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When Politics Gets Poisonous: Office-Decorum Consultant Sees Business Surge Since Trump's Election



By [Ed Sealover](#) – Reporter, Denver Business Journal
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It's not just in Washington where civil discourse is breaking down. Water-cooler political discussions at workplaces have gotten so caustic that more companies are calling in outside consultants to deal with it, one Colorado-based organizational-diversity expert said.

Jody Alyn, a Colorado Springs-based consultant, said she has seen a “surge” in businesses asking her to help them deal with worsening office atmospheres since the 2016 election of President [Donald Trump](#).



Most are taking action because they begin to hear complaints and don't want tension to escalate; one company called in Alyn only after its CEO had laid down a ground rule of "no physical violence" because things had gotten so bad, she said.

Incivility, particularly based around political disagreements, has been a workplace factor for decades, but it's really reached a new apex in the past 18 months, she said.

A recent [American Psychological Association](#) survey found that 26 percent of workers reported feeling stressed because of a water-cooler political conversation — a jump of 10 percentage points from before the 2016 election.

Alyn, who has worked in organizational diversity for 20 years, said the increasingly boundless discourse coming out of Washington, D.C., seems to have given workers the belief that now it's OK to say things that they used to censor themselves from uttering in their offices.

For example, some workers now may openly question whether employees of certain religions should be allowed at a company, or criticize anyone who does not speak English as a first language, Alyn said.

And while those are actions seen most often from Trump supporters, the inappropriate dialogue cuts both ways. Some workers have taken to referring to co-workers as white supremacists when they offer opinions that are far from deserving of such a label, and some college professors are coming under increasing criticism for not allowing opinions different from theirs on issues like immigration, she said.

“I’ve never seen people be so bold in their discourse,” Alyn said. “Dogma on the left and dogma on the right is still dogma. And I see both sides participating in that.”

The consequences of allowing such escalation of tension go beyond an on-the-edge workplace, said Alyn, who asked several clients to discuss their situation for this story but found that none wanted their businesses associated with this kind of behavior. Workers who don’t feel comfortable in their professional setting could spend less time in the office, put less effort into their jobs or just leave, meaning companies with such atmospheres become less productive.

While some employers simply have banned any political conversation at the office, Alyn does not advise such a step. Closing off conversation on one subject tends to shut down all of the interaction that is needed to make workplaces flourish with a staff that is willing to work together.

But looking away from the problem won’t help either, she added.

“So many times we want to avoid conflict. It’s really important not to ignore what’s going on,” Alyn said. “If you as an employer are seeing and hearing these things and not dealing with it, then you as an employer can be as complicit as the people who are acting out.”