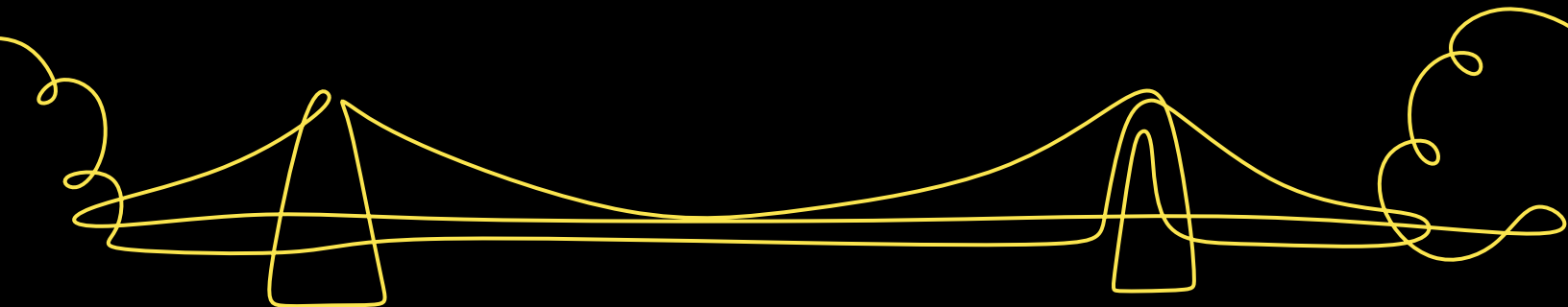


**civic
alliance**

politics and polarization in the workplace

an employer guide to bridge building



polarization in the workplace

the challenge:

Our society functions most effectively when we come to the table informed, willing to listen, and open to collaboration. But as we know, polarization in the United States — particularly political polarization — threatens our social fabric.

Ahead of the 2020 Presidential election, 80% of registered voters in both camps said their differences with the other side were about core American values. Further, 30% of Americans see political polarization as a top national issue, with 62% calling for active measures to address it.

What's more, we're seeing the effects of political polarization permeate the workplace. According to a January 2024 study by Polarization Research Lab¹:



Polarization can lead to avoidance behaviors within teams.

25% of Americans shared that they avoid colleagues due to differing political views.



Polarization risks belonging.

One-third of employees choose not to express their true beliefs at work because they know a colleague disagrees with them.



Polarization can threaten job retention and satisfaction.

13% of employees are likely to look for another job due to political disagreement.

Polarization has a clear and present cost for business.

The Civic Alliance conducted numerous interviews with member companies and experts in the field to better understand the effects of polarization on the workplace. Feedback from Fortune 500 companies highlighted several negative impacts, including deterioration of employee mental health, concerns around the safety of employees and customers, instances of employee isolation and exclusion, and an overall threat to brand reputation. In severe cases, polarization has led to workplace unrest, employee walkouts, and even customer boycotts.

the opportunity:

While there is real cause for concern, there is also a significant opportunity that workplaces can leverage. By encouraging respectful dialogue, understanding, and collaboration, employers can not only help mitigate polarization, but can also unlock a host of business benefits and competitive advantages:

- Improve employee retention and satisfaction
- Set workplace behavioral norms that value and reward communication, collaboration, and innovation that lead to improved organizational productivity and performance.
- Equip employees with tools to transform tough conversations with colleagues, clients, customers, and partners into opportunities for deeper and more valuable relationships.

Employees want business to be proactive

The workplace is one of the few spaces where people of differing opinions collaborate daily toward a common goal. And, they agree they want their employers to be a part of the solution:



Americans trust their employer.

In fact, a record **76%** of Americans trust their employer to do what's right.



Employees want their employer to take action.

Nearly **7 in 10** U.S. adults say companies can help increase civility and strengthen the social fabric by taking steps to promote consensus and cooperation.



Younger employees care about workplace culture.

Among Gen Z, which constitutes about 20% of the U.S. workforce, **93%** consider a sense of belonging at work to be important, yet polarization poses a threat to that sense of belonging.

¹ Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes and Sean Westwood. (2024). America's Political Pulse. <https://polarizationresearchlab.org/americas-political-pulse/>.

the solution

As the United States embarks upon a deeply divisive presidential election season, the business community has an opportunity to reduce the internal impact of polarization. By actively engaging in bridge-building initiatives, leading by example, and partnering with nonpartisan organizations, your company can motivate and empower your employees to choose understanding over judgment. In the process, you can strengthen both your company's culture and reinforce our democratic system.

