

What's wrong with being Politically Correct?

A recent US Court of Appeals case caught my eye. The court decided that a supervisor who had publicly humiliated a female employee by repeatedly yelling and swearing at her was not guilty of harassment. The court decided that since this supervisor acted in this way towards everyone regardless of gender, it wasn't a case of sex discrimination. It's just that he was (in their words) "a rude, boorish, thoroughly obnoxious supervisor prone to outrageous temper tantrums", and there's no law against that.

Should there be?

My first instinct was to wonder why anyone would work for this company. On the other hand, perhaps the female employee who had complained was being overly sensitive. What harm had the supervisor really done? Maybe this was just his "management style". Not so very long ago, such an aggressive "in your face" way of supervising people was more the norm than the exception. What has changed?

What is and, more importantly, what is not acceptable behavior at work can vary widely. Practices that are just fine in one country are heresy in another. What Organization A considers behavior that is essential to advancement could lead to termination in Organization B. The standards are influenced by social norms, cultural expectations, religious and other values, and leadership styles. They are enforced by peer pressure, management regulations, legal statutes, and the human desire to be accepted by others.

A friend of mine who sells training programs in Mexico laughed when I asked him about the market for sexual harassment prevention materials in his country. "Robert, where I live, men believe that if they are not harassing a woman, they have insulted her." After a moment he added, "I'm not sure if the women agree." We were clearly approaching the question of sexual harassment from very different cultural perspectives.

In the United States and most other Western countries, there are legal sanctions against discrimination or harassment in the workplace. The US also has a litigious tradition that has resulted in large settlements or fines that have pushed public and private employers to enforce strict standards of conduct aimed at eliminating any hint of racial, religious, sexual, or ethnic intimidation or bias.

What's wrong with that? The answer may depend in part on whether you are more likely to find yourself among those who face discrimination or benefit from it. It also may be influenced by your political and social values and perspectives. While most people would agree that harassment and discrimination are morally wrong, what constitutes offensive behavior and more importantly, what should be done to prevent it, are highly debatable.

The role of government.

There is a continuum of opinion about how involved government should be in influencing how we treat each other at work. On one end of this spectrum are the “libertarians” (with a small “l”) who believe individuals should be free to say whatever they want and act as they see fit as long as they’re not physically harming someone else. They see interference as a violation of fundamental freedoms of speech, thought and belief. Libertarians feel you can’t legislate morality, shouldn’t interfere with natural human interaction and that if left alone, employers and employees will make appropriate choices and mostly do “the right thing”. Adults are fully able to defend their own interests and take care of themselves, so they should not be treated like children. The government should only step in to ensure the physical security of its citizens. The less the government does to interfere in people’s lives, the better. Doing more is doing harm.

At the opposite end of the continuum we find the “liberals” (also with a small “l”). They look to government to play a leveling role. Liberals are champions of the weak and oppressed. They want government to discourage employers from excessively exploiting their workers, stop bigots from discriminating against racial, ethnic or religious minorities, protect women and children from abuse, and look out for immigrants’ rights. The liberal is distressed by the inequalities of opportunity that wealth and poverty bring and wants government to intervene to level the playing field and reduce these inequalities. Liberals see suffering and want government to take action. The more government does to improve peoples’ lives, the better. Doing less is doing harm.

Both libertarians and liberals see their agendas as supporting fairness, freedom, and democracy. Both are passionate in their beliefs. They may even share some common social objectives. They differ vehemently, however, on how a society achieves fairness and the role regulations should play. They both want to ensure that government does no harm. However they define “doing harm” very differently.

Most of us fall somewhere on this continuum. How “politically correct” (PC) we are in our choice of language and our behavior is a reflection of these broader political and social beliefs and how blatant (or open) we choose to be about those beliefs. No matter what your personal point of view may be, you cannot escape being strongly influenced by PC forces in your work and personal life. We cannot simply ignore laws. Even people with very thick skins are influenced by peer pressure. We don’t usually like being ostracized or socially isolated. This may lead people who find PC pressures offensive to play along anyway, simply because it makes their lives a bit easier or because they also value being “polite”.

Agents of civility?

Training and HR professionals play a significant role in supporting politically correct behavior standards at work. We present programs on how to communicate effectively, value diversity, prevent harassment, manage conflicts, and comply with EEO laws. We train people to wear a hardhat in a construction zone and not to smoke in areas where they may offend others. In so doing, we are explicitly or implicitly telling employees what our organization’s values and behavior standards are, and what the penalties may be for violating those standards. To some we are proponents of civilized, humane, respectful work environments who improve peoples’ lives. To others, we’re the PC Police.

No matter how you view the rules of behavior that are common in workplaces today, there is a widespread sense that being “PC” is a pejorative term. We use it as a way of labeling attitudes or behaviors we think of as extreme and insincere. The assumption is that you are making your culturally-sensitive or gender-neutral comment because you feel you should (or have to), not because you REALLY believe it (or want to).

This may present us with a dilemma. If you don’t comply with socially accepted norms of behavior, you may offend colleagues and could face negative legal or employment consequences. If you do act in a way that is respectful and sensitive to the feelings of others, you may be considered insincere and a political opportunist.

