

Effectively Leading Teams
Through a Turbulent Year Ahead:

Guidance for People Leaders

March 2024

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As a highly contentious election year, with many polarizing issues already igniting public debate, 2024 stands to be as volatile and divisive as any period in recent memory. No matter the outcome of the elections, and no matter what happens with respect to the issues, it is likely that employees will be deeply affected on a personal level. The impact could resonate throughout your organization.

People leaders have their fingers on the pulse of how employees are doing. Employees look to them for guidance and as role models. And, with responsibility for maintaining business continuity and a healthy team environment, people leaders' relationships with the individuals on their teams and across the organization are especially important.

Starting now, it is crucial that people leaders lay the groundwork for strong teams that can set aside personal issues and beliefs to work together, respectfully, to advance the organization's business priorities. The following guidance will help ensure they are equipped and ready to support and engage with employees through the potentially rocky period ahead. To further gauge your organization's preparedness for what may come, [reference this checklist](#).

Understand the Landscape

People leaders need to understand the issues creating division in society as well as the key milestones that could serve as inflection points throughout the year. The latter may include, but certainly are not limited to, political party conventions, election dates, and high-profile court rulings and divisive geopolitical events. People leaders should make time each morning for a quick scan of the news — from a balance of sources — if that is not already part of their routine.

Be Accessible to the Team

A good manager takes time to regularly meet with team members and gets to know them on a personal level, which makes it easier to spot when one of them is not doing well. **If people leaders are not walking the halls or hosting 1:1 meetings with their teams, now is a good time to adopt these routines** (1:1s are especially helpful for virtual employees who do not benefit from hallway conversations). As they do, they should be sure to let their teams know their “door is always open” and encourage their teams to reach out to them when they have something on their minds or need to talk. And in the course of these discussions, it is important to practice active listening. People leaders should:

- Ask employees how they are doing, not just in the context of work, but overall.
- Avoid multitasking and give employees their undivided attention
- Listen without interrupting.
- Pay attention to body language/non-verbal cues that can reinforce or contradict the employee's verbal response.



Stay Neutral

In interactions with their teams, **it is important for people leaders to remain balanced and do their best to refrain from bringing their own biases into the conversation.** In fact, it is generally best to avoid introducing political and other sensitive topics into team discussions. Sometimes, though, a discussion may naturally turn in this direction, in which case it is important to navigate it thoughtfully. If such topics arise, people leaders should pay attention to the body language of those in the conversation to gauge whether anyone is uncomfortable or offended. People leaders also should not be afraid to ask how people are feeling while the conversation is taking place and then direct the discussion accordingly. One option people leaders have, if a conversation needs to be redirected or ended, is to encourage employees to visit the polls on election day, where their voices can influence the change they wish to see.

Get Familiar With Policies and Helpful Resources

People leaders should designate time to review the organization's corporate values, code of conduct and any specific policies that may be particularly relevant for the year ahead, including the social media policy. People leaders also should encourage their teams to do the same to ensure they understand what is expected of them as employees of the organization. People leaders can [use these worksheets](#) to determine the degree to which the corporate values and code of conduct currently guide their teams' ways of working.

Consider Situations That May Arise

Thinking about potential scenarios — well before they occur — can go a long way in fostering preparedness and an effective response when they do happen. People leaders should consider the specific political and societal issues and decisions that are important to members of their teams, as well as inflection points that may be likely to result in displays of emotion in the workplace. Then they should consider how they would respond. For instance: "What action should I take if ...

- An employee wears clothing bearing a political message or language that may be offensive to others?"
- A political argument erupts in the workplace?"
- An employee threatens a colleague, or a colleague reports feeling threatened?"
- An employee, customer or visitor brings a weapon onto the premises?"

To confirm how to best respond in these or other situations, people leaders should refer to the organization's code of conduct, contact their Human Resources (HR) business partner or follow other established protocols for guidance.

If people leaders observe a discussion about politics or polarizing issues in the workplace, they should remember and reinforce these principles:

- Employees are expected to always treat each other with respect.
- The workplace is a safe space where no one should feel marginalized or harassed.
- One person or point of view should not be allowed to dominate the conversation.
- Attacks, even verbal, on others will not be tolerated.
- Everyone shares responsibility for avoiding conflict and confrontation in the workplace.
- If a conversation does devolve into unproductive or inappropriate territory, people leaders should take action to end it.



