



## Liz on Leadership

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### Politics in the Workplace: Healthy Debate or Toxic Stew?

There's just no getting around it. It seems wherever you turn these days, deep political and socio-economic churn are at the forefront of conversation. Across social media platforms, in social settings, and even in the workplace, heated political discussion has become the norm. The intensity is palpable.

And that's something of a double-edged sword. On one hand, deeply-held personal conviction, heightened awareness, and the willingness to engage in open debate are a powerful combination—one that can lead to the broadening of perspectives and a meeting of minds. It can be a catalyst for the collaborative development of potent solutions to profound challenges. And indeed, I encourage my clients to actively engage their organizations in dialogue and debate, to communicate openly and dig deep to uncover concerns and ideas that might otherwise remain underground.

On the other hand, in today's highly charged environment, healthy debate and robust discussion can quickly turn into a toxic stew. The conversation can get too intense and the tone too emotionally charged to allow for productive conversation. As a result, collaborations can become strained and important relationships may suffer lasting damage.

So how is a leader to keep today's political heat from burning up the workplace? Here are three things you can do right away:

**Make it clear: Thoughtful discussion is the rule.** It should go without saying (but say it anyway) that all forms of workplace discussion are to be respectful and professional. Make it patently clear that your employees are to be courteous and thoughtful in every interaction—with one another, with customers, clients and business partners... across the board. Sometimes you simply have to state (and restate) the obvious.

**Model the behavior you are looking for.** If you tell your employees that respect

is the rule—but then proceed to fiercely “have it out” with a colleague or publicly criticize a more junior employee—your words will quickly be dismissed as hypocrisy. Never lose sight of the fact that, as a leader, you set the bar, and people will be following your actions closely. Your actions set the stage for acceptable behavior across the organization.

**Hold people to account.** If you’ve got a team member who mistreats others—speaking disrespectfully, baiting, berating or bulldozing—you’ve got to put a stop to it at once. The fact is, your team can’t operate efficiently or effectively without clear and trustworthy parameters for safe, productive dialogue and debate.

It’s a simple formula: Create the right environment for productive dialogue, stand out as an exemplar of the behavior you’re expecting, and tackle poor behavior head-on. These three steps are the key to a healthy workplace—one in which your employees speak openly, listen respectfully and work together to create stellar results.

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### *Did you miss our last newsletter?*

#### **Are You Sowing Seeds in the Wrong Yard?**

A funny thing happened in my backyard last week. I was at my desk, reviewing recent conversations to be featured in my book, *Slow Down to Speed Up*. I was “in the zone” and paying little attention to external distractions. Yet the sound of leaf blowers and lawn mowers just outside my window drew me out of my reverie. I looked out the window and there they were—two unfamiliar men working in my yard, blowing away the remnant Autumn leaves and sailing across the lawn on a seeder.

Okay, so maybe that doesn’t sound all that funny. But consider this. I moved into this house just a couple of months ago, in the dead of winter, and I haven’t yet hired anyone to work on the lawn.

That being so, I went out to investigate. When I approached the lawn guys, they were a little confused. So they took out the work order and we quickly solved the mystery. As it turns out, the lawn company had no idea that the former homeowner had moved. So, the owner simply sent his employees to begin annual lawn service without having contacted his customer to confirm service for the year—or to inform him that they’d be coming to the house.

The result? Time and money wasted, and a lost opportunity to continue the relationship with a long-term customer at his new home.

Oversights like this (literally sowing seeds in the wrong yard) can have major implications for companies large and small. Yet the solution costs nothing but a bit of time and attention. As I tell my ever-busy executive clients: **Slow down.** Pause before you act. Take time to connect with the people who matter—your customers, employees, business partners, investors and other key stakeholders. Make sure you haven’t missed important developments: changes in need, priority, capacity or the external environment. Adjust to changing conditions.

By pausing before you act, you position yourself and your organization to leverage the opportunities in a changing landscape, while avoiding errors and oversights that cost time, capital, credibility and repute.

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## About Dr. Liz

Dr. Liz Bywater has been called a one-of-a-kind leadership expert. Working at the intersection of business and psychology, she brings together pragmatic experience, advising top executives across the Fortune 500, with an advanced degree in Psychology and a dynamic personal style to inspire, engage and counsel her clients.

For more than a decade, top global organizations have requested Liz's help in resolving issues such as creating extraordinary client relationships, increasing market persuasion, and driving productive collaborations in an increasingly complex world.

Liz advises senior leaders at some of the world's most successful companies, including Johnson & Johnson, Nike, Thomson Reuters, Bristol-Myers Squibb, AmerisourceBergen and more. She uses her expertise in human behavior to drive commercial success. She helps her clients propel innovation, exert influence and lead their organizations through change.

A thought leader in organizational excellence, Liz provides expert commentary for such publications as the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Fast Company and USA Today. She is on the editorial advisory board for **Life Science Leader** magazine and is a featured expert on such radio broadcasts as CBS Philadelphia's **Philadelphia Agenda** with Brad Segall and **Woman of the Week** with Marilyn Russell.

Liz earned her PhD in Psychology at the Derner Institute for Advanced Psychological Studies at Adelphi University. Her undergraduate degree is from Cornell University, where she graduated Phi Beta Kappa and Cum Laude. She is a longstanding member of the American Psychological Association and the Society for the Advancement of Consulting. She lives in scenic Bucks County, PA, with her husband and two teenage children. Stay tuned for Liz's forthcoming book, **Slow Down to Speed Up!** (Business Expert Press, Fall 2017).

Liz Bywater, PhD | Bywater Consulting Group | 215.805.5551 | [liz@bywaterconsultinggroup.com](mailto:liz@bywaterconsultinggroup.com)  
[www.bywaterconsultinggroup.com](http://www.bywaterconsultinggroup.com)

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Liz Bywater, PhD | Bywater Consulting Group, 1669 Edgewood Road, Yardley, PA 19067  
[www.bywaterconsultinggroup.com](http://www.bywaterconsultinggroup.com)

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