Of course, as training and HR professionals, this is a no-brainer. Who could possibly be opposed to behavior that is “respectful and sensitive to the feelings of others”? When put that way, very few would raise their hands. However, if we rephrase the question to ask if anyone feels they are walking on eggshells when discussing issues of gender, religion or race for fear of offending a co-worker, many more hands may go up. If you further ask if people feel there are too many laws related to how people should treat each other at work, you may find even more hands waving.

When Judith Martin, popularly known as Miss Manners, was recently asked by Time Magazine if we’ve gone too far in trying to regulate people’s behavior, she commented that we are increasingly using laws to outlaw behavior that is annoying or disgusting. “Etiquette is voluntary,” she added. “Its enforcement arm is disapproval.” This is not entirely true in the workplace, where more than peer approval may be at stake.

On the one hand, social values change. Standards of behavior are not permanent. People can be fickle. The language we use tends to evolve. So it can be difficult to know when you’re saying or doing something that someone else may find offensive. On the other hand the very act of consciously trying to avoid offending others can be viewed by some as pandering, paternalistic, spineless or insincere.

Let’s see if we can find a path through the contradictions.

What do we mean by PC?

While it’s a gross simplification, let’s pretend that there are two possible approaches to “Political Correctness”.

For some (Group A), Political Correctness represents an acceptance of (or at least tolerance for) the diversity of cultures, races, genders, religions, ideologies and lifestyles we find in our societies. For these people, Political Correctness is the socially and morally acceptable standard for human interaction. Anyone who fails to at least make an effort to comply with PC standards is (according to Group A) bigoted, ignorant, sexist, racist, homophobic, jingoistic and/or closed-minded. The members of Group A, however, are unlikely to use such strong language because, well, it just isn’t PC.

For others (Group B), PC is an epithet. It is a form of tyranny that forces people to believe in certain social values and to conform to specific politically motivated behaviors or face social or legal sanctions. It is an attack on our freedoms of speech and thought enforced by a mob of self-righteous social engineers. The only real purpose for Political Correctness (according to Group B) is to avoid offending anyone, which is a questionable value in the first place, and impossible in any case. Members of Group B are usually more than happy to share their opinions on this with you.

In the interests of full disclosure, I must confess that my sympathies lie with Group A.

As applied to work-related training, both groups would agree that the primary goal of Political Correctness is to avoid or suppress behavior that may be offensive. In some cases, these behaviors have also become illegal. This is especially true of harassment. Gender (or sexual) harassment gets the lion's share of our attention and most of the media focus. However, there are also laws against harassment based on an individual's race, ethnicity, religion, age, and in some jurisdictions, sexual orientation.

Group A believes these prohibitions have evolved from the struggles of oppressed people who have demanded fair and equal treatment. Harassment prevention and anti-discrimination training are seen as essential to ensuring that employees (especially women and non-white employees) are treated fairly and with respect. They help remove some of the fear that was common in the workplace before these laws were instituted and they have made it possible for many qualified and talented individuals to contribute to the success of their organizations at levels that would not have been possible in the past.

Group B tends to see harassment and discrimination prevention efforts as unnecessary, intrusive and (paradoxically) discriminatory. They see these laws as arbitrary and impossible to apply fairly. Why is it that impact matters but intent doesn't? They see most complaints of harassment or discrimination as exaggerated or fraudulent. While they don't support or endorse workplace harassment or discrimination, they feel the problem has been handled and that women and non-white employees now have the same opportunities and rights as anyone else and don't require special protection.

Because of these beliefs, Group A welcomes training aimed at preventing harassment, broadening our ability to communicate with people who are culturally different from ourselves, learning conflict management skills, and generally finding ways to "get along" better. These employees expect the employee celebration in December to be called a "Holiday Party", refer to "police officers" and "firefighters" instead of policemen and firemen, and take no offense to a gay colleague placing a picture of his significant other on his desk.

Group B is usually fine with training in computer skills, sales techniques, and management fundamentals as long as the training is focused on hard skills and avoids issues like "legally appropriate interview questions" and "EEO compliance". You can forget about harassment prevention and diversity training with Group B. They don't want to waste their time or their employer's resources.

Of course I've oversimplified all this. Most employees can't be so neatly fit into little ideological boxes. People are more interesting (and complex) than that. However drawing a few stereotypes is helpful for the purpose of understanding people's reaction to Political Correctness. Once again we have very different views of "doing harm".

The use of language.

PC behavior is most easily identified in how people use language.

In the case of English, which does not give nouns a specific gender, it was common practice to use the male form of a word with the understanding that it was not intended to refer exclusively to men. This was the case for hundreds of years. For example we would have a chairman of a committee; we would say "he" or "him" when referring to a person whose gender was not identified; and the post office would send a mailman on his daily rounds delivering our correspondence.

Over the past 30 years all of this has been changing. We now elect a chairperson; use he/she, he or she, (s)he, or they; and anxiously await the arrival of our letter carrier. Most of these changes have become widely accepted, though teachers and scholars (or those committed to the correct use of English grammar) still wince when they see "they" or "them" used to refer to an individual whose gender is not defined, as in: "Once a student has completed the class, thank them for participating and give them their certificate."

