

War on Iraq - At Work?

Do you believe that War in Iraq will have no effect on managing staff and productivity in your workplace? Can you be sure...?

This short fact sheet is designed for managers to increase their awareness of the potential impact on their teams of racial tensions due to a war in Iraq, and give advice on how to manage it.

A PEP Talk for managers (Peace Equality & Prosperity)

Are you concerned about heated discussions amongst your staff? Does your organisation have policies and procedures in place which have relevance to the current situation?

Q) Should I forbid any discussion of global affairs at work?

A) No. It will be very difficult to prevent it occurring in conversation, and simply preventing people talking about it will not prevent their attitudes being expressed in other ways, such as an increase in intolerance or discrimination. Also, staff will gain understanding by listening to each other's perspectives.

Q) Is this just an issue for new staff?

A) No. In the case of *Z Milovanovic V Hebden Dyeing & Finishing Company Ltd and others* (1995), the employee had worked in the company since 1991. When the Bosnian war began Mr Milovanovic experienced comments such as "Don't you think it would be a good idea Zoran, to go back to Bosnia or wherever you belong and fight and die like a dog instead of our lads". He resigned and was awarded £3,825 in compensation, with the tribunal stating "[He] felt so oppressed... that he felt unable to continue in his employment, since the relationship of trust and confidence between him and the employer had been destroyed".

Q) What if the abuse comes from customers or service users?

A) The employer can still be held liable for the behaviour of service users/customers. In the case of *S Jenkins V Burnley and others* (1993) Mr Jenkins complained to the college managers that he was being racially abused by students. The college claimed these were misunderstandings and took no action. The Industrial Tribunal found that "the way Mr Jenkins was treated was, in the truest sense, institutional discrimination and victimisation rather than the wayward behaviour of particular individuals". Mr Jenkins was awarded £12,000 in compensation.

Q) What should I do if staff make jokes which I am concerned may be unacceptable?

- A) Be aware that the employer can be held liable at tribunal for the behaviour of the staff.
- Check out your organisational policies on harassment and discrimination/Equal Opportunities
 - Make your staff aware of the organisational policies in a non threatening manner – circulate them, display them on noticeboards, remind staff of them in team briefings etc
 - If you feel individual staff may be upset by certain jokes or conversations... ask them. If your organisation has staff/staff groups within the company who may be able to offer support to the individual, then be able to refer them on.
 - Don't abdicate responsibility. You, as the manager, need to set a good example and ensure that staff are speaking in an appropriate way to colleagues.

- Liaise with your Human Resources Department if you have one, or your manager, to ensure that you are receiving the most appropriate support to manage the situation.
- Bring the matter up at management meetings, especially if you have specific concerns to ensure that the matter is dealt with consistently within the organisation.

Q) What if the comments are coming from customers/service users?

A) In addition to considering the advice above;

- ensure that staff are aware what forms of behaviour will not be tolerated from customers/service users.
- Find out what policies and procedures your organisation has relating to the behaviour of customers/service users.
- Find out who in your company should receive reports on any such instances.
- As the manager, you may need to support your staff by reminding customers/service users that unacceptable language and behaviour will not be tolerated.

Q) So how should I handle general discussion on War in Iraq?

- Acknowledge that there will be differences of opinion, both for and against war. After all, these differences are occurring in Europe and the international community.
- Emphasise that these differences of opinion need to be set aside for work to be carried out
- Remind all staff to have respect for, and tolerance of, each other's opinions
- If the discussion is becoming heated and you are concerned about what is being said, ask everyone to calm down and return to the work in hand.
- Be prepared to say that whilst everyone is entitled to their own views, certain comments are unacceptable, and these comments could lead to use of internal disciplinary procedures etc.
- If an employee makes a racist comment – challenge them on it and remind them it is not acceptable. Do not tolerate it in silence, as the manager you must set a good example
- Be aware of stereotyping and the diversity within ethnic groups.
- If you sense that an employee is becoming distressed by the comments, speak to them privately and ask how you can support them

Q) Where can my staff or I go for further information?

A) If you wish to discuss this further then you can obtain details of your local Race Equality Council from the Commission for Racial Equality on <http://www.cre.gov.uk/about/recs.html> or 020 7939 0000, or Slough Race Equality Council is on 01753 691266. Electronic version of this document available on <http://www.blbw.co.uk/ps/home.aspx?pageno=x451>

Other sources of further information:

<http://www.cre.gov.uk/pdfs/rhaw.pdf>

CRE Guidance on dealing with racial harassment at work

Challenging Racism At Work: Using the Law, ISBN: 1 85006 537 3

PUB: Trades Union Congress (<http://www.tuc.org.uk>). A basic guide to the Race Relations Legislation at work and what can constitute harassment etc.

<http://www.dti.gov.uk/er/equality/index.htm>

Information from the Government on proposed changes to legislation etc.

If you have found this publication useful and would like to know more about the work of Slough Race Equality Council or the Slough Leadership Challenge, then you can contact Slough REC by phone on 01753 691 266, fax 01753 517 329 or email sloughrace@yahoo.co.uk