

Establish A Respectful Workplace To Counteract Interpersonal Workplace Harassment

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Creating an organizational environment that engenders favorable employee behaviors is essential to reduce and eliminate interpersonal mistreatment and workplace harassment. Organization managers and human resource professionals can create a respectful workplace that incorporates effective preventive and remedial measures. Research findings from various streams in the organizational behavior literature are synthesized to develop a model of respect which is explained in order to aid practitioners in implementing important elements of a respectful workplace.

INTRODUCTION

Creating an organizational environment that engenders favorable employee behaviors is essential to reduce and eliminate interpersonal mistreatment and workplace harassment. Organization managers and human resource professionals can reduce the occurrence of these antisocial behaviors by implementing appropriate preventive and remedial measures.

An emerging stream of literature focuses on the phenomenon of dysfunctional social behaviors in the workplace ranging from incivility (Andersson and Pearson, 1999) to workplace violence (Baron and Neuman, 1996). The overall consensus is that various forms of mistreatment tend to co-occur in workplaces that tolerate such behavior (Lim and Cortina, 2005). For example, if sexual harassment is tolerated in an organization, it is more likely that general incivility will also occur. The work environment is therefore a critical determinant in how employees are treated. Dynamics of the work environment result in employees being treated professionally or being subjected to multiple forms of mistreatment.

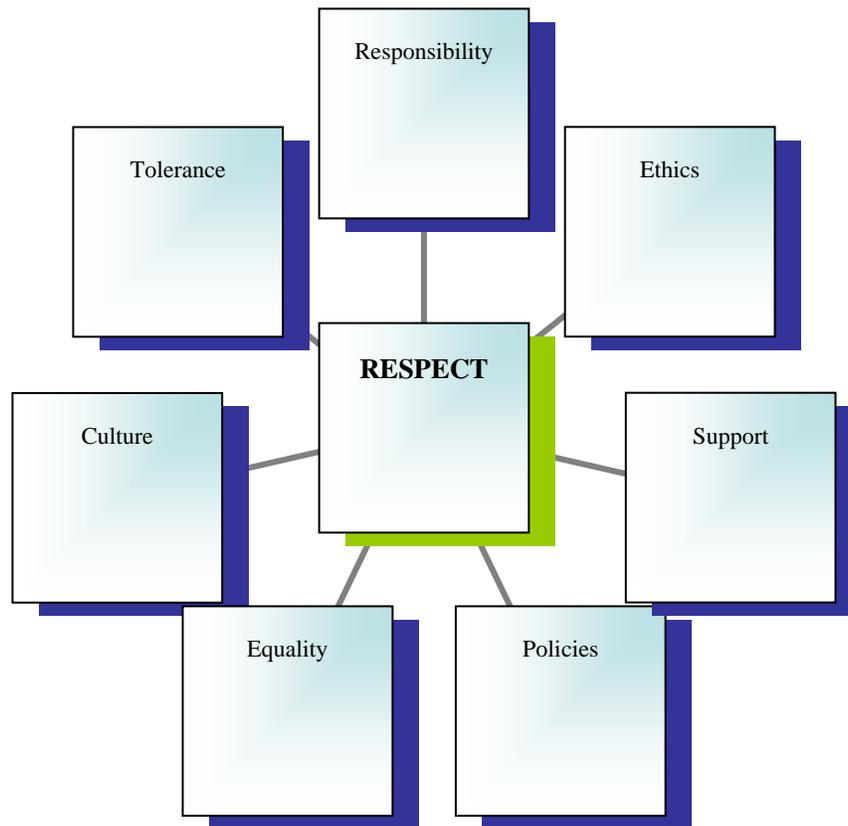
Organizations as well as individual members experience negative consequences if mistreatment and harassment are condoned. Although somewhat limited, research has shown that organizations that permit bullying and other mistreatment experience higher levels of absenteeism and turnover, lower levels of productivity and job satisfaction, and financial expenses for grievances and litigation (Hoel, Einarsen, and Cooper, 2003). The bulk of research has focused on the consequences to targets of such mistreatment. Individuals subjected to bullying and mistreatment experience a wide range of detrimental outcomes to their health and well-being. Lowered job satisfaction, stress symptoms such as low self-esteem, sleep problems,

anxiety, chronic fatigue, anger, depression, and suicidal thoughts are all common in targets of workplace harassment (Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003)