With the help of this guide, Civic Alliance member companies will have an effective strategy to:



Promote understanding by sharing nonpartisan civic education resources that establish shared foundational knowledge of how our government works and our civic responsibilities.



Equip employees with conflict resolution and empathy-building tools, which will help them navigate differences constructively.



Encourage respectful communication that promotes open dialogue and constructive expression of diverse viewpoints.



Connect with nonpartisan organizations that are experts in the field to leverage tools and coaching that have a track record of navigating complex social issues effectively.

civic education

Understanding the functions and structure of American government is crucial to building trust in it — particularly during the current election cycle. This knowledge serves as a key tool to guide productive conversations based on facts and can lead to more meaningful discussions among individuals.

The ABCs of government

Civic education lays the foundation for active and informed civic participation. It's important your employees and audiences understand the different branches of government and the duties and powers of those elected to office, so that they can confidently cast their ballot this election season.

You can find a detailed glossary of all branches of government and the roles and responsibilities of elected offices on pgs. 17–22 in our [2024 Elections Toolkit](#).

DOWNLOAD HERE



GLOSSARY OF ELECTED OFFICES

» The ABCs of State and Local Government

Civic education lays the foundation for strong and confident civic participation. It's important your employees and audiences understand the different branches of government and the roles and responsibilities that elected officials hold so that they can confidently cast a ballot this election season.

Below is a breakdown of what happens at all levels of government, what elected offices at those levels are responsible for, and issues that voters can connect with to further drive home the need for their participation and understanding.

» Government 101

Throughout the United States, whether at the federal or state level, the government is operated by a complex system of checks and balances to ensure all people are represented and have a say in how our country is being run. The federal and all state governments follow the same model and consist of [three branches](#):



Executive: Headed by the President or a state governor (who is directly elected by the people; other leaders elected in this branch can include the lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, and auditors and commissioners).



Legislative: Made up of elected representatives who consider state matters brought forth by the governor or other lawmakers as legislation. This body also approves state budgets and tax legislation. All legislatures are made up of two chambers, the smaller chamber is the House of Representatives or the State Assembly, or the Senate or the State Senate.

How to contact your representatives

Voting for your preferred candidates is only part of the equation. After the election and the elected officials are in office, we also have a valuable opportunity to contact our representatives to express our views on issues we care about.

Engaging with our elected representatives is a fundamental right and a powerful way to make sure our voices are heard. Constituents can express their views and connect with their representatives through phone calls, letters, or emails.

To help your employees with this process, we've developed [sample templates](#) to help them voice their concerns or support to their elected officials. The templates can be adapted and customized to express any position on a wide range of issues. Your employees can find their local, state, and federal representatives' contact information by using [US.gov's online database](#).

DOWNLOAD HERE



contacting your representative:

The sample templates below can be personalized for any author and can be sent as either an email or a mailed letter. The left-hand column is a guide for the format, and the right is the example text. Find your local, state, and federal representatives' contact information [here](#).

Note: Consider sending a written letter over email. Emails from constituents are mixed in with emails from fellow lawmakers and staff members and are can easily be overlooked or disregarded. Written letters get more attention and have more impact.

LETTER TEMPLATE

Return Address Include your personal address	Your Name Address City, State, Zip Code
Date	Insert Date Drafted
Legislator's Address Include "The Honorable" for U.S. Senators or Representatives	The Honorable [insert first and last name] Address City, State, Zip Code
Salutation	Dear Senator/Representative/Mayor/Mr./Mrs./Miss [insert last name],
Introduction	

encourage respectful communication

Finding the right thing to say can be challenging, especially when navigating the complexities of engaging in political conversations in a work environment, which requires a delicate balance of sincerity and diplomacy. The language we choose, values we prioritize, and respect we demonstrate when navigating sensitive discussions guide (and can even reshape) the collective tone and culture within an organization.

Furthermore, when workplaces prioritize genuine and respectful conversations, they foster diversity of thought and collaboration. In a time when the political divide seems insurmountable, it's important to remember that our democracy thrives on varied voices and contributions. The ability of your company's leadership to engage in constructive conversations, welcome diverse perspectives, and promote a culture of understanding can serve to shape a positive and cohesive workplace.

Best Practices for Leaders Navigating Sensitive Conversations

The recommendations below are grounded in the principles of behavioral science from [Disagreeing Better](#), an organization led by experts at Harvard University. These research-backed strategies can empower your company to turn any interaction into a bridge-building opportunity.

