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Field Notes: Bursting their bubble: How to have difficult conversations with your staff

by Marie-Jose' (M.J.) Caro, Registrar, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Daytona Beach Campus, AACRAO Professional Access and Equity Committee; and Edward F. Trombley III, Registrar, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Worldwide, FACRAO Vice President of Communications and Member Relations, SACRAO Topics in Higher Education Committee

At the summer 2017 Florida Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (FACRAO) Regional Conference, the authors shared an interactive session entitled, "Bursting their Bubble: How to Say Difficult Things to your Staff," in which they discussed the importance of proactively addressing workplace behaviors by sharing stories, experiences and insights. Audience participation added to the depth of the discussion and resulted in sharing tools, techniques, and tactics for handling these scenarios that were grounded in actual workplace experience. In this article based upon that presentation, Marie-Jose' (M.J.) Caro and Edward Trombley discuss behaviors that frustrate managers and co-workers, and that impact workplace productivity. They share their recommendations for navigating the conversations around these behaviors in order to generate the most positive outcomes from the most potentially negative situations.

Things that bug other people

- Making unpleasant noises
- Emanating bodily odors
- Wearing inappropriate attire
- Wearing fragrances
- Talking to themselves (whistling, humming, etc.)
- Having an abrasive personality (aggressive, pushy, dominant, etc.)
- Using their cell phone

This category of behaviors is one of the most difficult to approach because it is one of the most personal, which reflects directly upon the individual, as opposed to their behavior in the workplace. These issues must be addressed sensitively, but can be mitigated by establishing and proactively communicating office policy around dress codes, fragrance use, cell phone usage, etc. Supervisors may want to acquaint themselves with religious and cultural norms that may impact these behaviors, such as mode of dress. While difficult and potentially unpleasant to handle, these situations are often the ones most potentially corrosive if left unaddressed.

Things that make other people uncomfortable

- Harassing or bullying behavior
- Insensitivity (cultural, gender, religious, etc.)

- Complications of workplace relationships (family members, friends, significant others)
- Talking Religion and Politics
- Finding the “Goldilocks” office temperature
- Perceived favoritism or neglect (Teleworkers vs. Office Workers)
- Yelling and screaming
- Disagreeing

This category reflects upon behaviors in the workplace and employee interactions. These situations sometimes arise out of misperceptions among staff member behaviors or differing personality types. In these circumstances, the manager often becomes a negotiator, trying to broker an agreement among two or more conflicting opinions or styles. The supervisor must employ their full managerial tool belt to guide staff toward a compromise where no single member is 100% satisfied. While these behaviors may not be directly impacting the supervisor, s/he ignores them at the risk of alienating the employees in question; since these situations involve multiple players their potential adverse consequences can quickly impact office morale in a negative way.

Things that make bosses crazy

- Showing up late or leaving early
- Abusing lunch hours, sick days and vacation days
- Tattling
- Managing time (productivity versus socializing)
- Practicing negativity
- Using social media/surfing the web
- Hearing “I’m on a break...” and “It’s not my job...”
- Failing to take ownership for their areas of responsibility

This category involves the actual performance of the job and how the employee manages themselves and their time during their work hours. Fostering these behaviors begins with setting expectations and being clear with policy and procedure. Supervisors must quickly address any inappropriate behaviors or job performance issues in this category. If allowed to continue unchecked, these behaviors may become the norm and the supervisor will have less validity in tackling them over time. Empowering employees to

manage their responsibilities and job duties is a good first step in fostering ownership in, and accountability for, their work performance.

Recommendations

- Make your policies clear
- Set expectations immediately with new staff members
- Confront problems quickly and directly
- Keep notes on your meetings with staff
- Praise in public/correct in private
- Prevent problems from escalating
- When individual issues arise, reiterate appropriate policies to all members of the team

While managing employee performance and behaviors is one of the most challenging tasks a leader faces, following these recommendations consistently and fairly is a good first step in creating a happy and productive office environment. Generally, these conversations are best initiated by listening, soliciting feedback from the employee in question, and discussing the desired outcome, rather than beginning with a disciplinary or punitive approach. Often these situations can be resolved in a low-key, non-confrontational fashion simply through peaceful discussion. It is as uncomfortable for the supervisor as it is for the employee but managers should not be dissuaded from tackling it head-on. While these kinds of discussions are never easy, they do become easier to manage with repetition, and the more positive outcomes you see from these direct interventions, the less daunting they will become.