We run into particularly confusing and emotionally charged issues when we try to label or categorize people. Is he Black, African American or a Person of Color? When is it right to use Hispanic, Latino, Spanish-Speaking, Chicano, or Mexican American? Are you a Native American, Aborigine, First Nations, Indian, or do you prefer to be identified as a member of a particular tribe? Of course, what is PC today may be completely inappropriate in a year or two. Do you remember what the initials NAACP stand for?

Language is dynamic. Its evolution has accelerated recently as new technologies introduce words no one could have understood a few years ago (megabyte, intranet, e-learning, spamming, newbie...). People are particularly sensitive, however, to the use of language that implies you are either culturally aware or a Neanderthal. This can be taken to extremes that leave even the most liberal among us shaking our heads. For example, did you know you really shouldn't call someone a pet owner? They are now a pet caregiver. Notice I said "they" and not "he" or "she".

It's this extreme awareness of saying the "right" thing that gives Group B fits. It can also leave Group A feeling a bit frustrated and confused. You think you have rid your vocabulary of offensive terms only to find the rules have changed. You would never call a female actor an "actress". It's offensive. Or is it? I'm still not sure. Is "cop" a derogatory term for a police officer? If it is, why do so many people wearing police uniforms describe themselves as cops? Is a person who can't hear deaf or hearing impaired? Is that a question of degree of hearing loss? How would you know which one is appropriate? Must people who stink, are liars, or are idiots be described as having a hygiene problem, being inaccurate or intellectually challenged?

Is there something fundamentally wrong with just using words that clearly say what you mean to say without regard to whether or not those words might hurt someone's feelings?

In our personal lives outside of work, you could argue this both ways. However in the workplace, the short answer is – yes.

Events at the end of 2002 regarding ill-chosen words by the then Republican Majority Leader in the US Senate are just one clear example of the personal price to be paid when we use words that do harm. On a broader level, President Bush's choice of the word "crusade" when describing the war on terrorism had unanticipated impacts in the Muslim world and he quickly backed away from that language and has not used it since. Perhaps there is a growing consensus about what constitutes "doing harm". Could Group A and Group B be finding middle ground? What might have been considered acceptable in the past may no longer be so – by the vast majority of us. This is true no matter how powerful you are within your organization. In fact, the responsibility to use language that isn't offensive increases for those in leadership. This is the case for very practical reasons.

The role of respect at work.

Most of us work in environments where diverse groups of people need to cooperate, collaborate and co-exist. It is in the interests of our organizations that we are able to work productively with our conflicts focused on improving our work processes, not on demeaning, insulting or manipulating each other. Misunderstandings that lead to breakdowns in work relationships are counter-productive. They are bad for business. They can also be personally harmful.

It is important in such an environment to tell the truth and to clearly say what you mean to say. Your choice of words, however, should be helpful to the process of improving workplace relations and productivity, not divisive or disrespectful.

Respect is the key word here. You may not always know exactly what to say, but if your choice of words is guided by a spirit of respect, you will most likely avoid offending anyone's sensibilities. Respect is a nice value to have in other aspects of your life, but it is essential to your success at work.

Fundamentally, the rules of Political Correctness in the workplace are about respect for the feelings of our colleagues. They are about demonstrating that we care about our organization and the people with whom we work. It's helpful to have a sense of humor about all this. There is much art and little science to being PC. It's easy to say something in a way that makes someone uncomfortable without meaning any harm. If all sides in the PC battles would allow themselves to see the humor in our clumsy though well-meaning efforts at communication, we would all be better off.

For this to happen though requires a rather high level of trust. If you suspect someone intends to harm you, it's easy to read malice into their choice of words. If, on the other hand, we are working together in an environment of mutual respect, small matters of phrasing and word selection are easily overlooked or gently corrected.

Respect builds trust which allows for deeper understanding, reinforcing respect.

The PC trainer.

Trainers play a leadership role. They set a tone in every class they present and every e-learning course they author or authorize that tells participants what the communication and behavior standards are. We therefore take on significant responsibility to ensure that employees are able to focus on learning and performance and are not distracted by unnecessary and counter-productive conflicts.

Our job is, in part, to model Politically Correct behavior. If we want employees to treat each other with respect, then we must treat them with respect. If we want them to use language that isn't offensive, then we must use appropriate language.

At the same time, it's wise to be aware that PC behavior may be seen as insincere or worse by some of our colleagues. As you fumble around in search of a gender-neutral way to phrase a question, you may see a few eyes roll. Customer service training that takes into account the needs of your culturally diverse clientele may elicit a smirk or two from those who feel such efforts are a waste of time.

Don't get defensive. There's nothing wrong with being Politically Correct. The old children's rhyme about "sticks and stones" is not really true. Words do cause harm, and the impact on individuals and organizations when "politically incorrect" language is used can be significant.

It's about respect, and regardless of whether you work for a government agency, an educational institution or a business, respect is central to the success of your enterprise. Ultimately, that's a standard we should all be able to accept.

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