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Marking inauguration requires thought, tact

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Millions of workers at small businesses across the country will take time Tuesday to watch Barack Obama be sworn in as president -- and will do so with their bosses' blessings.

Many companies will allow workers to take a break to watch the swearing-in on TVs or their computers, while others are making rooms available so staffers can gather. Still others are planning celebrations to mark a historic event, and some owners are giving staffers the day off.

At BlissPR, a New York-based public relations agency, many employees will be in the conference room watching Obama's inauguration on TV. Abby Barr, the firm's managing director, said the company recognizes the historical significance of the day, and that "in moments like this, people want to be in a community."

BlissPR isn't doing anything to mark the day other than making the TV available, in part because there's still work to be done. Also, the company is aware not everyone might be an Obama supporter.

"That was our strategy, to welcome people but not obligate anyone" to take part, Barr said.

Flashpoint PR, a San Francisco-based PR firm, will be holding an inauguration party in its media lounge.

"We decided it's very important for us," said Kristin Greene, a principal with the company.

But, like the managers at BlissPR, Flashpoint is letting employees know they're not required to take part. "We're going to endeavor to make everyone comfortable," Greene said.

That kind of approach -- giving staffers a chance to watch the inauguration but not demanding they be part of a celebration -- is smart managing, according to human resources consultants and labor lawyers.

Beverly Kaye, an employee retention consultant in Sherman Oaks, Calif., says it can create a lot of goodwill.

"If ever there was a chance for managers and leaders and business owners to use this as a chance to say to your team, 'I appreciate you, I want to bring us closer, I want to share this with you,' this is it," Kaye said. "It is a great rallying cry and step toward coalescing your team."

It's a good idea to treat the inauguration as a historic rather than a political event, to try to lesson any tensions among staffers with differing viewpoints. To head off any problems, Kaye suggests giving staffers time off, perhaps two hours, to watch the swearing in, or for whatever the staffer might want to do.

Attorney Jonathan Segal of Philadelphia-based Wolf, Block, Schorr and Solis-Cohen noted a substantial portion of the voting population didn't cast their ballots for Obama, who took 51 percent of the popular vote.

"To endorse it and say, 'We're all celebrating it,' may be going too far, Segal said.

There are only a few jurisdictions across the country where there are laws against workplace discrimination on the grounds of political affiliation, so the chances are slim that employers would face charges from non-Obama supporters who think an office inauguration party creates a hostile work environment. Segal says the issue is more about making all employees feel like they're still part of the workplace community, even if they don't care or are unhappy about the inauguration.

"Those who are excited about Obama winning shouldn't be told they can't watch it," Segal said. "I see nothing wrong with setting up a TV so people can see it -- as long as the message isn't spoken or de facto that 'you need to do this to be part of the inner circle.'"

Kathy Sharpe, chief executive of Sharpe Partners, a digital marketing company in New York, is giving staffers a vacation day.

"I don't know if they'll watch, but I want them to have that day," she said, adding "It's not political. It's really history."

She's also giving staffers \$100 gift checks to mark the occasion.

At many companies, workers won't be able to watch simply because of the nature of the business. Phones do need to be answered in offices, people shopping in stores do need to be waited on. At Junior's, the New York restaurant chain, there will be flatscreen TVs so employees and customers can watch, co-owner Alan Rosen said.

"It's a very important day nationally for people, my staff, my customers, the country," he said.

But the employees do have to keep working. "We have a business to run," Rosen said.

Still, he says he won't mind if the kitchen staff stops cooking to come out and watch the actual swearing-in.

"This is a big day in our nation's history," Rosen said. "I don't care what people's politics are."

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