

Reinforce what matters most

Rob Wilson is president of Employco USA, a human resources outsourcing firm based in Westmont, Ill. An employment expert, Wilson and his team help companies manage a range of HR Functions.

Executive Leadership: In the run-up to the presidential election, what can leaders do to ensure that their employees engage in civil, respectful communication about politics?

Wilson: You cannot avoid the topic of politics, especially this year. People are going to talk about it. You have to set the right example by keeping these conversations brief and light.

EL: But what happens if employees express strong opinions?

Wilson: We had a case with an employer where someone said Hillary Clinton was untrustworthy. Others disagreed strongly with that. So we came in and defused it. We said, "Let's reconvene later when we have cooler heads." Then we met offline, in private, with those employees who voiced the strongest opinions and let them know, "I know you're passionate, but you also have to respect that others are passionate and you can't make them feel uncomfortable sharing their views."

EL: What can a leader say to an employee who just won't stop making controversial comments?

Wilson: You say, "We need you to keep your conversations lighter." If people are too blatant about expressing their views, it can be considered harassment in the workplace. So you need to nip it in the bud and say, "Your topic is not work-related. You risk creating a hostile work environment and that's not acceptable here."

EL: How would you describe respectful communication?

Wilson: Asking employees for input on future goals. Repeating important points that you want to make that are good for the business. Being a good listener. If someone pops into your office, put down the phone and look at that person.

EL: You mention the importance of repeating key points to reinforce what matters most to employees. What's the best way to convey those points?

Wilson: We find that small team meetings work well. I just came out of a meeting where we picked two or three clients and talked about the good things we're doing and how to do things better.

EL: What lessons have you learned about leadership over your career?

Wilson: As a leader, you have to be continually positive when you're out in front of your employees. In private, you might be concerned. During the recession [in 2009], we were worrying about losing clients and making payroll. But I wasn't negative with our employees. I told them, "We're going through tough times but we'll come out of this stronger than ever." And we did.

EL: But you have to get them to work through their own anxiety and negativity.

Wilson: It helps if you recognize them for persevering. In April, our firm celebrated its 20-year anniversary. We gathered about 65 employees at our corporate headquarters. I had all the employees who were with us in 2009 stand up. About nine of them stood, and we applauded them for their perseverance.

EL: That must have been a great moment.

Wilson: It was. They were shy about standing up at first. They didn't know it was coming. But they were good about it, and they appreciated it.