Managing conflict through workplace civility

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conflict in political and social spheres can also affect the workplace, leading to strife between coworkers. Managers and employers can reduce confrontation by fostering a culture of workplace civility. Through training and setting appropriate examples, conflicts in the workplace are reduced, leading to increased productivity and higher morale.

In the period leading up to the November 2016 election it seems the United States experienced a massive shift in thinking, in communication and in the divisions between people. This shift has damaged our willingness to listen to others and our ability to relate to them, leading to disagreement, confrontation and civil unrest. These divisions have been going on for quite a while, but are now getting more press thanks to the advent of 24/7 media and our hyperconnected, social media-driven world.

The explosion of social media makes it seem like people have permission to do or say things they would not have even thought about before. The rise of social media also has put an end to privacy. Your coworker in the next cubicle might be taking photos at work with you in them and posting on Facebook, Snap Chat or other social platforms, without asking your permission. In many ways, these divisions and social postings are no longer just "political talk"; they're a part of everyday life.

Welcome to the new world.

Managing the new world

Managers, therefore, would be wrong to assume these kinds of divisions won't find their way into the workplace. No matter how separated work feels from the outside world, thoughts and feelings are bound to surface in conversations between coworkers. As our society grows increasingly polarized, these conversations can become confrontational and degrade productivity, morale and workplace culture.

In recent years, we at work have seen open discussion of racism, income inequality, gender discrimination, opiate abuse, healthcare, sexual harassment and more. These topics are deeply personal to employees, and a negative comment can easily feel like a direct attack.

Many organizations have seen increases in calls to their employee assistance programs (EAP) to discuss anxiety over political, social and cultural challenges. In particular, calls spiked after the November 2016 presidential election, and many counselors said they talked to employees who were fearful that their friends and coworkers would be deported. Many employees nationwide are disturbed by current events, and even more are frustrated or perturbed by the discussions they're having with coworkers.

In a society where certain topics of conversation can quickly cause controversy, it's up to managers and employers to develop a culture of workplace civility and create an environment for happy, productive and healthy employees. Workplace civility reduces both feelings of frustration and potentially harmful anxiety and stress, leading to higher quality, unimpeded work. Civility in the workplace is essential, and it's important to equip managers and employers with the strategies to nurture civility practices, particularly in a diverse workplace culture.

Workplace diversity takes many forms, and efforts to build it begin with the hiring process. Diversity goes beyond hiring employees of different ethnicities, religions or sexual orientations; expert hiring managers will also look for candidates who exhibit diversity in thought and ideas. Having employees with different work styles, different life experiences and different ways of thinking diversifies the business process.

Equally important as hiring diverse employees is encouraging open, respectful dialogue in the workplace. Employees should feel comfortable speaking their minds while still being conscious of the different beliefs and life experiences of their coworkers. Including employees in strategic planning or business decisions gives them a chance to express their opinions and will diversify business practices. Choices made with a greater diversity of ideas are more likely to align with the values of employees and customers alike.

Setting expectations

A diverse workplace can function as a business thinktank, a marketplace of ideas where everyone's point of view comes together to make your brand stronger.

While diversity leads to more inclusive policies and decisions, however, it also can lead to head-butting between employees. Encouraging open discussion and debate means that, eventually, someone will get upset.

Employers and managers need to not only facilitate diversity, but civility.

Workplace civility education is vital to reducing hostile workplace situations and keeping conversations between coworkers respectful. Managers should work with human resources to organize training sessions with their employees to set expectations, review scenarios and model good behavior.

Workplace civility training also can be a great place to foster diversity of ideas. Instead of simply identifying problematic behavior for employees, managers should include them in the conversation, ask about situations that would feel hostile and offer ways to avoid or handle those situations. Employees will feel their ideas are being respected, and diversity will once again help create better-rounded, inclusive civility policies.

Respectful, open-minded policies of many kinds can help maintain a civil environment in the workplace. Human resources staff members are encouraged to establish and promote an open-door policy by which employees can "drop in" with concerns at any time. Providing employees with access to an EAP-provided counselor also can be a good way to help them express themselves. Inclusive policies encourage employees to openly voice concerns, preventing negative feelings from silently festering until they explode into a larger crisis.

