

October 4, 2006
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
MEDIA CONTACT: Amy Lunday
(443) 287-9960
acl@jhu.edu

A CIVIL GUIDE TO NAVIGATING PRE-ELECTION DISCUSSIONS AT WORK

Eschewing electioneering in the workplace can be a full-time job during campaign season. As Nov. 7 approaches, prying co-workers suddenly want to know for whom you're voting and with which party you are affiliated. Worse, they often assume you share their political views.

Civility expert P.M. Forni, director of the Civility Initiative at The Johns Hopkins University, says that, by and large, it's up to employees to handle these concerns at the cubicle level – most managers won't legislate good manners or dampen debates.

“There is only so much that an organization can do to minimize the negative impact that differences of opinion may have on everyday life at work,” Forni says. “Over-regulation prescribed from the top can add to the very tension that it is meant to ease. In the end, it is up to the individual workers to find the wisdom and deploy the skills to remain professional at a time when ‘we’ versus ‘they’ thinking is more frequent.”

Just as politicians gear up for the campaign trail, Forni suggests that working voters prepare in advance a strategy to duck debates by the water cooler. How do you defend yourself from intrusive questions? How do you voice your opinions in a way that is at the same time forceful and respectful? How can you avoid angry confrontations? Here are a few plan-ahead suggestions from Forni.

1.) Decide whether you are game. Is this the time and place to engage in a discussion that may become heated? Consider the likely consequences. Are they worth your while? Will you end up revealing more than you wish to? Is someone baiting you? Do you have trouble remaining calm and collected in this kind of situation? You can always change the subject, excuse yourself, or even state that you just prefer not to talk about politics right now.

2.) Disclosing your position is not your only option. When asked how you intend to vote or what political beliefs you hold, you can answer, “Why would you want to know that?” Or “You know, I think that the fewer tags we give one another at work the better.”

Or “I’m sure I’ll make up my mind before Election Day.” Or “I am really not comfortable discussing such a delicate matter at work.” The pressure to disclose can come in passive-aggressive form. Instead of asking flat-out for whom you will vote, a co-worker will play an “outing” game: “And how is our favorite conservative today?” Wrapped in tinny friendliness, it is still coercion, and there is no excuse for it in a civil workplace. If you feel you need to respond, try saying, “And who would that be?” and return to your work.

3.) Be fair and respectful. If you do choose to discuss politics, give others the opportunity to state their opinions. Do not interrupt and do not ignore. Do listen to what the other person has to say. Allow the possibility that there may be something good in his or her ideas. Acknowledge the points on which you agree. Do not use demeaning or abusive language. The elections come and go; your job remains (one would hope). You will have to face your co-workers every day long after Election Day.

4.) Do not presume agreement. Taking for granted that the political preferences of your co-workers and acquaintances will coincide with yours is not a good idea. Even friends whose steady voting record you know may on occasion vote for the “other guy.” Do not say to your boss: “So, sir, how are we going to make sure that X is not re-elected?” Maybe your boss *wants* X re-elected. You have the right to express your opinion, but presuming to know the minds of others is rarely endearing.

5.) Keep your poise and be assertive. By expressing yourself with determination and poise you will convey the strength of your convictions. If someone is bullying you, respond politely but firmly. You may say, “This is my opinion and I have given it a lot of thought,” “I would appreciate it if you did not raise your voice,” or “Well, let’s just accept that we have different opinions about this and move on.” The respect you want that person to grant you in future encounters depends on your being assertive today.

As you might expect, Professor Forni is charming and wonderful to talk with, and he can address a broad range of issues connected to civility for any story on the subject. He is also the author of *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-five Rules of Considerate Conduct* (St. Martin's Press, March 2002). To speak with Forni, contact Amy Lunday at 443-287-9960 or acl@jhu.edu.

###

Johns Hopkins University news releases can be found on the World Wide Web at http://www.jhu.edu/news_info/news
Information on automatic E-mail delivery of science and medical news releases is available at the same address.