



Presidential elections engage—and ignite—employees in the workplace. Policies can help contain the flames.

## POLITICS IN THE OFFICE

By Adrienne Fox

**T**he call came with about 48 hours' notice. Barack Obama was coming to the Seattle area to give a speech to thousands of supporters at Key Arena. He wanted to unveil his environmental strategy at a Seattle company. McKinstry Co., a mechanical contractor that retrofits buildings to make them energy-efficient, was on the short list of possible sites. The campaign coordinator wanted to know: Was McKinstry interested in hosting the Democratic presidential hopeful?

It was February, months before Obama would have the nomination. McKinstry's union leaders were supporting Hillary Clinton. How would employees react to an Obama visit?

Mari Anderson, SPHR, vice president of human resources at McKinstry, and the rest of the executive team started weighing pros and cons. In the pro corner: a chance to highlight McKinstry and its industry to the world and the opportunity

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*The author is a freelance writer in Alexandria, Va., and a contributing editor and former managing editor of HR Magazine.*

for employees to rub elbows with a national figure. Over in the con corner: the appearance of endorsing a presidential candidate and making employees who did not support Obama uncomfortable.

This was not entirely uncharted territory for McKinstry's 16,000 employees, who had previously played host to local and state politicians talking about their environmental strategies. But it would be the first official visit for a candidate.

In the end, senior managers decided the pros far outweighed the cons and accepted the request. That left about 24 hours for a security sweep of the facility and a communication sweep for the HR professionals.

"We communicated to our employees about the visit and asked them to offer up any concerns," says Anderson. "We stated clearly that this was not an endorsement by the company, but that it gives us an opportunity to showcase McKinstry."

As it turned out, McKinstry employees were more excited than concerned to rub elbows with a presidential candidate. In fact, by most accounts, this presidential election numbers among the most exciting and talked about. If people talk about it at home with their families and friends, you can be sure they talk about it at work. The increased enthusiasm translated into record-breaking turnouts in the primaries. But, for HR professionals, that zeal for opposing candidates could turn into heated debates and dangerous territory if employees overstep their boundaries.

It's a good time to remind employees to be respectful of each other's beliefs, inform them of any legal restrictions on politicking in the organization and enforce policies the company has against campaigning on the job.

A political activities policy is a simple statement covering acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the workplace. It generally encourages workers to participate in the political process—albeit off duty. It may allow paid time off for employees to vote or to volunteer for campaigns. But it usually does not allow workers to raise funds, solicit votes, or wear or display campaign paraphernalia at the office, especially if the job requires frequent interaction with customers. (For a sample policy, see the online version of this article at [www.shrm.org/hrmagazine](http://www.shrm.org/hrmagazine).)

## Showing Support

Brad Marston's job as manager of a restaurant in Boston requires a lot of face time with patrons. Yet he strides into work each day proudly wearing a McCain '08 hat on his head and a button on his shirt. Marston estimates that he

works 50 hours a week in the restaurant and another 50 hours on the campaign. He and several other volunteers built McCain's web presence and oversee 25 pro-McCain web sites, 200 affiliated blogs and a database containing tens of thousands of e-mail addresses.

Management has been supportive of Marston's extracurricular activity. On conference calls, other managers and his regional manager often ask how the campaign is faring. "It's not secretive, nor has it been discouraged from management to fly the flag," says Marston.

He hasn't received much flak for his McCain paraphernalia from patrons, either. "Most people in Boston are Democrats, but they've been very respectful of my beliefs," he says.

Several of Marston's roughly 50 employees have asked about McCain's positions, and he offers them readily. But he draws the line at arguments or any pressure at voting a certain way. "I wouldn't engage in a heated discussion with a customer or an employee," he stresses. "I talk about my volunteering activities the same way I talk about what movie I saw last weekend. But I will not proselytize for any candidate to an unwilling or disinterested audience, especially since I'm in a management position talking to hourly employees."

Corporate headquarters for the restaurant group has not issued memos or said formally what managers or employees are allowed to do in the election. "My general manager did mention that she had noticed McCain web sites in our cookies [computers' Internet history] and asked me to make sure that I'm not online during work hours," Marston adds.

## A Witness to History

About two hours northwest of Boston in Claremont, N.H., Beverly Widger, SPHR, has seen her share of primaries, having lived most of her life in the Granite State. "This was by far the most exciting primary season," says Widger, senior vice president of human resources at Claremont Savings Bank.

She and her 100 employees had an up-close view of the candidates because many held rallies at the high school next door.

"If we have an individual who wants to attend a rally, as long as they have leave banked and it is approved by the supervisor, they can go," she says. "John Edwards, John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama all had rallies [at the high school], and employees went to see multiple candidates to get informed."

