

Detroit Free Press

CAROL CAIN

Michigan business leaders working to bring kindness, civility to the workplace

Carol Cain Free Press Business Columnist

Published 6:07 a.m. ET Nov. 12, 2022 | Updated 8:35 a.m. ET Nov. 12, 2022

Delta Dental's Margaret Trimer is laser-focused on civility in the workplace as something critical during these too often incendiary times — not only to the health and well-being of the company's employees but its bottom line, as well.

She's also been involved with programs and events in Michigan and other states she works in to help other firms confront contentious issues and learn from one another on how to effectively have productive conversations.

Much of the problem with workplace communication stems from the fallout of politics, which has been tough in recent years for businesses as it consciously or unconsciously trickles into conversations at the water cooler and even in Zoom calls. And civility also has to do with celebrating and encouraging conversations about differences with diversity, equity and inclusion.

"Today's political polarization can seep into the workplace and hurt culture and, ultimately, productivity," said Trimer, vice president of strategic partnerships at Delta Dental of Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana. "We believe in finding common ground and uniting around that. At work, the common ground should be easy to find. It's our mission and our strategic plan."

Delta Dental has been a sponsor of the Great Lakes Civility Project, started by Detroit journalists Stephen Henderson and Nolan Finley, to encourage such conversations to help the region. The Civility Project provides workshops and resources for businesses. Trimer added, "We are encouraging tolerance and teaching active listening, which are key to problem solving."

She isn't alone as other influential business leaders are working to encourage dialogue, too, about civility inside businesses and across the community that ultimately impacts our region.

“Civility is the cornerstone of good public policy – too many Michiganders don't feel comfortable engaging anymore and this polarizing climate is pushing away so many who can contribute to conversations and solutions in a meaningful way,” said Jim Holcomb, CEO of the Michigan Chamber of Commerce. “It's incumbent upon us all to put the campaign season behind us and work collaboratively to grow a robust, resilient economy that works for everyone. Fostering this civility is going to continue to be a top priority of the Michigan Chamber.”

Holcomb, a longtime chamber employee who took over the chamber's top job Jan. 1, has made this issue a cornerstone of his leadership of the group. He's been traveling the state, giving speeches and holding meetings.

The chamber also partnered with the Great Lakes Civility Project and held a virtual event on Oct. 4 called “The Power of Perspective: Talk, Listen, Respect, Repeat,” which was part of its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion series. It was timed to be held just before election time kicked into high gear, knowing that employees' water cooler talk might fester. The event featured Henderson, Finley and others. Over 240 people, including chamber members and other businesses and organizations, attended.

“We held this event seeing the increasing polarization taking place and we wanted to help stem that and learn to talk with one another again,” Holcomb said. “Being part of a dynamic and inclusive society underscores the importance of listening to differing viewpoints and strongly held beliefs.”

More: Detroit Thanksgiving parade will have 9 new floats: 'That's a record for us'

But how to do that can be difficult, if not downright uncomfortable, which is why the event offered a few suggestions for companies hoping to inspire more talk about civility and celebrating differences in the workplace:

- Start with the person, not the issue. Get to know each other. Who are they? Where are they from? Ask about their backgrounds and experiences that have shaped their views. This builds respect for each other's humanity and can often be a game changer for the ability to have a meaningful conversation.

- Change your goal — and stay curious. It shouldn't be to win, score points or convince someone else to your position, it should be to listen and learn or better understand. These conversations should be honest give and take. Starting with that simple — but foundational — goal is essential.
- Know yourself and look inward first. Recognize where you're at and why and make a conscious commitment to be open minded and more tolerant. Use what you hear to challenge or affirm your beliefs.
- Know when to walk away but agree to come back. Sometimes it might just seem like it's pointless or something cuts to the core. Unless it's egregious, always agree to come back. That commitment to try again can make a real difference.
- When a conflict exists, set honest goals. Committing to not lecture or to listen first, speak later helps lay a foundation for engaging in civil conversation.

Sandy Baruah, president and CEO of the Detroit Regional Chamber, who has led the organization for 12 years and just signed a new contract for five more years, has been focused on civility in the workplace for years.

The chamber's annual Mackinac Policy Conference — attended by nearly 2,000 leaders from business and politics — has featured national and state political speakers from both sides of the aisle speaking on issues, including civility, in recent years. The chamber also has a partnership with the Civility Project.

Unlike the turbulent 2020 elections when Joe Biden was elected president and some leaders refused to accept results, and our region and nation was thrown into crisis mode, the midterm elections in Michigan this week ended on a quieter note.

Tudor Dixon, the Republican gubernatorial candidate, called Gov. Gretchen Whitmer to congratulate her on her win and issued a public statement, and Matthew DePerno issued a statement acknowledging he lost to Democratic Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel in that race.

“Unlike the unfortunate drama around the 2020 election, business leaders can be thankful that the 2022 elections in Michigan were orderly and civil, with a return to the norm of candidates graciously conceding defeat and allowing our election workers and volunteers to do their jobs,” Baruah said. “Hopefully, this is a sign that civility is regaining its footing.”

The Detroit chamber has held meetings for its members about how to have conversations celebrating differences of opinions, politics, backgrounds and more as part of its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion program.

“Commit to having conversations that matter,” said Baruah. “When a safe place is created in the workplace, it is important to use that trust to bridge divides. Be willing to speak up as a champion for inclusion and equity. These conversations matter to the Detroit Regional Chamber and they matter to the community.”

Jennifer Kluge, president and CEO of MichBusiness, has also been helping businesses across Michigan deal with civility and workforce issues through programs it offers.

"We have seen improvements in the business community of creating a trusting workplace culture and holding each other accountable for anything that might disrupt the harmony of a workplace team," Kluge said. "The general theme is 'give grace' to each other and approach conflict from a perspective of curiosity rather than anger."

She added, "Much has transpired in the past two and a half years (referring to the political environment and pandemic) that we now can see a little bit more clearly into the struggles of team members. There seems to be more compassion for each other and our respective struggles. This comes from efforts of employers creating cultures of transparency and a focus on wellness and mental wellbeing.

"While not perfect, employers are getting better at teaching team members how to uphold a positive culture despite world events and to create an environment of transparency and respect," Kluge added.

More: U-M's winningest softball coach gets big surprise in the Big House

Contact Carol Cain: 248-355-7126 or ccain@cbs.com. She is senior producer/host of "Michigan Matters," which airs 8 a.m. Sundays on CBS Detroit. See Rochester Hills Mayor Bryan Barnett, Denise Iltch, Coleman Young II, John McCandless and Marilyn Britten on this Sunday's show.