Organization managers can eliminate interpersonal mistreatment and workplace harassment and these deleterious consequences by promoting a healthy, respectful work environment in which such antisocial behavior is rejected and eventually eradicated. Synthesizing research findings from various streams in the organizational behavior literature, a model of respect is advanced and explained to guide managers in addressing important dimensions of a respectful workplace.

Using the acronym, RESPECT, seven dimensions of the workplace are explored with recommendations on how to incorporate practices in the work environment that will enhance mutual respect among organization members. Figure 1 shows the model I use to portray these seven dimensions - responsibility, ethics, support, policies, equality, culture, and tolerance.

FIGURE 1
DIMENSIONS OF A RESEPECTFUL WORKPLACE



Responsibility

Clear delineation of responsibilities and authority is an important element in employee effectiveness on the job. Employees perform best when their job duties and roles are clearly stated and enforced. Role-related stress due to ambiguity and conflicting demands often leads to frustration and in turn antisocial behavior (Einarsen, 1999; Fox and Spector, 1999). Even the most conscientious employee will flounder and eventually succumb when expectations are unclear or conflicting demands are imposed (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman, 1970). The frustrations experienced by the individual can lead to aggression towards coworkers and the organization itself (Fox and Spector, 1999; Fox, Spector, and Miles, 2001). For example, situational constraints such as inadequate time, resources, information, or guidance may lead to increased interpersonal conflicts that may eventually result in mistreatment or harassment.

Two basic tenets of classic organization theory are the notions of chain of command and unity of command. To prevent role conflict, each employee should be directed by one superior only to prevent inconsistent or conflicting demands and priorities. Likewise, each employee should report to only one superior to avoid selective task and reporting allocation. Taken together, these two principles purport that a subordinate will be most effective and satisfied when there is one superior from whom directions are given and to whom results are accounted. If either of these principles is violated, the employee is likely to experience role conflict and the stress associated with it (Rizzo et al., 1970).

A second complication, role ambiguity, occurs when responsibilities and expectations are unclear. Every job in an organization should have specific tasks and responsibilities formally defined. In this way, the jobholder receives guidance and direction and can be held accountable for tasks under his or her purview. If employees are taken to task for matters outside their scope of control or are otherwise uncertain as to their particular scope of responsibility, the resulting job-demand conflict leads to increased stress and reduced job performance (Rizzo et al., 1970).

Role conflict and role ambiguity are easily remedied through implementation of effective management practices. An appropriate chain of command should be established and honored in the organization. Each employee should be assigned to one supervisor who ultimately serves as the employee's point of contact and direction. Further, it is imperative to provide employees discrete job duties and responsibilities and hold them accountable for matters under their jurisdiction. It is incumbent upon managers to define the scope of each employee's job and to provide clear reinforcement of those boundaries. Providing a clear outline of reporting relationships and assigned roles and responsibilities gives employees the optimal opportunity to perform their jobs free of doubt or lack of clarity. This, in turn, can enhance employee job satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Acker, 2004; Netemeyer, Johnston, and Burton, 1990).

Ethics

In recent years the failure of U.S. corporations to act ethically has led to enactment of additional federal legislation, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, aimed at improving corporate financial disclosure and reporting transparency (States, 2002). Such an extreme response emphasizes the importance of ethical standards in organizations and the repercussions from widespread violations of ethical codes of conduct. Legislation would be unnecessary if organizations operated according to appropriate business conduct guidelines.

