their stories, values, strengths, and work styles contributes to deeper understanding of one another. Our research shows that teams with deep human connection are better equipped to navigate disagreements and find common ground with respect.
- **Practice Mental Agility** – While a single conversation or company statement is unlikely to change someone's deeply held beliefs, ongoing exposure to different perspectives—within a context of trust and respect—can prompt reflection and, over time, a shift in understanding. The ability to adjust one's thinking on a topic when presented with new information is a critical leadership skill overall and can be learned.

- **Establish a Plan for Managing Conflict** – Heated discussions can escalate into workplace conflict, undermining engagement, productivity, and team cohesion. People quiet quit each other, siloes are created, and frustration grows rampant. Left unaddressed, these tensions can lead to turnover and cultural fractures. Organizations can build the skills in leaders to address conflicts as they arise and invest in continuous development of these skills to facilitate resolution effectively.
- **Communicate Consciously** – As leaders take and share their stance or the company's stance on politically relevant topics, carefully assessing stakeholder impact and reactions is a critical step to take. With over 30% of U.S. workers sharing their political point of view on social media, it is critical to consider how communication of a perspective might impact mutual trust and respect. In addition, communicating a political stance broadly should be done with multiple diverse points of view at the table, ensuring all implications on people, profits and purpose have been considered.

By leaning into political discussions conscientiously, with care and consideration, organizations can create an environment where political differences do not become sources of division but rather a competitive advantage where a company's culture serves as a safeguard to broader societal uncertainty and turmoil.

Conclusion

Navigating the intersection of politics and the workplace is a growing challenge for today's leaders. While political discussions can create tension and disrupt productivity, they also offer opportunities for understanding, engagement, and meaningful dialogue. Workplaces, in a moment of divisiveness in society overall, can serve as a common ground for people of all perspectives and backgrounds to learn and lead from.

For the latest insights on employees' perspectives on politics in the workplace, subscribe to *The Pulse* for full access to the report.

About the Pulse of the US Workforce

At idealis, we know that employee experience is closely tied to business outcomes. Yet, while financial metrics are often tracked rigorously, the workplace experience is rarely measured with the same precision. Our Pulse of the U.S. Workforce, in partnership with Civic Science, captures real-time insights from thousands of U.S. workers each month. This data gives leaders a reliable and actionable view into how their employees feel, empowering them to make informed decisions that foster engagement and growth. To explore the insights and opportunities the Pulse can provide, visit our [Pulse website](#).

“We don’t leave our political perspectives at home when we go to work; at the same time, work is a place where our perspectives can expand and shift. For the sake of civil society, we ought to talk about it.”

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About the Authors

Dr. Sumona De Graaf

An organizational psychologist specializing in motivation and what drives people. She has worked with founder-led businesses, family offices, venture capital and private equity companies, and boards and management teams across the public and private sector. Her work across clients has one commonality:

Sumona is called upon by Boards and C-level executives to help them navigate their most challenging human issues. As a social scientist, she uses data to draw insights, and as a career practitioner, guides her clients to redesign habits, processes and practices to create lasting impact.

Sumona is the founder and CEO of idealis. She spends her time helping clients navigate their most pressing leadership challenges, amplifying the stories of human-centered leaders, and most importantly, creating the conditions for her team of exceptional humans to thrive.

Dr. Abbey Salvas

An industrial-organizational psychologist who has been driven throughout their educational and professional career by the mission of making workplaces better for everyone.

At idealis, Abbey serves as a research lead and data expert, providing analytical support to the team to help answer our clients' most nuanced and challenging questions using best-in-class data tools and solutions. They apply human insight to hard data, answering the critical question of how to create human-centered environments that benefit everyone.

Allison Williams

An accomplished senior leader in higher education with 20+ years of strategic leadership and management responsibilities, Allison has implemented cutting edge individual and organizational leadership development initiatives with boards, executive leaders and complex organizations. She has built dynamic tools designed to ignite the leadership potential of individuals and teams to drive positive change at every level. She also teaches organizational leadership development at the graduate level and is a certified facilitator and trainer through the International Institute of Restorative Practices.

At idealis, Allison serves as our Chief Learning Officer and is guiding our growing higher education practice focused on developing current and future leaders of our world. With a deep passion for guiding others to repair culture, align vision and values, and bring forth the best in people, she couples theory and practice to offer new ways of thinking about today's most complex leadership challenges.

Francesca Vaneri

With a strong commitment to collaboration and content excellence, Francesca is dedicated to helping leaders articulate their vision and values through writing and inspire others to lead with authenticity and empathy.

At idealis, Francesca plays a role in content creation, research, and strategic communication, contributing to the firm's mission of fostering human-centered leadership.



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