The recommendations are organized into four activities:

- ✓ Address and correct "false polarization."
- ✓ Train employees in "conversational receptiveness."
- ✓ Encourage casual engagement across groups.
- ✓ Reinforce new skills by incorporating them as a regular practice

Address and correct "false polarization"

Extensive [research](#) has identified that people tend to hold several false beliefs or "misperceptions" about those who disagree with them on important political or social topics. For example, members of opposing groups frequently believe that the other side is more extreme or uniform in their beliefs than they actually are. This set of inaccurate beliefs is often called "false polarization."

These misunderstandings can lead people to be reluctant to interact with or read information from those they disagree with, anticipating a more emotionally challenging experience than it turns out to be, or expecting arguments from the other side to be less cogent. Such avoidance can fuel a cycle of mistrust and disengagement that further perpetuates the stereotypes and undermines workplace relationships.

Managers play an important role in correcting these misperceptions (through information campaigns or training). Proactively addressing false polarization is a key step to making employees more willing to engage in productive and respectful dialogue across lines of disagreement.

[Studies](#) suggest that when people understand that differences in opinion are usually less extreme than they believed, they become more open to interacting with people with opposing viewpoints. These interactions, in turn, help individuals gain mutual understanding and uncover shared values, helping to bridge divides and strengthen relationships.

Train employees in “conversational receptiveness”

Conversational receptiveness is a communication style that involves using particular words and phrases to navigate disagreements effectively. By training employees in this approach, conflicts are less likely to escalate, and people become more inclined to engage in challenging conversations with each other in the future. The key components of conversational receptiveness can be summarized with the acronym H.E.A.R.:

H **Hedge** your claims. In a disagreement, using qualifiers like “sometimes” or “maybe” help to soften your assertions. Acknowledging room for uncertainty signals humility and a willingness to recognize situations when the opposing viewpoint might be valid.

E **Emphasize** agreement. Before jumping in with evidence to support your own perspective, point out an area of agreement: “We both want a workplace where different people can feel that they belong.” This doesn’t mean compromising; it simply means recognizing that there are many facets to any debate.

A **Acknowledge** other perspectives. Demonstrate active listening with phrases like “I understand that you believe that...” or “You told me that...” and then actually restate what your counterpart said. This approach behaviorally demonstrates to your partner that you heard their point.

R **Reframe** to the positive. Try to avoid contradictory words such as “no,” “can’t,” and “don’t” and instead use more positive framing (“yes,” “can,” “do”). Reframing the same idea in positive terms encourages a similarly constructive response from your discussion partner, leading to an overall more positive exchange.

Encourage casual engagement across groups

Consider hosting classic team-building activities or community service days that create relaxed environments where employees can learn about one another’s backgrounds and experiences. In fact, research has shown that opposing parties collaborating casually decreases animosity and cultivates mutual understanding.

Don’t know where to start? The Cooperation Game is a fun, interactive online quiz that has been tested and shown to decrease partisan divisiveness.

Reinforce new skills by incorporating them as a regular practice

Demonstrate your commitment to bridge-building by making it a habit. Include brief refresher trainings or exercises during team meetings. Reminders and reinforcements ensure that employees incorporate the new ideas and behaviors into their daily interactions, especially as their focus shifts and new projects occupy their attention. Additionally, it communicates to employees that your company values constructive conflict management and is committed to investing resources and time toward encouraging it.

BEST PRACTICE

Incorporating conversational receptiveness training alongside other valuable communication skills, such as effectively expressing curiosity or using storytelling to share lived experiences, enhances overall communication effectiveness. These skills of preventing and/or de-escalating conflict are invaluable not just professionally, but also personally.

Employee communication tips

Equipping employees with the skills to engage in difficult topics with respect and compassion enables them to have more authentic and less destructive conversations with the very people they spend the majority of their days with. It's worth noting that the skills for bridging conversations across the most challenging topics can easily be translated to more effective discussions of situational workplace matters, such as plans for a complex project, staffing and budgeting decisions, or controversial workplace policies.

Here are five simple skills taught by [Moral Courage College](#), the creators of Moral Courage® — a science-backed skill set that fosters trust and empathy, equipping people to explore differences in unifying ways:

1 Breathe. Deeply.

Before entering a conversation that could go sideways, give your brain an ample dose of oxygen. Deep breathing helps your brain transition from the highly emotional primal region located in the back of your head, to the more evolved cognitive area that balances thought and emotion, in the front of your head. Just a few deep breaths can clear your mind and prevent your primal brain — your ego — from tricking you into overreacting.

2 Don't merely seek common ground. Create it.

Shared ground builds trust. Rather than leaving it to chance that you'll "find" common ground, proactively create it.