Ethics involves moral issues, decisions, and choices that individuals make and that reflect their assessment of behavior that is "right" and "wrong" (Luthans, 2008). Ethical practices

encompass not only financial or economic decisions, but also the manner in which we treat others (Key, 1999). Therefore, in a broad sense the interpersonal dynamics in a workplace reflect the ethical standards within the organization played out on a daily basis. Behavioral expectations are a manifestation of the ethical values endorsed by the members of the organization. An ethical organization will require that all members adhere to the highest standards of “right” behavior.

Signals about collective behavioral norms are embedded in an organization’s culture. Behaviors are endorsed as either appropriate or inappropriate by organizational members. When the organization culture reinforces ethical behaviors, those behaviors tend to increase and vice versa. In fact, the implicit influence inherent in the organization culture may exceed the explicit influence of written codes of conduct in guiding employee ethical decision-making and behavior (Shih, 2006). Ethical decisions are therefore based in part on how members reconcile their behavior with what is expected and condoned in the organization (Trevino, 1986).

When interpersonal behavior is viewed through the lens of ethics, it is readily apparent that the treatment employees experience is in large part determined by the collective organization and its cultural norms. If the behavioral norms dictate that abuse and harassment are acceptable or even desirable, then such behavior will thrive. Conversely, if the behavioral norms dictate that employees and others are treated with dignity, consideration, and respect, then those behaviors will prevail.

Organization leaders along with human resources professionals can take several steps to instill ethical standards within the organization culture (Joseph and Esen, 2003; Shih, 2006; Trevino, 1986). Primarily, written ethical behavior standards should be developed and disseminated to all employees. To insure comprehension and compliance, all employees should participate in training about the organization’s ethical standards and code of conduct. An individual with appropriate skills should be assigned to administer the ethics program and to conduct investigations of reported violations. All employees should be held accountable to the stated ethical standards. And, the organization’s reward system should align with the ethical behavior standards. Employee selection practices should encompass an assessment of ethical conduct. Lastly, an effective means of reporting suspected violations of the ethical code of conduct must be instituted that protects employee anonymity and prohibits retaliation against employees that report.

Support

Experiencing interpersonal mistreatment and harassment often results in an increased level of stress for the affected individual (Colligan and Higgins, 2005; Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003). One mechanism for ameliorating this type of workplace stress is social support provided by various work and non-work individuals (LaRocco, House, and French, 1980). Social support has been broadly defined as “the availability of helping relationships and the quality of those relationships” (Viswesvaran, Sanchez, and Fisher, 1999). Accessing social support can help to reduce the negative mental health outcomes often associated with mistreatment and harassment.

Two key dimensions of social support are the types and sources of support (Fenlason and Beehr, 1994). Researchers have traditionally classified social support into two types; emotional (empathy and caring) and instrumental (tangible help with stressors). There is a strong intercorrelation between these two types of support when they are provided by the same source. Typically three sources of support are considered; the employee’s supervisor, the employee’s coworkers, and the employee’s family and friends.

Emotional support takes the form of empathic listening and demonstrating concern and caring. In general, emotional support can take one of three content forms – positive, negative, and non-work related (Fenlason and Beehr, 1994). Positive support focuses on affirming aspects of work with an emphasis on the good things that happen in the workplace. Negative support focuses on adverse elements of work with an emphasis on shared commiseration of the unfavorable things in the workplace. Non-work related support focuses on the individual's life outside of work. Rather than discussing the workplace and the stresses therein, non-work support serves to distract the individual from the work-related problems and redirect discussions to more pleasant aspects of life.

Instrumental support takes the form of assistance such as physical aid, providing knowledge or advice, and other actions to reduce the employee's workload (Fenlason and Beehr, 1994; Kaufmann and Beehr, 1986). While emotional support may be rendered by any of the three sources of support, in general, instrumental support can only be rendered by job-related sources. LaRocco et al. (1980) found that job-related sources of support were the most effective for reducing job-related stressors. This is logical because job-related sources of support are best able to understand the circumstances and to provide both emotional and instrumental support. Maximum support results from supervisors and coworkers engaging in positive and non-work related discussions with the affected employee. Conversely, little appears to be gained by engaging in a gripe session where the focus is on negative, unfavorable elements of the job (Fenlason and Beehr, 1994).