Appropriately Address Workplace Issues

If people leaders need to speak with an employee about their behavior, or the behavior of someone else, they should remember to:

- Consult with HR before the conversation, if possible, and determine together whether an HR representative should participate in the discussion.
- Block out distractions, pay attention and document the conversation.
- Seek to understand each person's perspective.
- Respectfully remove themselves from any conversation in which they feel threatened/unsafe.

Respond When the Team Needs Support

If something happens that they know will upset one or more members of their teams — whether it occurs at work or is something reported in the news — people leaders should determine how to address it. They should consider, for instance, whether it is a topic appropriate for a team-wide discussion or better suited for 1:1 check-ins and conversations. If needed, they should reference relevant employee benefits and programs that may be helpful for that moment, including:

- The Employee Assistance Program (EAP), if available, which may offer counseling and other services to employees
- Time-off policies that can offer a needed break in times of stress
- Employee Resource Groups or other support networks that can provide an important source of connection and belonging

In periods of stress and volatility, mental health and well-being become even more essential. People leaders should help their teams prioritize self-care in a way that is appropriate for their needs — and remember to do the same for themselves. Taking the time and space needed to bring one's best self forward sets a powerful example for those they lead.

Seek Additional Support

Since the “Covid era,” people leaders have had to come to terms with the lack of a “playbook” for navigating the many first-of-their-kind issues they have experienced. In the year ahead, more of the same is likely to occur. In addition to following best practices outlined in this document, people leaders can position themselves to effectively manage through what's to come by seeking the input of peers they trust or colleagues in supporting functions, such as HR, Employee Communications, Legal and Labor Relations (if applicable).

Through it all, it is important to remember that the employees on their teams are people first, deserving of respectful, empathetic, values-based leadership that fosters a healthy, collaborative environment in which everyone has the opportunity to do their best work to advance the business, with minimal disruptions despite the tumult that may occur outside the organization's proverbial walls.

FleishmanHillard's Talent + Transformation team delivers business outcomes at the intersection of business and communications strategy. For more than three decades, we have helped industry-leading organizations align their employees behind their most essential business needs, including strategy, culture, transformation, and critical business and functional initiatives.



CHECKLIST:

Maintaining Business Continuity During the 2024 Election Cycle

Considerations for Communications Leaders and Company Executives

The 2024 U.S. presidential election and the many issues polarizing our society have the potential to cause substantial discord and disruption in the weeks and months to come. Employees are likely to interact with people of opposing or differing perspectives in the workplace, creating the potential for conflict. Business leaders and communicators can equip their organizations to weather this divisive period and maintain business continuity by embracing a preparedness mindset today. This checklist poses a series of questions to help identify gaps in your organization's ability to navigate the volatility ahead.

Company Values and Desired Behaviors

- Have we codified values we expect our employees to embrace?
- Do we feel our values are adequate to guide us through this moment in time?
- Have we articulated specific behaviors that will bring our values to life?
- How recently did we establish/update our values/behaviors?
- How frequently do we communicate about our values to employees? Are we due for a communication/reminder about our values today?

Corporate Policies

- Do we have a code of conduct or the following policies?
 - A policy that covers the display of political messages in the workplace?
 - A policy that governs permissible activities using company time, equipment, or software for political or other non-business purposes?
 - A social media policy?
- When was the last time we reviewed/updated the above-referenced code of conduct and policies?
- When was the last time we encouraged or required employees to review them?
- Do we need to make code of conduct and policy communications more of a priority?
- Are there specific updates we should make to our code of conduct and policies before we do that?
- How will we respond if a person behaving badly at a political rally, another event or on social media is identified as one of our employees?

Election-Specific Guidance for Employees and Managers

- Do we have plans to communicate with employees about the need for civility and adherence to our code of conduct and values during this election season?
- Have we developed a clear messaging framework to communicate these and related messages?
- Have we identified an executive spokesperson for this message?
- Do we have plans to equip managers to reinforce this message with their teams?
- Have we encouraged employees to vote to let their voices be heard?
- Do we offer a sufficient degree of flexibility for employees to visit the polls on election day? Is this flexibility available to all of our employees, regardless of their role, location, tenure, etc.?
- What resources and support mechanisms will be available to employees who may experience heightened stress or anxiety due to disruptions?
- Have we considered offering additional wellness programs or mental health resources to support employee well-being during this period?