Widger, a member of the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) Employee Relations Special Expertise Panel, says three employees took paid time off

### ► Online Resources

See the online version of this article at [www.shrm.org/hrmagazine](http://www.shrm.org/hrmagazine) for links to:

- SHRM articles on political activities in the workplace.
- SHRM's Get Out the Vote web site.
- The SHRM Online Workplace Law Focus Area.
- A sample policy on prohibited political activity.
- A press release on Harris Interactive's poll on politics in the workplace.
- Surveys from OfficeTeam and Vault.com.
- The federal Hatch Act, which limits partisan activities by government employees.

to attend the Obama-Clinton rally in nearby Unity, N.H., in June—the first joint appearance for the former rivals.

According to Widger, bank leaders say “people should be informed voters, and we encourage them to attend rallies or town meetings and to vote.” But, she adds, “because of our business, our policy states that you can’t display political material in your cubicle or wear anything [campaign-related] while at work. You will hear civil conversations in the break room about the candidates. If someone isn’t interested, they walk away.”

Indeed, a January 2008 OfficeTeam telephone survey of 522 full- and part-time office workers found that nearly 40 percent of workers discuss politics “often,” and 67 percent of workers think it’s OK as long as it’s not too heated.

But some of the heat may be simmering under the surface and causing as much damage to employee morale as in-your-face arguments.

## Political Rumbblings and Grumbings

Paul Cruce, a McCain supporter, says, “My workplace in San Francisco is teeming with liberals who openly talk about their support for Obama. The few of us who support McCain are subjected to quite a bit of verbal harassment while being told we can’t talk about politics at work. But the same rule is not applied to them. The official policy at work is no politicking of any kind is allowed. But no one from upper management calls out the liberals, and the conservatives are ignored when we complain.”

Laura Lea Clinton, GPHR, HR manager at CARE USA, a large nonprofit humanitarian organization based in Atlanta, says her workplace has similar underground frustration, and she is well aware of it. Still, it’s hard to remedy.

“We are nonpartisan in our approach as an organization, but we tend to fall on the liberal side in terms of the makeup of our employees,” says Clinton, also a member of SHRM’s Employee Relations Special Expertise Panel. “We have conservative employees who feel they don’t have a voice, and because of the type of organization we are, [the conservatives] believe that those with liberal leanings can be much more overt about their beliefs.”

Clinton says employees who work on programs and in advocacy tend to be liberal, but the people in HR, finance and marketing tend to be more conservative. “Someone [from the programs or advocacy groups] may be outspoken in a forum, and you will hear conservatives grumble,” she explains.

More than one-quarter of workers polled in a 2007 Attitudes in the American Workplace survey conducted by Harris Interactive said they don’t fit in with their company’s culture in terms of politics.

Clinton has tried to address discontent through diversity training. “We take the approach of diversity of thought and

try to emphasize that each individual’s perspective can bring something to what we’re trying to achieve as an organization,” she says. “Still, we get complaints and concerns from conservatives who feel marginalized.”

Conservatives just “don’t go there” anymore and don’t engage in political debates because they know they won’t be heard. “So, while we try to address it in training,” Clinton concludes, “it’s not exactly a success story.”

## Workplace Diplomacy

Knowing your workplace culture and how your political beliefs fit—or don’t—can keep acrimony at bay. Crystal Blair, a financial management associate at a global accounting firm in Houston, openly shares her support of Obama at work. Colleagues know that she attended the Texas Democratic Party state convention in June and that her Facebook page is populated with Obama pictures and buttons, and she subscribes to numerous support groups.

However, she’s careful to talk politics only with people on her level and who share her beliefs. “We don’t talk about politics with the partners because we don’t know where they stand,” Blair says. “I might display a pro-Obama editorial in my cubicle, but it’s not a huge sign. I don’t think that would be appropriate or professional.”

Blair says her firm sent a memo the day before she attended the state convention outlining the boundaries. “We are not allowed to donate money on behalf of the firm,” she says. “We can’t volunteer for the campaign on company time. I’m not supposed to be on the phones telling people to go to the Obama meeting tonight. I can visit an Obama web site during my lunchtime, but I can’t work for the campaign on work time.”

David Polinsky, a finance specialist at a computer manufacturer in Texas, is a “die-hard Democrat surrounded by conservatives. But we blow off [any debate] at the end of it.”

Like Blair, Polinsky doesn’t keep any ostentatious Obama campaign material in his cubicle, believing that would be unprofessional, although he does have an Obama sticker on his car. His company has never sent out policies discouraging politics at work. He says he goes online to talk about Obama during work hours and he reads Obama web sites at work.

