

Who did it? What should we do to them?

By John McDonald, Director, ProActive ReSolutions

Most of us are more likely to succeed at work if we work collaboratively as a team rather than individually. And a team will always perform better when our day-to-day interactions with each other are open and honest.

Despite many examples to the contrary, relationships are extremely important to us because as human beings we're a political species.

Us and them

What others in the team think about us and what we think about them are critical factors in being successful.

That being said, it's rare to find a team where someone's behaviour doesn't occasionally distract team members from achieving their goals.

However, it's equally rare to find a team where these distractions are acknowledged, understood and dealt with openly and honestly.

Usually, when we're annoyed, disappointed or upset about the behaviour of someone else in our team, we tend to talk to anyone – and at times everyone – except the person whose behaviour annoys us.

The time never seems right to let someone know that we're uncomfortable with what they're doing, so we keep putting it off until eventually we grow to resent the person. In some instances, tolerating others' behaviour is generally a good thing – and we do a lot of this everyday. However, it doesn't help to tolerate behaviour that makes you question others' integrity: their intentions and commitment to individuals and to the team.

Reflection required

Team leaders and other managers should realise that it's not just a matter of them 'fixing' the behaviours of their 'ungrateful' and 'recalcitrant' staff. Managers and other bosses also need to reflect on how their behaviours affect others.

Here is a collection of comments from staff about managers and their behaviour:

- *She's a perfectionist – works very hard, keeping very busy. She makes us redo things that many times over that she drives us mad.*
- *He's got this rigid communicating style. He looks at you, speaks, stops, nods. Then he lets you speak about two sentences. Then he stops you from talking – claps his hands together, opens them out then says, "OK, got all that, now what I want you to do is..."*
- *There are two of them, they hang out together... team leaders who like to play like one of the boys, but they are bosses. I don't get it. They come out of a meeting, and if you are around you will find out confidential stuff about the company or what some of the other bosses are thinking, like: "Hey Champ, how's that set of numbers looking? Now between us, the view in there (pointing to the meeting room they have just left) is that when the merger is complete we won't need two sales teams – so your work on the projections sets you apart from the other sales guys*

– and we will need an analyst. Do we have to walk you right through it? Mate, counting on you!”

• She usually cuts you off before you have finished speaking, and then completes the sentence for you. She might have an MBA but she is not that good she can tell you what you are thinking.

We all have our bad news stories about the manner in which we have related to each other at work and how this has distracted us from working together.

But it's not only the bad behaviour that is problematic. Poor relationships at work can reduce the collaboration, cooperation, innovation and creativity necessary for gaining customer and market share and improving productivity and profits.

In context

Although open and honest communication is vital to all workplaces, many people find it difficult to communicate in such a way.

In some instances, the contexts in which people work drive dysfunction.

Certain management systems and cultures can cause employees to adjust/censor their communication to suit – even if what they really want to say can advance the company. Employees may do this because they can no longer be bothered ‘fighting’ the overriding culture or they are worried about how others may perceive what they really want to say and the affect this may have on their jobs, career opportunities and approval ratings from their managers.

For example, if a management system demands that people work within inflexible standard operating procedures to churn through high workloads to meet deadlines, there is a risk that staff may become robotic in their approach to work and, therefore, more likely to lose sight of the bigger picture and the need to maintain good working relationships in order to deliver high-quality work.

Generosity ‘gene’

How do you build and maintain respectful relationships between people at work?

Most importantly, politics must take a step back, and cooperation and generosity a step forward. We should begin by asking a different set of questions to those usually asked when things go wrong or become difficult.

As parents, teachers, managers or anyone with authority over other people's lives, we tend to ask the following two questions:

1. Who did it?
2. What do we have to do to them?

This significantly restricts how we might respond and is based on a punitive or retributive model of justice and authority.

The preference is to be informed by a different set of questions:

1. What's happened?
2. How have people been affected?
3. What can we do to repair any hurt or harm?

These questions are based on a restorative model of justice and authority that works from the approach that when things go wrong, it's an opportunity to learn from our mistakes and minimise the possibility of the behaviour recurring.

It is an approach built on the evidence-based principles of restorative justice that allows a team of people to do a number of things:

- Talk about what has been happening from their perspective
- Acknowledge the barriers and distractions to working well together
- Understand how these barriers and distractions affect people and prevent cooperation
- Determine what needs to be done to make working in the team better
- Sign up to a plan that delivers on this
- Take the responsibility for delivering on the plan.

Ultimately, it moves teams and individuals away from expending unnecessary energy on pointing the finger of blame at one person.

And, importantly, it moves teams and individuals towards looking at how and why people are working together, allowing for a more holistic, sustainable and systemic, rather than just an individual, approach to relationship change.

The approach is applicable wherever you have a group of people at work – from the operational level right through to the board level – who need to cooperate yet struggle to get along with each other.

Finally, just before you blast off an email demanding to know which 'bad' employee or colleague left the unwashed cups in the office sink – again – take a step back and reflect on whether the dirty cups can live to see another day and if bigger resentments are at play here – you might find there is a better way to 'wash' the 'dishes'.

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