



Water cooler wars

What—if any—policies should credit unions have in place to temper debates among staff as the political landscape becomes increasingly polarized?

By Alexandra Samur

Many Canadians happily bid adieu to 2016, given the deaths, disasters and divisiveness that characterized so much of public discourse through the year. And while one can't clearly predict what 2017 will bring, the fact that Canadians will face six important elections—leadership races for the federal Conservative and New Democratic parties as well as the Alberta Liberals and Bloc Québécois, together with provincial

that embracing respectful dialogue is the best approach for navigating discussions that come up at work, whether in the office or on social media. Particularly in the wake of President Donald Trump's inauguration, employees who seek to make sense of the increasingly polarized political climate may need to do a delicate dance of diplomacy, lest political chatter spark a brushfire at the office. "It all starts with trust and respect. Sometimes, if you don't agree with someone, you can just keep quiet about your own

whether the policy makes specific mention of political discussions, it may still provide employees with broad guidance around acceptable behaviour at work, whatever the topic.

Baldev Gill, COO and CFO at Vancouver-based Human Resources Management Association, agrees that staff should have guidelines. "Make it clear to your employees what is considered acceptable and what is not, whether it's a policy, guideline or rule," says Gill. A lack of limits on what is said can lead to alienation among coworkers, which in turn could affect productivity, he warns.

At Your Credit Union, which has six branches located in and around Ottawa, a policy governing political discussions has not been seen to be necessary. "I'm not sure that such a policy or a framework would be required in a workplace. I've been

doing this for 20-plus years and I've never had an issue with topics of discussion in the workplace," Lalonde says.

Even in the most harmonious workplaces, Gill sees a role for leadership to play in helping preserve a genial environment. "In the absence of a policy, I would encourage folks to discuss such topics on their breaks or after hours

and keep the conversation civil."

As for sounding off on social media, Gills suggests employees pause and think before they tweet, noting, "Donald Trump is very quick on his Twitter account to say certain things, when perhaps it hasn't been fully reasoned." While Trump may get away with such an approach, the average employee can't.

And for those who prefer to keep politics out of business: next time your activist co-worker goes on a tirade about Prime Minister Justin Trudeau or Trump, just put on your headphones. As the young rabbit Thumper wisely said in Walt Disney's *Bambi*, "If you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all." ■

elections in British Columbia and Nova Scotia—it is a good bet that debate will run rampant around the workplace water cooler through the year. But to what extent do employers need to police their employees' political parley on the job?

It's clear that banning all political banter—whether over pipelines, pot or Parliament—is unrealistic, especially in a place like Ottawa. "For us, talking politics is a forever hobby here in Ottawa—it happens all the time," says Joel Lalonde, CEO at **Your Credit Union** (11,000 members, \$244 million in assets). "You can't assume that other people think or share the same values that you do," Lalonde says.

In fact, human resources experts agree

opinion to keep the peace," says Lalonde.

That said, rich workplace discussions may serve to enhance job satisfaction. "Good dialogue helps contribute to employee engagement," says Julie Mitchell, executive vice-president of human resources at **FirstOntario Credit Union** (108,600 members, \$3.5 billion in assets). "Credit unions are very focused on relationships with both our employees and our members so it's really prudent of us to ensure that our work environments are conducive to building and maintaining these relationships."

Mitchell suggests that one way to help ensure workplace harmony is by adopting a Respectful Workplace Policy. Regardless of

