



WORKPLACE WISDOM
25 WAYS TO SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE
WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS

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INTRODUCTION

We have all been there at one time or another. Forced to work with co-workers, supervisors, managers, subordinates, Boards of Directors, and Business Owners that seem to have been put on this planet for the sheer purpose of making our lives as unpleasant as possible. This becomes even more of an issue as workers today spend more and more time at “the office”, sometimes as much as 80% - 90% of their waking hours each week.

So it is no wonder that people have such a sincere need for tips and strategies on learning how to cope with, alleviate, and ultimately prevent current and future workplace-related conflict.

Relationship Management Expert, Ted Mouradian has been helping people to accomplish just that for years through his newspaper advice column entitled, “Workplace Wisdom”.

After sitting down with Ted one day and reading through a few of his past Workplace Wisdom articles, I knew we needed to share this incredible information with everyone! So, I asked Ted to go through all of his past articles (which was no small feat) and pick out what he felt were his *25 absolute best, most valuable Workplace Wisdoms* to share exclusively with you!

I have no doubt that you will find in the following pages more than a few ideas on how you can dramatically improve the quality of relationships you have with the people you encounter every day in your workplace.

Enjoy,



Gavin Rouble

A Simple Apology Often Works Best

Dear Ted:

I work in a medium sized firm in western Canada and I supervise about seven people. Last week I think I made a huge blunder. One of the women in my office informed me that her father died and that she needed to take some time off. We are at a really busy time and she is critical to dealing with some sensitive issues at work. I don't know why, but I said, "Boy your father certainly picked a bad time to die". Of course I really didn't mean anything by it but you could see the look on her face said it all. She then turned around and left. I haven't had an opportunity to say anything to her and the funeral was not the place to bring it up. Have you any idea how I should address this?

This sounds like a perfect example of brain in neutral and mouth in drive. Your question brings up a philosophy that I have that zero tolerance does not work. From your question I can see that you are a good person and this was just a case of a poor choice of words. Often we say things that we don't mean or that we may regret and then the dominos begin to fall creating more and more issues.

The first thing I suggest is that she needs to know how sorry you are. An apology is in order. That can be done several ways, you can get her a card or you can talk to her when she comes back. I would try to use words similar to these.

"I have to tell you that I am not only very sorry for the comments I made last week, but I am truly embarrassed as well. I shouldn't have said it and therefore I hope you will accept my apology."

You notice how short and sweet this apology is. Many of us believe we have to go further to try and justify the behaviour and frankly we don't. For example to say "but as you know we have been really busy and all hell was breaking loose and all I could think about was losing you for a few weeks..."

The lesson here is to always give a simple apology without a long justification for what you said or why you said it. By adding the "but" to any apology you will negate the apology.

Another example of what not to say would be, "I'm sorry I said that to you BUT if you had of done X and X I would not have treated you that way." In this case we take the apology and turn it on the person who deserves the apology. They will actually feel worse than they did before the apology.

Next, if the person needs to vent about what you said and it may sound like an attack, do not begin to justify what you said because you will put yourself in the same position as above; the apology will be negated.

A tip for the person being apologized to

Whenever someone apologizes it can be an uncomfortable situation. Many people have a very difficult time apologizing and I am not defending that, I am just stating fact. When we receive an apology sometimes we don't think it is sincere or that they were forced to apologize. In my mind, they took the time to come forward and as long as the apology was said simply without a huge fanfare I will accept the apology with a simple thank you.

After someone apologizes then you need to let it go and move on. If the same type of behaviour keeps repeating itself then the apology becomes mute and it may be time to take further steps. But in my book everyone has the right to make a mistake and everyone has an obligation to apologize if that mistake has harmed others.

Absent Board Members Should Honour their Responsibility

Dear Ted:

I am the president of a volunteer board and lately we have had several board members not show up for our monthly board meeting. I know people are busy and this is a volunteer organization but because of their absence we have not had quorum and have therefore not been able to conduct our business. How do you dictate to volunteers?

Having sat on many volunteer boards I hear your concerns. Many people put their name forward for these positions and don't really understand the time commitment involved. Others get on and then realize that it is not what they thought it would be, but don't know how to get out. And of course, there are those who really shouldn't have been put on the board in the first place.

I would first suggest that you look at your by-laws and make sure you have attendance clauses that enable you to remove a board member who misses a prescribed number of meetings. Second, I would look at the by-law that dictates the number of members needed for a quorum. You may find that those numbers are too high.

Having looked at those two by-laws, I would then contact each of the members who have not shown up and find out why. Don't send out a blanket email, as this could not sit well with some and create more conflict than is needed. I would use some words like these at a personal meeting with each person.

"I want to talk to you about your absence from the last three monthly board meetings. We do have a by-law that states if a board member misses more than three meetings in a row without notice or a valid reason their seat may be considered vacated and they can be replaced. I would hate to see it come to that, as I believe you are a valued board member. I need to find out what we, as a board, can do to facilitate your continued involvement. Has something changed since you joined the board? Is the time and day we have the meeting inconvenient? Is your

absence only temporary?"

Of course you can alter the questions to suit your needs. The key is to find out why they are missing the meetings and see if there is something that can be done to accommodate the board member without harming the others.

A tip for the absent board member

You are not doing yourself any favors in your community by not honoring your responsibility as a member of this board. In many communities, word travels quickly and good reputations can be harmed.

