

Passively Creating a Hostile Work Environment

Leadership and a Failure of Communication

Most leaders readily understand the negative impact of a hostile work environment on employees. Employees who aren't properly trained, who aren't given the tools and resources to do their jobs, and who are demeaned by the abusive actions of supervisors or other employees, cannot contribute effectively to the team effort and the success of their organization.

Often the hostile work environment is created by bullying, teasing, or insensitive remarks or actions that center on:

- Gender – sexually suggestive remarks, posting inappropriate pictures in the workplace
- Race or ethnicity – “Polish” jokes, making fun of accents or racial and ethnic stereotypes
- Religious beliefs – not respecting a person’s religious or moral values by telling “dirty” jokes or making fun of another’s religious symbols or practices
- Age – “over the hill” comments or pranks centered on the young, inexperienced “rookie”
- Sexual orientation – using disparaging words to characterize someone with a different orientation
- Disabilities – mimicking a person’s stutter or limp
- Differentiation – drawing attention in a demeaning way to anything that isolates and mocks someone who is different from the norm in any way

When an enterprise is trying to build a team focused on a common vision and shared goals it cannot afford for any team member to be demeaned, handicapped, or marginalized by words or actions that exclude. Leaders at all levels are expected to intervene to ensure that this does not happen. If they don't get actively involved to stop such behavior, they are abetting it and allowing a hostile work environment.

A more subtle factor in creating a hostile work environment is the supervisor who does not communicate well or often with his or her team or who doesn't pay attention to what is going on in his or her section or department. Consider that:

- Individuals in any group setting rarely have neutral feelings toward or about the others in the group. They like some and dislike others, usually for their own, sometimes hard to discern, reasons.
- People are naturally attracted to and spend time with those they like and avoid those they don't. This results in cliques of the included and, outside the cliques – the excluded.
- The excluded often feel jealous, resentful, and fearful because of their exclusion.
- In the absence of ongoing timely and accurate information, fearful people assume the worst. Fearful people can be paranoid and perceive discrimination and favoritism where it may not exist.
- A fragmented work team cannot perform effectively.

When a supervisor does not engage daily with team members, give specific directions regarding who is to do what, and communicate thoroughly about all matters affecting the team, the fragmented team will gossip, backbite, and bicker among themselves. Seldom will they work together and often their antagonisms affect members, guests, and co-workers. Sometimes their behavior is passive-aggressive – trying to sabotage the efforts of others, all the while acting helpful and friendly.

If all this seems outlandish or too much like Psych 101, let me say that a number of times in my career I have taken jobs in dysfunctional organizations – operations that were failing for a host of obvious reasons, but underlying every one was a previous manager who did not communicate with his or her staff. In the absence of communication employees vying for advantage or position continually fought and intrigued among themselves, even to the exclusion of doing their jobs. In every case, the problems went away quickly by building trust based upon daily direction, constant communication, and forcefully putting an immediate stop to inappropriate behavior.

If a manager doesn't understand this important point and fails to communicate and interact daily with all employees, he or she may be responsible for passively creating a hostile work environment. Such inattention to the daily functioning of the organization is just as destructive as a supervisor who actively engages in demeaning, disparaging, and abusive behaviors.

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