

Building positive workplace relationships and teams

Consultant workplace mediator and conflict management coach Mary Rafferty looks at ways to build positive relationships in the workplace.

Last month's article looked at the issue of bullying and harassment in the workplace and how to deal with complaints of this nature.

Ideally, of course, relationships in a workplace should never degenerate to a stage where one or both parties feel they are being bullied or harassed. This month we will explore some ways to build positive relationships in the workplace.



– these can be used to review contracts, to hear from the employee and to give constructive feedback on what is and isn't 'working well'.

For example, lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities tends to be a frequent cause of workplace difficulties. Much of this can be avoided by holding once- or twice-yearly short reviews, where these

Why are good working relationships important?

Having good working relationships between staff is more than 'nice to have'; it can significantly improve your bottom line! Up to 65% of performance problems result from strained relationships between staff (Dana, 1990). Hidden costs of conflict range from the waste of employees' time and energy in being preoccupied by the issues, days off work for stress, lowered motivation and morale and poorer quality of decisions and work. Many people's response to an unpleasant work atmosphere is to find another job – finding and training new staff can cost a business anything between 30 and 150% of that member of staff's annual wage (Dana, 2001). The worst case scenarios will involve long and intractable litigation cases, whilst customer service also suffers in a negative workplace atmosphere.

The good news is that building a positive team culture does not require any huge financial investment or restructuring of the workplace. It is more a question of developing and modelling positive communication skills and making good working relationships an explicit part of your agenda and strategy as a manager or employer.

Work practices

Establishing good work practices in your business is critical. This starts with ensuring that every employee has a written contract with a job description which is clearly outlined and agreed between you and the employee at the outset. Build in a system of short annual meetings with all staff members

kinds of issues are part of the agenda. Give people input into decisions around what is and isn't part of their role. This doesn't mean letting the employee decide what they will and will not do but, by involving them in the process and taking their opinions on board where possible, you will build goodwill and co-operation.

As well as written contracts, there should be a set of written policies and procedures around issues such as paid leave, sick leave, grievance and disciplinary procedures, anti-bullying etc. Thinking these issues through and putting them in writing reduces the chances of misunderstandings at a later stage. Be sure, then, to apply these policies consistently and fairly.

Team meetings

Develop a practice of bringing all staff together for a team meeting on a regular basis. This doesn't have to be for long – 30-40 minutes – but it can be a very worthwhile investment of your and your employees' time. For starters, this provides a forum and opportunity to discuss and clarify in a group many issues which could otherwise be fertile ground for clashes and disagreements. More importantly, it demonstrates commitment to the value an employer places on the idea of the team and ensuring people are working well together.

Many employers shy away from staff meetings, as they fear it simply turns into an unproductive 'whinging' session. Many may even have tried it once or twice, had this very experience and then abandoned meetings as a bad job!

Yes, when you start, that may be a likely outcome of a first or even second session. But look at it from another perspective: you have gained valuable information on what's not working well and while you may not be able to remedy every ill, allowing people to vent and air grievances is a necessary first step in building honesty and trust in a team. Better that it is done in a constructive forum like a team meeting rather than in the coffee room behind your back.

Constructive problem resolution

Listen to the negativity and 'take it on the chin'. You may feel defensive but rather than getting into an argument about it, acknowledge the concerns that are expressed. Remember, acknowledging does not mean agreeing with but having the ability to demonstrate that you can see the situation from the other perspective and is one of the most effective skills in constructive resolution of problems. Make changes where you can and, where not, give your perspective on the situation. Try to frame disagreements and conflicts constructively. Most people in conflict tend to take up 'positions' and then try to win an argument by simply citing the merits of their position. For example an employee might say (or think!), "We should have a 10% wages increase in January," and the employer says, "I have to freeze any wage increases until the end of next year." Each party can then cite a long list of reasons to justify their position ("I work hard" or "In other jobs people earn more" from the employee or "She's no good on this computer system" or "In other jobs people earn less" from the employer).

Constructive problem solving	
1.	Arrange a time and forum to discuss the issue.
2.	Frame the problem neutrally in a way that incorporates the priority needs rather than the positions of both sides.
3.	Invite the other side's viewpoint first.
4.	Listen and acknowledge their perspective.
5.	State the situation from your perspective citing how the situation impacts on you rather than attributing blame.
6.	Ask for their help in brainstorming options to find a solution that is fair and balanced.

Figure 1: Constructive problem solving – you can use this framework to resolve your own issues or adapt it to 'mediate' informally between two others'.

What's much more effective is to get each side to talk about the interests and needs behind their positions (Figure 1). The employee, for example, might cite things like "feeling appreciated", "long hours" or "difficult new computer system". For the employer, it might be "increased overheads", "low productivity" or "a slow season". A reframe of the positions could be: "How can you meet the employee's needs for feeling valued or for better working

conditions with the employer's need for reduced overheads and better productivity?" Then, you can set about finding ways of meeting both sides' needs in a creative way, rather than each side being polarised in rigid and incompatible fixed demands.

Top employee motivators

A number of workplace motivation surveys which have been carried out along the lines of, "What managers thought employees wanted most from their jobs and what employees said they wanted most", have yielded some interesting results (Figure 2).

Managers		Employees	
1.	Good wages	1.	Appreciation
2.	Job security	2.	Feeling 'in' on things
3.	Promotional opportunities	3.	Understanding attitude
4.	Good working conditions	4.	Good working conditions
5.	Interesting work	5.	Good wages
6.	Loyalty from management	6.	Interesting work
7.	Tactful discipline	7.	Promotional opportunities
8.	Appreciation	8.	Loyalty from management
9.	Understanding attitude	9.	Job security
10.	Feeling 'in' on things	10.	Tactful discipline

Figure 2: What managers thought employees wanted most from their jobs and what employees said they wanted most.

The key message from this is the importance of getting right basic management skills such as encouragement, positive feedback, involvement and acknowledgement. Yes, it does take time and effort on an employer's part, but the payback will be worth it. Better morale and productivity among your staff will, without doubt, improve your business's financial health but, perhaps more importantly, will also have a positive impact on your own health and wellbeing too.

References

Dana, D. (1990). *Talk it out*. Kogan Page Ltd.
 Dana, D. (2001). *Conflict resolution*. McGraw Hill.

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