Various practices can enhance the availability of effective social support in the workplace. Lowe, Schellenberg, and Shannon (2003) found that good communication, friendly and helpful coworkers, a positive relationship with one's supervisor, and receiving recognition are important factors that contribute to workers' perceptions of the health of their work environment. Because social relations play such a critical role in helping employees to cope with the stressors in their work environment, organization managers should invest resources in developing cooperative work groups and decreasing competition among workers. Appropriate reward and recognition programs can improve employee perceptions of support. Further, because support from the employee's immediate supervisor is such a potent mitigating force, supervisors should be trained to provide positive and/or non-work related communications when an employee reports being under stress. All employees should be trained in giving both effective emotional and instrumental support to coworkers.

Policies

Workplace policies are important to guide and govern employee behavior on the job. Policies express the boundaries of acceptable work conduct and explicitly convey expectations to employees (Snell and Youndt, 1995). Organizations develop policies to address many aspects of employee behavior including prohibitions against harassment, particularly sexual harassment.

Policies are disseminated in various formats. Organizations use printed employee handbooks, intranet websites, and other means of distribution to assure employee receipt. Further, employee orientation programs and ongoing training are used to assure comprehension and compliance. Effective policies should address important workplace issues and at the same time reflect the changes in the business environment. In their SHRM white paper, Rubenfeld and Laumeier (2006) point out that policies should provide procedural guidance as well as increased flexibility to deal with the challenges of an evolutionary employment landscape.

Developing and implementing a policy prohibiting interpersonal mistreatment and workplace bullying are paramount to creating a respectful culture. Organization leaders must define the guidelines of appropriate workplace behavior and disseminate this information to employees. Employees cannot be expected to behave according to standards if those standards are not clearly outlined and explained to them. Rayner, Hoel, and Cooper (2002) provide a clear, detailed description of the elements of effective policy development including definitions of acceptable and unacceptable behavior, details of the reporting and investigatory processes, and consequences for violating the policy.

Effective investigative and enforcement procedures must be developed to give life to the policy statement. DuBois and colleagues (DuBois, Faley, Kustis, and Knapp, 1999) found that the extent of organizational actions taken to prevent sexual harassment directly influenced the perception of favorability of organizational responses. In essence, an organization that implements numerous measures to eliminate harassment will likely be seen by employees as more favorably-disposed to addressing a specific complaint. In such organizations, employees feel safe in reporting and do not fear retribution. In addition to establishing a policy, important organization actions include swift and thorough complaint investigation, enforcement of sanctions against harassers, awareness training, publicizing complaint channels, and providing counseling services for targets.

Equality

Statutory requirements for equal treatment of employees are imposed by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and various other federal and State laws. At a minimum, organizations must comply with these legal mandates. Employees must be treated equally in all employment related matters regardless of their race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, and disability status. Hiring decisions, compensation matters, access to training and development programs, and enrollment in benefit programs must be done in a fair and consistent manner for all employees.

While legal mandates establish a floor below which employers cannot operate, an organization is free to impose more stringent standards on its own operations. For example, an organization can make promotion decisions transparent, explaining why a particular individual was chosen for the upgrade. Disciplinary matters can be routed through a peer review system. A voluntary audit can be conducted by an external entity dedicated to worker fair treatment. In this way the organization raises the bar beyond mere compliance to a higher level of fairness and equal treatment for employees.

Historically, organizational justice research has shown that employees seek both distributive and procedural fairness in organizational policies and practices (Greenberg, 1988). Procedural justice, the mechanism for distributing rewards and punishments, encompasses the process used by an organization to allocate resources among organization members. Distributive justice, the perception of what decisions are reached, focuses on the fairness of a given outcome or the ends achieved. Organization management must earn employees' belief in the fairness of both the decision making method and the decisions reached regarding employment practices (Greenberg, 1990).