Consider starting the conversation like so: "I know that we disagree about this issue. I also know that you're about so much more than this single issue. Which means I have no right to judge you based on this disagreement. Can we agree to remember we're both more than this disagreement?"

You've just created a compassionate and common rule of engagement, which serves as shared ground.

3 Before making statements about what you believe, ask a sincere question about what the other party believes.

A couple of open-ended questions to start with could be:

- "Can you help me understand what I'm missing about where you're coming from?"
- "Did any particular experience lead you to feel this way about the issue?"

4 Listen to learn, not to win.

The tell-tale sign that you're listening to win: You want to turn the discussion into a debate. ("What about this? What about that?")

The tell-tale sign that you're listening to learn: You say, "Thank you, because..." (For example, "Thank you, because I couldn't have thought of that on my own"). Be specific about what you're learning and why you're grateful for it. It proves you've been listening.

5 Ask another question by starting with three simple words:

"Tell me more..." Research shows that this phrase breaks open an otherwise guarded discussion because it is both inviting and unassuming. When used after asking a question and hearing a response, it shows your ongoing interest in the other person's perspective, solidifying trust.

pro-tip

You don't have to use all five of these skills. Start with one and practice it enough to make it a habit. That way, it will come effortlessly in times of high emotion. Learn better visually? Watch Moral Courage College's 8-minute video [here](#).



Sample employee email

Below, you can find a sample email to help guide your leaders and managers as they broach sensitive topics, such as elections and political polarization, with their teams. This template serves as a starting point, offering guidance on how to have respectful conversations in the workplace that encourage open dialogue and mutual respect.



Subject: Nurturing Unity: A Gentle Reminder for Respectful Conversations During Election Season

Dear [company name] team,

As we are in the midst of the 2024 election season, we want to take a moment to reinforce our commitment to cultivating a workplace culture that values diversity of thought, encourages open dialogue, practices empathy, and supports our team to be educated voters and participants in our democracy. In times like these when political tension is high, our actions and words can either contribute to division or promote understanding. At [company name], we always choose the latter.

To maintain a supportive and inclusive environment, we encourage and ask that all team members practice empathy. We each come from varied backgrounds, holding a wide range of perspectives and beliefs, and it's essential to approach each conversation with respect. The strength of our company, and our democracy, lies in our ability to engage in civil discourse — a respectful and constructive exchange of ideas that promotes understanding.

Here are five conversation tips for navigating contentious or sensitive discussions, both in and outside the workplace:

- 1. Embrace respectful disagreement:** Chances are you won't always agree with the people around you, and that's okay. When disagreements do arise, remember to voice your views considerately. Differing viewpoints contribute to a robust and innovative workplace and society.
- 2. Listen to understand:** Consider slowing down and listening to understand the other person's perspective, rather than immediately responding or interrupting them to make your point. This can help avoid the blame game, and lead to a deeper understanding of the other person.
- 3. Avoid stereotypes:** Stereotypes tend to oversimplify and misrepresent people, leading to counterproductive and often harmful perceptions. Rather than rely on generalizations, we encourage you to see each other as unique individuals with diverse perspectives and life experiences.
- 4. Use "I" Statements:** Beginning statements with "I" allows you to express your own personal opinions rather than making assumptions about others. This promotes individual responsibility for one's perspective.
- 5. Know when to hit pause:** If things become too heated, you can always disengage from a conversation and return once emotions have settled.

Thank you for your commitment to contributing to a respectful and inclusive work environment.

Respectfully,

[Your name]
[Your position]



pro-tip

Share nonpartisan organizations that your employees can engage with to support respectful communication. You can find a comprehensive list below. Consider including a few of these organizations in communications to your employees.

organizations to know

Want to go deeper? We've compiled a list of nonpartisan organizations that are experts in the field. Consider partnering with organizations like these to develop and host trainings, create customized content for your employees, and serve as advisors as you navigate difficult situations.



AllSides: AllSides presents users with news from multiple perspectives and resources to encourage media literacy and a more nuanced understanding of issues to combat polarization. The website also features a media bias rating to show users how biased sources can mislead and manipulate readers.

- ☐ AllSides partners with companies to host their own AllSides Talk event that brings together people across the political divide to discuss their views and promote understanding.

To learn more, contact AllSides [here](#).



Braver Angels: Specializing in structured dialogues and workshops, Braver Angels provides a platform for individuals with differing political perspectives to engage in meaningful conversations and bridge the political divide. With a focus on civic discourse, Braver Angels offers resources and programs designed to enhance understanding and cooperation in diverse communities, thus strengthening the fabric of civic engagement and promoting a more united and understanding society.

