



Three Ways to Navigate Political Divides at Work

Updated 07 October 2020

Even before Covid-19 many of us were divided - if not physically, certainly politically. We're spending less time with family members who differ from us on the political spectrum. And research shows that our friendships, dating preferences, health choices, business decisions, and much more are informed by where we fall on the political spectrum.

Dr. Jay Van Bavel, an associate professor in Psychology at New York University, studies these patterns. In his recent talk with The Conference Board's Inclusion Councils, he explained that our social division around politics precedes any current administration and is likely to continue. As Inclusion leaders see the impacts of these divides within organizations and seek ways to manage them, Van Bavel offers a focused, research-informed tool kit with three components important to addressing political polarization in the workplace:

1. **Cool down the rhetoric:** Van Bavel explains that social media rewards our moral outrage. The stronger our language, the more likely our message is to be liked and reshared. But as our message cascades out, it reverberates primarily among those who share our beliefs (see more on this [here](#)). Our passionate moral positions don't reach those with whom we differ, and they don't lead to conversation or change. If we want to engage across difference, we need to find ways to help members of our organization temper language and find ways to hear one another other. This requires organizations to develop an active listening culture and related skills, such as framing issues in the language of the person with a differing perspective and recognizing the values that person holds.
2. **Debunk stereotypes:** Our media and social media tend to emphasize extremes. Even "hate reads" get clicks, so there's an incentive to show stereotypes. This focus, though,

tends to skew our understanding of those with whom we differ. Van Bavel's research indicates that the more media with which we engage, the more wrong we tend to be about the other side (see more on this [here](#)). But when we are presented with a more accurate picture of those with different political beliefs from our own, we are challenged to question our assumptions and we become less hostile. The message is that if we seek to help employees work across divides, we need to help them focus on facts, not stereotypes. Organizations need to institutionalize the practices of questioning assumptions and checking facts so it becomes normal.

- 3. Create common goals:** Human history has clearly shown that competition reduces empathy, Van Bavel explains. Whether one considers the history of colonialism and imperialism, our multitude of wars, or even our earliest civilizations, it's clear that as we identify with one group our trust and commitment is directed toward this in-group. And we see out-groups as opponents. To create empathy across polarities, organizations need to tap into the positive elements of our human affinity for groups. We can do this by creating groups that include people with different backgrounds and beliefs who are tasked with working toward a common goal, particularly when hierarchies are downplayed (see more on this [here](#)). This concept is reinforced in [INdivisible](#) where Alison Maitland and I discuss common cause – involving shared power, participation, support, and shared purpose – as a core driver of inclusion. Van Bavel's research is a powerful match with our understanding that diverse teams working in an inclusive environment can be more productive and innovative.

As Inclusion leaders, we do not have the power to resolve the political polarization that is a current reality in the US and many countries around the world. But we can help employees in our organizations work across their differences with a commitment to measured, fact-based conversation and an active focus on what binds us, rather than divides.

AUTHORS



Rebekah Steele

**Program Director,
Opportunity & Access
Strategists Council I;
Opportunity & Access
Innovators Council**

The Conference Board

**Senior Fellow, Human
Capital**

The Conference Board

The Conference Board is the Member-driven think tank that delivers *Trusted Insights for What's Ahead*[®]. Founded in 1916, we are a nonpartisan, not-for-profit entity holding 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status in the United States.

© 2026 The Conference Board, Inc.