Further, the perception of fair interpersonal treatment has emerged as an important variable in organization research. Moving beyond procedural and distributive justice, the notion of interpersonal justice relates to employee perceptions of how they are treated by supervisors and coworkers. This concept involves not only the quality of interpersonal treatment experienced

when organizational procedures are enacted, but the broader phenomenon of generalized interpersonal interactions and encounters with various organization members (Donovan, Drasgow, and Munson, 1998). Treatment by both supervisors and coworkers contribute to perceptions of a fair workplace. Donovan and colleagues (1998) found that negative interpersonal relations are related to abuse, harassment, and hostility in the workplace. Further, job satisfaction and organizational commitment decrease when employees perceive that unfair interpersonal treatment dominates the work environment.

Organization management can best establish an environment of fairness by being open, public, participative, and nonsecretive in their actions (Greenberg, 1988). Communicating fair intentions and keeping others informed are critical to building employee trust and confidence in both the process and outcomes. Giving employees an opportunity to contribute to decisions and to participate in important organizational initiatives reduces their suspicion of a hidden agenda by managers. Likewise, promoting positive coworker communications via training and reward systems can enhance the perceptions of fair interpersonal treatment. Fostering a workplace in which cooperation rather than competition prevails sets the stage for employees to interact in a beneficial, considerate, and respectful manner.

Culture

Schein (1983) defines organization culture as the pattern of basic assumptions that organization founders develop about the nature of the world in which the organization exists, how to survive in it, and how to manage and integrate internal relationships to operate effectively. Culture is not tangible; one cannot see or touch culture in an organization. It is the assumptions upon which the organization leaders build the value system, behavior patterns, and other visible manifestations of those beliefs. All organization members must be taught the culture as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel about the problems facing the organization. The very essence of an organization's culture is shared assumptions about how the organization deals with these challenges.

Culture is embedded in the fabric of the organization in various ways. Some of these embedding mechanisms are more explicit than others and not all mechanisms are equally potent in formulating culture. However, the mechanisms can reinforce each other and send a clear message to organization members about what leaders expect. Mechanisms identified by Schein (1983) include:

1. Formal statements of philosophy
2. Design of physical spaces and buildings
3. Deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching by leaders
4. Explicit reward and status systems
5. Stories, legends, and myths about key people and events
6. What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control
7. Leader reactions to critical incidents and crises
8. The organization design and structure
9. Organizational systems and procedures
10. Criteria used for human resource selection and placement decisions

Organizational culture is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon. O'Reilly, Chatman, and Caldwell (1991) identified at least seven dimensions of culture, specifically, innovation,

stability, respect for people, outcome orientation, attention to detail, team orientation, and aggressiveness. Of particular importance in the present paper is the explication of the respect for people, team orientation, and aggressiveness dimensions. Respect for people includes the items respect for individual, fairness, and tolerance. Team orientation includes the items team oriented, collaboration, and people oriented. Aggressiveness includes the items aggressive, competitive, and socially responsible (which loads negatively on that factor).

Clearly the culture strongly influences how organization members behave towards one another. Through the embedding mechanisms previously discussed, organization members learn appropriate interpersonal conduct by following their leaders and earning rewards for culturally congruent actions. Formal anti-harassment statements, prompt leader response to harassment incidents, and leader attention to interpersonal conduct can reinforce the expectation for respectful treatment of individuals in the workplace.

Interpersonal mistreatment and harassment cannot thrive in an unsupportive culture. Brodsky (1976) stressed that “harassment in the work setting requires at least acquiescence by management.” The organization culture must convey absolute intolerance of mistreatment and harassment in myriad ways so that would-be perpetrators understand that their behavior goes against the organization’s norms. Likewise, a robust anti-harassment culture will provide assurance to potential targets that they will be heard and protected (Rayner et al., 2002).