- ☐ Braver Angels hosts a variety of workshops that allow individuals to learn skills for communication and listening, and can partner with you to host a customized workshop for your company.

To learn more, contact Braver Angels [here](#).



Constructive Dialogue Institute: The Constructive Dialogue Institute is dedicated to promoting effective communication and collaboration in the workplace. Offering tailored solutions, the Institute equips organizations with the tools and strategies necessary to cultivate a positive and open dialogue environment.

- ☐ Constructive Dialogue Institute partners with companies to implement their research-based tools to improve corporate climate, foster belonging, and facilitate constructive conversations around challenging topics.

To learn more, contact Constructive Dialogue Institute [here](#).



Disagreeing Better: Disagreeing Better, founded by Harvard Professor Julia Minson, specializes in building communication skills that are crucial for navigating workplace disagreements. Disagreeing Better is dedicated to equipping individuals with strategies that foster constructive dialogue, promote a culture of respectful disagreement, and find common ground.

- ☐ Disagreeing Better offers in-person and virtual workshops, executive coaching, and targeted assessments to better understand organizational challenges surrounding polarization.

To learn more, contact Disagreeing Better [here](#).



The Flip Side: The Flip Side is on a mission to help bridge the gap between liberals and conservatives. The news outlet is a one-stop shop for smart, concise summaries of political analysis from both conservative and liberal media, with the goal of becoming a trusted and nonpartisan news source for liberals, moderates, independents, conservatives, and even the apolitical

☐ Subscribe to get the best of both sides [here](#).



Interfaith America: Interfaith America equips leaders and institutions to unlock the potential of America's religious and ideological diversity. The organization contributes to the enrichment of civil discourse by breaking down barriers and building bridges of understanding between diverse communities.

☐ Interfaith America offers [corporate consulting](#) and training programs to help companies support employees' religious identities and meet diverse consumer needs. Interfaith also offers a [free set of resources](#) to help employees learn more about faith in their personal and professional lives and how to navigate diversity in a healthy and productive way.

To learn more, contact Megan Johnson at Interfaith America [here](#).



Living Room Conversations: Living Room Conversations strives to mend divides by bringing people together across various spectrums, such as politics, age, gender, race, nationality, and more. Through facilitated conversations, Living Room Conversations helps to build understanding and catalyze positive transformations within communities.

☐ Living Room Conversations offers a [variety of tailored programs](#) depending on a company's needs, from hosted conversations to dialogue consulting and more.

To learn more, contact Living Room Conversations [here](#).



Moral Courage College: With partners from major corporations to small businesses, Moral Courage is on a mission to unify people at work, and beyond. It trains and certifies Moral Courage Mentors: employees who teach their own coworkers the skills to discuss polarizing issues productively. In this way, civic engagement becomes a natural outgrowth of professional development — both the workplace and the public square win.

☐ Moral Courage College offers companies two tracks of services: Developing Trustworthy Leaders and Doing Diversity Without Division.

To learn more, contact Prof. Irshad Manji, Co-founder of Moral Courage College, [here](#).



The News Literacy Project: The News Literacy Project is dedicated to enhancing media literacy and fostering informed civil discourse. After building the essential skills to critically analyze and navigate the complexities of news and information, individuals finish the program empowered to engage in meaningful conversations with empathy and integrity.

☐ The News Literacy Project provides [corporate training sessions](#) to educate employees on the core topics of news literacy, such as understanding news media bias and avoiding election misinformation.

To learn more, contact Alee Quick, Director of Civic Engagement, [here](#).



We would like to thank Professor Julia Minson of Harvard University and Irshad Manji, founder and CEO of Moral Courage College for their expert insight on polarization and bridge building.

The Civic Alliance is America's premier nonpartisan coalition of businesses united by a commitment to our democracy, which we believe depends upon active participation in safe, accessible, and trusted elections. Founded by Democracy Works and the CAA Foundation, the Civic Alliance supports its member companies as they inspire their employees and consumers to engage in civic life and their communities.

Companies join the Civic Alliance by making a nonpartisan pledge to encourage their employees and/or consumers to vote and be civically active. There is no financial requirement to become a member. In exchange for your commitment to civic engagement, we provide member companies with research-backed toolkits and programming to help you develop effective civic initiatives.

The Civic Alliance
was founded by:



The Civic Alliance
is powered by:



**Take the pledge and become
a member at civicalliance.com.**

