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Respect where it's due

A respectful workplace can be hard to define. It's one of those things - you know it when you see it, but it's hard to put words to. It's much easier to say what it is not.

In thousands of workshops dealing with respectful behaviour we have asked participants questions like 'what are some of the things that people say and do at work that display respect?'

Some of the common answers include:

- People are performing - they are meeting reasonable expectations around productivity, effort, quality, effectiveness and efficiency, they talk frequently about what they are doing and how they are doing it, they say their colleagues do a good, high-quality job
- People are following the rules - they get that written rules are there as a safety net for our conduct at work - they understand that thoughtlessly following the rules is not the main game. They have figured out how to comply with the written rules of the workplace in a way that meets the spirit of the rules rather than the letter
- People get along with each other - they greet each other, are polite and courteous, they include people in conversations, events, coffee, they have social conversations as well as work conversations, they are comfortable talking -or not talking - about personal stuff at work, they do what they say they will do - when they say they will
- People talk to each other and attempt to resolve locally any day-to-day disagreements, hiccups in the way we get along - they call poor behaviour respectfully and directly, they have high expectations of each other, they invest time and effort in helping each other get along, when they see things getting out of control they step in and help each other out

A respectful workplace is one where you feel good about being there. Other people's attitudes and actions towards us have a significant impact on how we feel about ourselves and our work. Did you notice how many of the above items are focused on doing our job and on how we get along each other through the way we talk and act towards each other?

Respect at work is feeling safe and secure about:

- Diversity and accessibility - the workplace welcomes people similar to you and different from you.
- Acceptance - the workplace values you for what you bring, and not what you are.

- Accommodation - the workplace takes reasonable steps to recognise your individual needs and help you do your job well.
- Clear expectations - there are clear expectations as to how we treat each other in the workplace.
- Effective communication - we communicate in a healthy and effective manner in the workplace.
- Effective conflict transformation and dispute resolution - the workplace makes available a variety of processes for changing relationships, behaviours, attitudes and organisational structures for the better and resolving disagreements.
- Active improvement - everyone plays a role in continually trying to improve the workplace.

Why is it important to build and maintain a respectful workplace?

If a respectful workplace is one that allows you to feel good about being there - then it is useful to ask if there are any business advantages to feeling good at work and with getting along with each other.

Some team leaders, managers and CEOs may well ask - "how do I get the best out of my people if they don't fear me?"

The advantages of feeling good about yourself and your work include reducing the amount of stress we feel at home and in our personal life. Reducing stress often goes hand in hand with improving our physical and emotional well being. Feeling good about ourselves and getting along well with others at work results in increased productivity.

The business prize won when you build and maintain a respectful workplace includes:

- Smoother change management
- Greater productivity and profitability
- A better chance of achieving stronger revenue growth, lower costs and higher income
- People are more likely to work in value-adding ways to achieve the kind of performance that shareholders demand.
- Your customers use your products more, and increased customer usage leads to higher levels of customer satisfaction
- Lower incidence and cost of injuries in the workplace and therefore reduced workers compensation costs

You can better understand the business benefits of a respectful workplace by considering some of the problems you get to deal with when people begin to feel excluded and disrespected at work. Poor relationships at work are detrimental to employee wellbeing. Employees behaving badly erode productivity, customer retention, morale and satisfaction on the job.

Are respectful workplace policies doing their job?

The findings of the ProActive ReSolutions workplace questionnaire* highlight that having respectful workplace policies doesn't guarantee respectful behaviour.

Sixty-nine per cent of some 8,000 employees and managers who responded to the questionnaire said they were aware of their organisations' respectful workplace policies.

Yet, 58% said their organisations hadn't prepared them to respond appropriately when they were being treated with disrespect, and 32% said they were aware of two to five past incidents of disrespectful behaviour.

These findings highlight the need to do more than just create respectful workplace policy manuals.

People at work unprepared

Over half of the employees and managers who participated in the ProActive ReSolutions questionnaire said their organisations had not prepared them to respond to disrespectful behaviour.

In addition, 58% said their organisation had not prepared them to respond appropriately when they were being treated with disrespect.

To ensure policy is transformed into action, workplaces should integrate respectful workplace behaviour into organisational values, performance reviews and training.

Six tips to build respect

1. Redistribute your workplace behaviour and conduct policies often and talk about them often and in lots of different ways: for example, via the intranet, team meetings and in performance reviews.
2. Make workplace behaviour and conduct competencies part of your hiring and performance reviews for all employees.
3. Make your relationship management competencies part of your hiring and performance reviews for all managers.
4. Train your people in how to solve their day-to-day disagreements informally - that should take care of the 98% of the issues that come up and which should never get to the formal grievance stage.
5. Train your people in the formal processes for addressing issues that cannot be solved informally.
6. Include in your policies a requirement to behave respectfully and collaboratively and in ways consistent with your organisation's values.

About the author

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Source:

**The Proactive ReSolutions workplace questionnaire results are based on responses from some 8,000 (of the 11,138) people working in mostly the government sector in Australia and Canada, who participated in ProActive ReSolutions respectful workplace training from June 2007 to June 2009. Before each training session, participants were asked a series of questions about their organisations' respectful workplace polices. Not all questions were answered by all participants.*