Organization managers can employ any number of Schein’s (1983) mechanisms for creating and sustaining a positive interpersonal culture. The importance of leader conduct cannot be overstated as organization members rely heavily on how those in power behave (Schein, 1983). Explicit policy statements supported by consistent reward and selection practices deliver a strong message of appropriate standards of behavior. Establishing a workplace that emphasizes cooperation rather than competition among workers further cements the notion of respect and harmony within the work group. Dealing with employees in a fair, just manner will create the foundation for mutual trust that is critical for respect to flourish.

Tolerance

Respectful workplaces exhibit a tolerance for individuals of various backgrounds and talents. Trends such as increasing global commerce along with higher rates of immigration are resulting in the displacement of the White male domination of the workplace. Organizations now employ a substantially more heterogeneous group of workers than in the past (BLS, 2007). Workforce diversity within modern organizations abounds and diversity management efforts have evolved beyond simple compliance with civil rights legislation. The requirement for diversity initiatives to produce bottom-line impact is giving way to a broader business imperative focused on the ethical treatment of all individuals and a growing appreciation for the unique contribution of each member of the organization (O’Leary and Weathington, 2006).

Research has shown that workforce diversity may result in both positive and negative outcomes to the organization (Jackson and Joshi, 2004; Kochan et al., 2003). While diversity may enhance innovation and creativity, the downside is that conflict and turnover may increase when dissimilar employees are required to work together on teams and in work groups. Organizations are therefore in somewhat of a Catch-22¹ regarding how to enfold workers with diverse demographic characteristics, problem-solving approaches, interpersonal communication styles, and career objectives into a cohesive unit.

¹ From the Joseph Heller (1961) novel *Catch-22* in which a paradox in practice makes one a victim of its provisions regardless of the actions one takes.

Traditional diversity initiatives were instituted to help American organizations leverage cultural diversity for competitive advantage. Despite the enactment of equal employment opportunity and affirmative action mandates (EEO/AAP), organizational cultures did not readily accept underrepresented groups. Early diversity programs attempted to change employee attitudes about individuals they perceived to be different from themselves. Of course, surface level differences such as race and gender were obvious foci of these training programs. Slowly, a wider range of physical, cultural, ethnic, personality, and interpersonal differences were included in diversity awareness programs (Kochan et al., 2003; Milliken and Martins, 1996).

The new paradigm is that of an inclusive workplace where input from all members is valued and an attitude of open-mindedness prevails. Rather than a narrow definition of diversity based upon EEO/AAP requirements for hiring and selection of diverse workers, progressive organizations adopt a broad definition of diversity that encompasses a wider range of initiatives to address the needs of workers and customers (Carrell, Mann, and Sigler, 2006). Tolerance for differences has become a more expansive concept by which organizations welcome and embrace input from diverse perspectives and provide opportunities for non-traditional populations to participate in organizational efforts.

Organization leaders can take several important steps to enhance a spirit of tolerance and open-mindedness within the organizational culture. At a minimum, organizations should enact a written policy regarding diversity to highlight its importance in meeting the organization's goals. Talent acquisition strategies that support targeted recruitment efforts to reach underrepresented groups and utilizing selection criteria that consider diverse factors should be implemented. Career management programs and awareness training are additional core elements of a sound diversity program.

Kochan et al., (2003) offer further recommendations for organizations that rest on a sustained, systemic, long-term commitment to diversity. A supportive and cooperative organizational culture along with group leadership skills are important elements in the success of such programs. First, organizations should undertake an analytical study of the links between business performance, workforce composition, and human resource practices to better understand how diversity is impacting organizational outcomes. A second key recommendation is to provide training for managers in group process skills, conflict resolution, and effective communication.

