

Managing a Polarized Workforce

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One of the most difficult challenges leaders of all organizations face is managing diverse perspectives. Much has been written on the benefits for teams and organizations of engaging with opposing views, fostering productive disagreement, and creating “teams of rivals.” Yet anyone who has been involved in such work knows that disagreements on strongly held opinions, often related to personal identity, are always tough and frequently destructive. That’s truer today than ever before, as topics from the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements to environmentalism and remote work have elevated both the need for thoughtful discussion and the desire to avoid it. In a 2021 survey we found that conflict is an inescapable part of work life for employees at all levels. Eighty-nine percent of the 486 U.S. respondents from a wide range of companies and industries reported experiencing it at work to some degree. They spend about 3.5 hours a week, on average, dealing with it.

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