## The Laws of Politicking

While Polinsky does not believe he would be fired by his progressive employer for keeping a bumper sticker on his car, the same scenario did result in a dismissal at a different company during the 2004 presidential election. An Alabama woman was fired by insulation company Enviromate Inc. for refusing to remove a Kerry/Edwards bumper sticker from her car.

The move may well be within the employer’s rights, notes Daniel Prywes, a partner at Bryan Cave LLP in Washington,

## RULES OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Michael Toner, former head of the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and also a partner at Bryan Cave LLP in Washington, D.C., explains three FEC rules against corporate politicking:

**Fundraising.** Corporate resources cannot be used to underwrite a fundraiser for a federal candidate, according to Toner. For example, if a corporate conference room or supplies or catering are used during a fundraiser, those expenses must be underwritten by the campaign. Otherwise, it is a prohibited corporate contribution to a federal candidate. "If you are going to make your resources available to a candidate, you have to make sure the campaign pays fair market value," says Toner.

**Soliciting co-workers.** The law allows people at work to solicit contributions from their colleagues—if all contributions are voluntary and made without threat or reprisal. "Supervisors also can solicit contributions, but they have to be careful not to make it be or appear coercive," Toner notes.

**Donations.** Avoid "straw donor schemes" where employees are reimbursed with corporate money for their contributions, says Toner. "We've seen major cases at the high level where people are trying to raise \$100,000 or \$200,000 and they go to colleagues and say, 'Write these checks, and we'll reimburse you with company money.' You can get into trouble with the FEC as well as bring criminal charges against your company," Toner warns.

D.C., adding that in the private sector, employees don't have First Amendment rights at work. "Some employers may not want to have employees involved in political activity that is antithetical to their corporate visions, and, in many states, it's their right to discipline or fire them."

Prywes notes that protections for private and state employees for expressing political views in the workplace vary by state. For instance, New Jersey passed a law prohibiting an employer from turning its employees into a captive audience for candidate speeches. "So, if candidate X is touring the plant, you can't say, 'You must come to the auditorium and listen to the candidate's speech.' There's a sense that that puts people in an uncomfortable position," he says. (For a state-by-state guide, see the online version of this article at [www.shrm.org/hrmagazine](http://www.shrm.org/hrmagazine).)

Prywes voices concern about supervisor-employee relations. If a supervisor gets into an argument with a subordi-

nate, "There's always the possibility that the supervisor will discipline or take a negative action toward the employee," he says. "Anything that has any element of coercion or compulsion should be looked at carefully in making policies."

In 2007, Vault.com found that 30 percent of workers polled in a Politics in the Workplace survey said a co-worker tried to influence their choice in an election. What's more, 35 percent said their boss openly shares political views with employees, and 9 percent said they feel pressure to conform to the boss's views.

Even if the supervisor is not coercing a direct report to vote a certain way, trouble may arise if a boss inadvertently has his or her assistant help with a campaign. "Election laws allow you to volunteer on your free time for a candidate," explains Prywes. "But say you have a CEO who is volunteering to raise money for a candidate and that CEO's secretary is making calls for the event or whatever it is, then her time must be paid for by the campaign. You have to have accounting so the campaign pays for any administrative out-of-pocket expenses."

### An Opportunity

Back at McKinstry, the day before the Obama visit, Anderson nervously met with shop workers in an open forum, stressing that participation was voluntary and that the company did not endorse any candidate. She stood ready to field questions. But her worries were unwarranted, as the workers voiced enthusiasm.

After the forum, shop employees went to work creating a special jersey to commemorate the visit. "When someone retires from the metal shop floor, we make a jersey out of sheet metal and put the number of years of service on it. We then 'retire the jersey' and hang it up," Anderson explains. The shop workers made a jersey for Obama with the number "08."

Obama arrived at McKinstry at 9 a.m. and spent roughly two hours touring the facility, meeting workers and shooting hoops on the basketball court. He culminated the visit with a press conference where he unveiled his environmental and energy strategy. "He talked with our plumbers and pipe fitters and sheet metal workers about how they help support the green economy," says Anderson.

Conservative Mike Grizzle, head of estimating at McKinstry, says, "His visit was an honor because he picked us for our green-build initiatives, and he wanted to showcase what companies like McKinstry can do to find an economic solution by working green. I was proud he picked us. When we met, I thanked him for the opportunity and for choosing us for his platform. He did not change my vote, but I respect him."

That, if anything, is the message HR professionals can learn during this election season: You can turn a potentially divisive political workplace situation into one that fosters respect for others' beliefs. ■