HR PROACTIVE Inc.
Profit by Proactive Prevention™

Promoting a Civil & Respectful Workplace Culture

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A work environment characterized by civility and respect is essential for the effective operation of increasingly diverse workplaces. Rude, disrespectful or otherwise objectionable conduct has impacts in the workplace: it can drive wedges between workers, it can drive down productivity, and it can drive your best workers out the door to other employers. Worse, it can result in poisoned work environments that can cost you dearly in court costs, damages and good will.

Left undealt with, a poisoned work environment will result in a fragmented work force, with employees choosing sides in a rancorous atmosphere where uncivil and disrespectful incidents occur. Employees are the face of your organization; if that face is marked by a scowl, a look of anguish, or muttered unhappiness, your customers and suppliers will take notice.

Respect and civility should become part of your corporate DNA, and inform everything you do in the course of your business. However, you cannot create respect and civility in the workplace by waving a magic wand. As an employer, you need to set clear and unambiguous standards of conduct, and follow up with positive measures that cultivate and encourage a civil and respectful work environment. To be effective, this requires the active participation of your employees. Employees need to be part of the process to establish standards of conduct that reflect the sensitivities of your particular workplace. They should have input into determining what is welcome and unwelcome behaviour. Without their input, they will not feel they have an ownership stake in the workplace environment.

In other words, the process of developing a respectful and civil workplace must itself be respectful and civil. A top-down approach - "be civil and respectful or else!" - is doomed to failure.

1. Take stock

It is important to get a sense of your workplace culture as it pertains to civility and respect. A workplace audit that canvasses employees on this issue can help to focus on areas of workplace culture that enhance or detract from civility, and to reinforce for employees the value that civility brings to the workplace. Such an audit will allow you to get a picture of what needs to be done to create a respectful workplace. And as with any worthwhile workplace initiative, this cannot be a one-off affair. The values of civility and respect in the workplace need to be restated, revisited and reinforced as a normal part of ongoing employee training.

2. Develop, with input from employees, a statement of workplace values that emphasizes the central importance of civility and respect.

After the audit has been completed and the input from employees analyzed, draft and post throughout your workplace

a statement setting out the commitment to a respectful and civil workplace. This should be separate from established discrimination or harassment policies, so as to emphasize a pro-active commitment to these values as fundamental to all your company's other policies.

3. Be clear about what civility and respect mean

When workplaces undergo gender, demographic or other changes, certain conduct that may have been accepted in the past may turn out to be unwelcome in a more diverse work environment. (Think of once male-dominated work areas featuring pin-ups and male intramural humour, etc.) For this reason, the statement of values should set out concrete examples of welcome and unwelcome behaviour, ideally customized to your workplace and obtained as part of your workplace audit. (One possible example: "At ABC Co., employees are called by their names, not nicknames or terms of endearment, such as 'my dear'.") Illustrate the goal of making every interaction a positive one for both parties.

4. Provide an effective avenue of redress.

A complaint resolution process is essential to convincing employees that you take their issues seriously. If as an employer you already have such a process to address human rights, workplace safety or harassment concerns, you should allow for such a process to consider complaints about uncivil or disrespectful conduct, whether filed pursuant to an incident or with respect to the general workplace atmosphere.

Employees should be reassured that there is a way to bring concerns to management's attention and that complaints will be taken seriously and handled objectively, fairly and in a timely manner.

5. Address issues flagged in the audit head on

It is likely that the workplace audit will identify issues that require follow up. These could range from relatively minor irritants to serious concerns. By addressing these issues forthrightly, the employer can help reassure employees of its commitment to the core values set out in the statement of values. This may be achieved a number of ways--through regular training or through other communication such as a company newsletter.

6. Ensure that management sets the tone, modelling respect and civility.

Civility and respect apply to everyone, from the CEO on down. If employees feel there is one standard of conduct for management and another for everyone else, any attempt to implement a civil and respectful workplace will fail. Management by yelling, belittlement or derision, it should go without saying, is inconsistent with civility and respect.

7. Train

Your work is not done once you have set out a statement of values; you should move to ensure that the introduction of

such a statement is accompanied by training for all employees. Training should address how it is possible for people to engage in disrespectful behaviour without intending to, and how such miscommunication can be resolved.

And as with any training, it is important to reinforce values of civility and respect, by regular follow-up training.

8. Reward

Civility and respect should be part of regular employee performance reviews. Those employees who stand out in modeling civil and respectful behaviour should be rewarded for their efforts, whether through bonuses (if that is part of your corporate practice), or through other means, such as being recognized in company newsletters, etc.

9. Play the "long game"

Civility and respect are not fads. They are foundational values for any organization or company. Employees need to know that these values are an integral part of your company's DNA, and that the company is committed to them over the long haul. The only way to demonstrate this effectively is over the long term.