

# *A New Place to Learn Civics: The Workplace*

Fearing that rising distrust could spell doom for businesses, some companies are offering employees lessons in democracy.



By Melissa Eddy

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A peaceful end to the war in Ukraine. That was the wish behind a post that Simge Krüger made on LinkedIn in March.

In response, people began posting their wishes that her husband, father and brother be killed in combat. Seeing that she lived in Germany, they called her a Nazi.

“I was just talking about peace and I’m suddenly a Nazi,” Ms. Krüger, a Turkish citizen who lives in Hamburg, said in an interview.

Weeks later, sitting in a workshop led by a pro-democracy organization, she came to understand what happened in that dizzying moment. The insults had nothing to do with her ethnic background or political leanings. The people targeting her comment were trying to whip up emotion and further polarize a world torn over issues like Russia’s war in Ukraine, gender identity and climate change.

The best way to resist, she was taught in the class, was not by trying to explain her position or defend herself, but by asking probing questions.

“People who believe conspiracy theories usually just have one line of argumentation, but there’s nothing behind it,” she said. “When you start carving into their iceberg, you quickly realize that it has no depth.”

These lessons came from an eight-week program offered by her employer, Hays, a multinational recruitment firm with 3,500 employees in Germany. The company said the project dovetailed its own aim of strengthening democratic values and making their employees more resilient.

Across Germany, several hundred companies have taken part in such workshops, and similar classes are being held in other Western countries, including the United States. Businesses are finding they need to bolster their employees in the face of increasingly vitriolic political debate. Seminars on civics and democratic principles — such as the importance of voting or recognizing the dangers of disinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech — have become a way to ensure healthier relationships at the workplace, and in society at large. In addition, reports show that economic growth is

higher in stable democracies, and liberal border policies allow companies to attract skilled immigrants.

Since the initial offering that Ms. Krüger took part in, Hays has trained more individual employees and incorporated elements of the workshops into its companywide mandatory training, said MIMOZA Murseli, a project coordinator for diversity and inclusion at Hays.



A demonstration led by a right-wing group in Germany in 2018. Dpa Picture Alliance/Alamy

Being schooled in how to recognize and respond to hate speech and misinformation has made employees more self-assured in doing their jobs, Ms. Murseli said.