

Respectful Relationships at Work

In this era of the new millennium, the number of hours we spend at work is on the rise. Correspondingly, the amount of time we spend interacting with work colleagues may far outweigh the time we spend with family and friends. Cultivating relationships at work that are positive, supportive, and empowering is critical to our sense of well-being. Each of us deserves to work in an environment that is respectful, one in which we feel valued and treated as we would like to be treated.

Unfortunately, lack of respect in the workplace can lead to an unhealthy work environment. When people at work offend or humiliate us, it hurts our dignity and sense of self. It also affects our ability to work well. Our ability to perform at our best is dependent upon our physical, psychological and social well-being. There are many ways to build positive relationships at work. Practicing the following behaviors can help.

Demonstrate Respect

The foundation of any healthy relationship, respect can be demonstrated by:

- Treating others with courtesy, kindness and consideration, regardless of their race, religion, gender, size, ability, age or country of origin.
- Encouraging co-workers to express opinions and ideas. Listen to what they have to say before expressing your own viewpoint. Never interrupt or cut off another person.
- Never insulting people, blaming, threatening or calling people names, even if you are angry or hurt.
- Addressing conflict in a positive and respectful manner and reporting abuse, discrimination or harassment. Remember that constant criticism, belittling, judging, or demeaning behavior, added up over time, constitutes bullying.

These actions, when implemented consistently at work, provide the basis for a respectful, considerate, professional workplace.

Face Differences

Another key to forming effective working relationships is to deal with differences directly. Differences between people can be interesting. In a conversation where each person listens to the other, discovering more about the other's values and opinions can be meaningful. One may, for example, discover a new idea or perspective. While confronting differences with others can be uncomfortable and take time, attempting to understand them is a good, "stretching" discomfort. This is more rewarding than withdrawing, fighting or plotting. And treating people unfairly because of differences only contributes to a hostile work environment.

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Respond with Compassion

Compassion inspires one to be kind and sympathetic toward others. Developing the ability to respond with compassion to people at work requires a different way of thinking.

First, it involves a commitment to suspending judgment while taking the time to truly understand another's behavior. Understanding the needs, values and beliefs that influence an individual's behavior can change one's attitude toward this person. When you truly listen to them, you are able to develop empathy for their position or situation.

Second, a compassionate response involves acceptance of the facts. This does not mean that you agree with or approve of another's choices. It simply means an acknowledgment of the facts without any value judgment. Understanding and accepting another's behaviour can lead to forgiveness. Once again, forgiveness does not mean approval or agreement but simply a letting go of the past and looking toward a better future. When you forgive another, you have given up on revenge or retaliation. The accounts are balanced and nothing is owed for the mistake.

Work toward Solutions

Respectful relationships at work also stem from the cooperation and collaboration required to identify and implement solutions. When all co-workers are included in meetings, discussions, training and events, the opportunity for people to participate in continuous quality improvement is provided. While not every person can participate in every activity, it is important not to marginalize, exclude or leave any one person out. Use people's ideas to change or improve work, and praise much more frequently than you criticize. This builds exciting and satisfying relationships.

Handling Conflict in the Workplace

Unless your work completely isolates you from others, it's likely that you have experienced some form of conflict in your professional life. Conflict in the workplace is inevitable.

How you handle conflict is probably a fair indication of your ability to cope with both your own stress, and the reactions of others to stressful situations.

To diffuse anger and help control conflict situations, follow the general guidelines for effective conflict communication listed below:

- Don't take it personally. Realize that the individual is angry at the situation, not you personally.
- Let the individual vent their anger by allowing them to speak without interruption.
- Use active listening skills: maintain eye contact, ask questions, take notes when necessary and restate your understanding of the problem. Your interest will show the individual that you are genuinely concerned and want to help them.
- Apologize and mean it. Even if you personally are not responsible for the problem, tell the person how sorry you are that they have had a bad experience.
- Accept responsibility. Do not pass blame off to someone else.
- Do what you can to solve the problem right away. If you don't know the answer to something, tell them you don't know, and promise to find out for them.
- Keep your promises. The person is probably feeling betrayed already and your doing what you say you are going to do will go a long way towards regaining their trust.