Many companies have found success averting crises during our tense political climate by updating and reinforcing conflict management policies. Most companies have them, but often they have been left neglected on the shelf for years or fail to meet employees' needs when used.

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A crisis management plan should be a living document, a series of policies designed to respond to workplace issues in the most up-to-date manner. Managers are encouraged to regularly evaluate policies regarding reporting, mediation and counseling.

Take the industrial concern that recently experienced tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim employees in the workplace. After a change in shifts was proposed to allow Muslim employees time to pray, workplace rhetoric became heated and at times aggressive, exacerbated further by media reports of lethal attacks by self-identified Muslims with reported ties to Islamic terrorist groups.

By instituting training that demonstrated the expected culture of workplace civility, reiterating that human resources had an open-door policy, reviewing the conflict management process and establishing workgroups to break down barriers, the company was able to alleviate tensions and prevent more substantial conflicts from arising.

Proper policies are important, and if they're put in place well before a crisis occurs, they can save your organization from costly and demoralizing conflicts.

Keeping an eye on civility

Once workplace civility policies and procedures have been established, managers and employers must continue to keep an eye on how they are being implemented in the organization. A company can offer or require all sorts of training, but if there isn't an inclusive environment in the workplace, nothing will change.

Lax enforcement will only weaken civility. Make sure to establish additional policies to help deal with employees who do not live up to behavioral standards. It's important to have procedures in place that address lapses in civility without breeding further incivility.

Additionally, managers need to understand that civility starts with them. Living up to the standards they have set will make it easier for employees to do the same. Debating with, or being hostile toward, an employee only serves to damage the culture that your organization has built through training.

Managers are the keystone of workplace civility; without their influence and modeling of good behavior, it's unlikely that the rest of the workplace will live up to expectations.

Managers and employers should practice anger management daily. Managers need to know their triggers as well as the triggers of others, allowing them to avoid topics that may cause confrontation. Employers should avoid putting their employees in these uncomfortable, stressful situations.

Handling workplace civility issues often comes down to the awareness of managers and employers. The preceding tips are an excellent foundation for building an open, inclusive, respectful culture, but every situation is different. Managers need to understand their employees as well as the state of current events to predict how specific situations will affect individual workers. Being conscious of and sensitive to the situations of employees allows managers to formulate a more understanding, specific response, involving human resources when necessary.

Additionally, managers should be aware of how local unrest will affect the workplace itself. Events like those in Ferguson, Missouri, Berkeley, California, or Charlottesville, Virginia, can bring large-scale protest, an increased police presence and the danger of violence to their respective communities. Managers need to know what is currently happening and what may happen in the vicinity of their place of work and establish channels of communication to keep employees informed and safe.

Even with help from human resources, managers attempting to build workplace civility from the ground up can feel overwhelmed. It's often difficult to set policies in place that will make overarching, impactful changes on the workplace. Managers and employers who feel in over their heads are encouraged to turn to their internal or external employee assistance programs for assistance in handling this kind of important example setting.

EAPs have been around for over 50 years, providing a variety of highly useful services to any manager. The EAP often is included as part of an employer's health insurance plan, but standalone EAPs offered through independent companies are another solution. They can offer a wider range of services to employers, leading civility training or mediating disputes.

Ready for tomorrow today

Maintaining a culture of workplace civility is no simple task. Creating policies and procedures, enforcing them and modeling good behavior can feel like a full-time job. This effort, however, is rewarded with higher productivity, better morale and more positive workplace relationships.

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Managers and employers must avoid the pitfall of only focusing on what they've already established. Situations change, and denying the possibility of a crisis will lead to being unprepared for one. To be blindsided when a crisis does happen will only make it harder to pick up the pieces afterward.

In a rapidly changing, increasingly polarized world, employers and managers cannot sit idly by and expect their previously established policies to always work. One size does not fit all when it comes to workplace civility. Those managers who are adaptive, well-informed and proactive will find it easiest to stay on top of a changing political and social landscape – and will be rewarded with more functional, productive and effective workplaces.

No one wants to work where they feel uncomfortable. Making the organization a place people want to work will prevent conflict and lead to a respectful, positive culture. ❖