Inclusion, Expression, and the Workplace

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Conflict in the workplace is a growing concern for many organisations, particularly in the year of what is looking to be a very tumultuous US election. However, this problem is not confined to the US. Both within our workplace and with our clients or customers, we are increasingly seeing the effects of polarisation. How do we manage this growing tension? And how do we navigate the competing rights and interests at play here?

One of the considerable challenges of liberal societies is reconciling competing rights. The public narrative relating to

rights can often miss the fact that not all rights are absolute. We say: "…but I have a right to X!" In most cases, though, there must be tradeoffs and give-and-take. For example, I have a right to listen to music in my apartment. However, my neighbour also has a right to the peaceful and quiet enjoyment of their apartment. At some point, these two will come into conflict and a middle ground must be found for each's sanity.

Freedom of Expression and Peaceful Inclusivity

In many of the conversations we are having at the moment around diversity and inclusion, there are often two conflicting rights or claims. The right to freedom of expression and the right to peaceful inclusivity. In the workplace, these issues are increasingly bubbling up. As leaders, we are constantly striving to make team members feel included – like they belong, are safe and valued. At the same time, it is important that people feel that they can express themselves with authenticity and openness.

Freedom of expression is a well-developed area of thought, having been central to political freedom for centuries. Generally speaking, criminal law will restrict this freedom only at the point where an expression is inciting violence. However, organisations in business have typically taken a more stringent position – placing certain limits on expression in the workplace through codes of conduct.

On the one hand, team members should be able to communicate with each other, share their views, and discuss matters of interest without censorship. On the other hand, hurtful expressions don't need to be made and are not useful (or kind). People have a right to feel safe and a reasonable degree of belonging or welcome. It is also not helpful for team cohesion and a harmonious culture to have expressions of speech that are largely personal or identity attacks.

A values-based approach

As we navigate these questions, the point that we must keep in mind is that it is not an either/or equation. There is a way to recognise and respect each of these rights by taking a nuanced and values-based approach to this tension. So, as you find the middle ground between these rights and others, consider the following:

1. **Have a consistent and reasoned approach –** reach an informed view on what you see as reasonable in the workplace, which aligns with your values and organisational culture (and the law) and then explicitly formulate this approach to underpin your next steps

2. **Develop clear comms, training and policies –** once you have done this work, communicate a consistent message to the team and, where useful, introduce training to support them in conflict resolution and building inclusivity. This work extends beyond just how they interact with team members but also customers or clients. How can you support them to live in their values in these interactions? Make it clear in relevant documentation what the expectations are in relation to key issues including expression and inclusivity

3. **Consider the context, forum, and parties –** in any one incident where these two rights are coming into tension, we need to take a highly contextual view around who was involved, why were the expressions made, and if it was reasonable in the circumstances. There are tradeoffs here and context matters.

4. **Offer gentle nudges –** Using signs, leadership behaviours or other material, you can nudge the team towards making kinder and more values-based decisions aligned with the broader culture you're trying to build.

It's important to not fall into *either/or thinking* when it comes to balancing considerations that make competing claims on our

behaviour. Define your principles and reason from them in a way that's clear, consistent, and aiming towards a more values-based workplace.