SUMMARY

Workplace interactions built on a foundation of respect should reduce and eventually eliminate interpersonal mistreatment and workplace harassment. The model presented and explicated herein is necessarily complex as it reflects human interactions which are decidedly complex. Workers arrive at the workplace with their own unique values, talents, expectations, and personalities. The environment created by organization leaders and other members shapes the daily experience for each worker. Given a healthy, respectful workplace, workers can more fully participate in helping the organization achieve its mission.

The seven dimensions of the respectful workplace, responsibility, ethics, support, policies, equality, culture, and tolerance, are comprehensive and likely not exhaustive. These dimensions touch on many aspects of the work environment that can impact worker behavior and set the stage for positive interactions. Likewise, organizations that fail to create a healthy workplace can expect more negative interactions, mistreatment, and harassment and their resultant

consequences. Additional dimensions and aspects of the work environment may have been overlooked in the creation of this model. I do not assert that all variables needed to create a respectful workplace have been included. This paper represents a preliminary effort to better understand the dynamics involved in creating a culture that will lead to beneficial, prosocial workplace conduct. An empirical test of this model will begin to provide evidence of the potency of various dimensions in staving off antisocial behaviors in the workplace.

A major objective of this article was to provide organization leaders with guidance and recommendations on how they can proactively address interpersonal mistreatment and harassment by creating a culture of respect within the organization. Workers are strongly influenced by leader words and actions. An important first step in leading with respect is for leaders to understand how to establish and maintain a healthy, respectful culture in which workers can prosper.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Managers hold the key to creating and sustaining a respectful workplace. The relationship between employee and manager defines the work experience for the employee and is crucial in setting the stage for positive organizational outcomes. Interpersonal harassment will not manifest if the workplace norms and values are built on dignity and respect. When managers understand the myriad ways in which their actions contribute to the health of the work environment they can take the appropriate actions to prevent dysfunctional behavior and create a setting in which employees thrive.

Establishing effective role definitions and expectations reduces employee role conflict and ambiguity and creates the conditions under which employees can most effectively perform their tasks. Conflict and frustration decrease when managers give employees the necessary framework in which to operate. Managers that model ethical behavior and demand the same from all members of the work group set a standard for proper workplace conduct. Acting with integrity towards all organizational constituents demonstrates a commitment to respectful relationships and interactions.

The emotional and instrument social support provided by one's manager can go a long way towards reducing employee stress and frustration. Managers play a key role in creating a harmonious, supportive work environment through valuing cooperation over competition, providing feedback and recognition to employees, and rewarding behavior consistent with the organization's values. In addition to these informal mechanisms of support, formal policies provide organizationally-sanctioned oversight and remedies. Managers can reinforce the organization's policy administration and enforcement and facilitate speedy resolution of employee complaints.

Perceptions of organizational justice are strongly influenced by managerial decisions and how those decisions are evaluated by employees. When the same standards are applied to all and employees feel that everyone is treated fairly and equally, they are more likely to trust the manager, the process, and the organization. Operating at a level beyond that prescribed by law reinforces an environment of respect for each employee.

The organizational culture impacts the way employees behave and view the organization. Managers are powerful examples of the cultural values in the organization. The organizational design, reward systems, procedures, and decision making criteria all reflect the culture. If

respect and dignity are woven into the organization's culture, employees will receive a consistent message of how to behave and what is important to the organization's leaders.

Finally, demonstrating tolerance for the wide diversity of individuals in the workplace leads to an environment based on inclusion rather than exclusion. Managers that exhibit a welcoming posture and value each individual's unique contribution will benefit from greater innovation and creativity from the work group. Managers can proactively involve every member of the work group and endorse the importance of bringing diverse perspectives to bear.

Managers create the conditions under which employees operate every day and they have considerable power to influence employee behavior. The emergence of antisocial, negative behaviors can be quelled by proactive, prosocial manager actions. There is no reason why every manager cannot adopt affirmative behaviors to prevent such discord. Managers have countless tactics at their disposal to enhance the unity and performance of their work groups. Learning about these techniques and instituting any number of them will result in better relationships with employees as well as improved results at the work group and organizational level.

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