CHECKLIST:

Maintaining Business Continuity During the 2024 Election Cycle - *continued* Considerations for Communications Leaders and Company Executives

Issues Preparedness

- Do we have a crisis plan or playbook?
- When was the last time we updated our crisis plan or playbook?
- Do we feel confident that all relevant internal stakeholders have the information they need regarding our crisis plan?
- Have we conducted training sessions or tabletop exercises to prepare leaders and communication teams for managing crisis situations and communicating effectively during periods of uncertainty?
- Do we have a plan in place to stay abreast of events/issues that have high potential to cause disruption to our organization?
- Have we established an approach for monitoring and responding via social/traditional media should an issue arise?
- Do we have a plan for communicating with external stakeholders, such as clients, customers, investors and business partners, about any potential disruptions to our operations or services?
- Do our managers/employees know how to respond to altercations/violence in the workplace?
- Do we have an active shooter protocol?
- Are our employees aware of/have they been trained on this protocol?
- Do site leads/teams know in what instances they should engage Corporate Security/law enforcement?
- Do they know our process for doing this?
- Do we have a process for communicating with the organization if an incident occurs, such as a protest, strike or security threat?
- Do we have pre-approved messaging templates to address these or other scenarios?
- How will we evaluate the effectiveness of our communication strategies?
- Are we prepared to adjust our approach if needed?

Activism Against Our Organization

- Have we considered different scenarios that may lead to employee activism?
- Do we have plans for addressing these scenarios/this activism?
- Do we support candidates or certain issues to which employees may object?
- Are we prepared to respond if employees take to social channels to call us out over this support?
- How will we respond if employees stage a demonstration or walk-out over this support?
- Have we considered the aspects of our business to which candidates may object?
- How will we respond if a candidate calls us out over this aspect of our operations?
- How will we respond if a demonstration takes place on or near our premises?
- Are we equipped to have employees work from home if such a demonstration occurs?
- Are we equipped to notify all of our employees in the event of a demonstration or an emergency situation?



CHECKLIST:

Maintaining Business Continuity During the 2024 Election Cycle - *continued*

Considerations for Communications Leaders and Company Executives

Location-Specific Considerations

- Have we conducted a thorough risk assessment to identify sites/locations that may be vulnerable to disruption as a result of the political climate or other divisive issues?
- Do we have locations where a known divide exists?
- Do we know what's behind that divide?
- What are we doing to build community and improve culture there?
- What factors have potential to push that location to a tipping point? How are we staying abreast of these issues and events?
- If this happens, what scenarios may occur?
- What plans have we considered to address these scenarios?

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Fostering a Values-Based Team

Team Exercise for People Leaders: [Worksheet 1](#)

To foster a healthy team culture that is better positioned to weather the tumult of the year ahead, designate time in a team meeting to complete this worksheet collaboratively with your team. Doing so will offer a better understanding of the values-related strengths your team can harness if the political and societal disruptions of 2024 begin to affect their ways of working — and the potential weaknesses the team needs to focus on shoring up today, before disruption occurs.

How do our values show up on this team? What do we do well in terms of living our values?

1

Why do you think this is?

2

Where do we have opportunities to improve the way we live our values?

3

Why do you think this is?

4

What questions do you have about our code of conduct and how it applies to our team?

5

What concerns do you have about how we interact on this team?

6

What should our top priorities be for improving how we live our values?

7

What gives you hope that our team is ready for whatever comes our way?

8



Fostering a Values-Based Team

Team Exercise for People Leaders: [Worksheet 2](#)

After completing Worksheet 1 in collaboration with your team, complete this worksheet to help synthesize what you've heard and identify a path forward.

What are the three most positive things our team is doing?

1

What are the three most concerning areas needing improvement?

2

What actions do we need to take to improve?

3

What support/resources do we need?

4

How will we know we are successful?

5

What is my plan to demonstrate to the team that we are working to address their concerns?

6