I would suggest that you be honest about how you are feeling when approached by the president. If it is time to move on, then do so and resign from the board. If there are personalities or board policies that need to be addressed then do so in a respectful and honest way.

You may of course have come to the realization that this board is not for you and it may be time to walk away. In the past, I have joined a few boards and it turned out that it did not fit in with my expectations so rather than create issues or just not show up, I chose to politely resign. I did it respectfully and did not bad mouth the board to the community at large.

Keep in mind that your seat can be filled with someone who may be a better fit with the aims and objectives of the board. Do the right thing, either attend and contribute or bow out and move on.

Acknowledging Your Behaviour Is A Good First Step

Dear Ted:

I know from time to time I can be a real jerk and say things that can really annoy people. I am really not a bad person but I seem to get caught up in the teasing game and sometimes take it too far. My other problem is I don't know what to do after that happens. I know I have hurt some of my coworker's feelings but it is really hard for me to apologize. Any ideas or tips?

Answer: I understand your situation; we want to have some fun at work and we start with a little prank or comment and then sometimes it gets out of hand. It can be difficult for some to understand the difference between teasing (banter, joking, chitchat) and taunting (snide, unkind, hurtful). The answer to that sometimes lies in how the target of the teasing is reacting to the situation. If your coworker asks you to stop the behaviour, or seems uncomfortable then you need to stop immediately. You have just crossed the line.

I congratulate you because you have taken the first step and that is to understand that you can be a jerk. Many people cannot and will not see how their actions are affecting others and they will never take responsibility for their actions, so good on you.

Whenever you are in a situation where someone tells you in no uncertain terms to stop, then stop. Don't start making excuses like, "come on I was only joking" or "what's the matter can't you take a joke?" You need to immediately stop the behaviour and then say something like this.

"I am sorry that my actions negatively affected you. At no time did I want to harm you; that was never my intent. I will certainly stop and make sure that it will not happen again."

I don't believe in zero tolerance because I don't think it works. I would hate to see a workplace where the workers couldn't have fun. When you spend eight hours a day with

the same coworkers you should not be afraid to have a little fun; but never at the expense of others. The key is to know when you have crossed that line from teasing to taunting.

When you realize a line has been crossed and you apologize to others it means you have learned how to take responsibility for your actions. That realization will change your life. Being able to own your behaviour will have others see you in a new light. Contrary to what you may be thinking, others will not see you as weak. They will see you as caring and human, and we are allowed to make mistakes.

A tip for the coworkers

Every workplace has a joker and sometimes that person will cross a line. The first time this happens let them know how you are feeling and be clear when you ask them to stop the behaviour. Then, with grace, accept the apology. If the behaviour continues it may be time to take it to the next level and talk to a supervisor about the behaviour. I must make it clear that most jurisdictions have anti harassment legislation in place and the employer must ensure a harassment free workplace. But you need to be clear that you want the behaviour to stop and then it will be up to the employer to support you.

Bottom line is if a person wants to change, then help them along. It is difficult to take 10 to 20 years of behaviour and change that overnight. But if the person chooses not to take you seriously and will not change then you need to act appropriately to ensure the unwanted behaviour stops.

An Unwanted Nickname is Causing Stress

Dear Ted,

I work in a union environment and for years one of the union reps has been calling employees by nicknames. Some names are ok and accepted and some are degrading to the individual. I have tolerated the nickname that I have been given. It's hard to tell someone you have known and liked for years that you don't like the name he calls you and never did. I feel strongly that he should be using everyone's proper names when addressing them, especially in the workplace. I do believe he thinks it is innocent and funny, but it has gone too far for too long. I think a union steward's responsibility is to act as a role model and conduct themselves respectfully. I need to approach this the right way; could you offer some advice?

Here is a common problem in many workplaces. You have an individual who has been behaving a certain way for many years and no one (until now) has said anything to this person. The fact that he is the union rep makes it even more complicated. We have to remember that even though certain things were OK in the past, they may not be OK today and need to be addressed.

You should be cautious as to how you approach this issue as you don't want to be seen as being petty. Management does hold some responsibility for the behaviour however, that can be difficult if no one has said anything to management about this person's comments in the past. I also know that in some workplaces, going to management about a brother or sister could be seen as "ratting" someone out.

If this union rep is a good person (and I am assuming he is) then you need to take this person aside and tell him how you are feeling. Here are some suggested words.

"We have been working together for many years and I see you as a valuable friend and

co-worker. A few years back you gave me a nickname as you have with many other co-workers. I need to tell you that I never really liked that nickname and would prefer that you use my first name from now on. It may not seem like a big deal, but to me it is and as a friend I felt I needed to say something."

By going to this person first and respectfully, directly and honestly letting him know how you feel, you will give him an opportunity to evaluate his behaviour. If he does not take it well, then I would suggest you approach the union executives and see if they could deal with it in house rather than involve management. By taking this step first, your co-workers and the union will see this as respectful. If it needs to go to the next level at least they will know that you tried.

A tip for the union rep

You are the union rep and as such should hold yourself at a higher level of conduct. The employees will be looking to you as a role model and your behaviour will represent the union's attitude in the workplace.

As times change, so must your behaviour. It may have begun as some harmless ribbing or light hearted name calling years ago; however, it may now be seen as offensive or unprofessional.

As you would not accept any type of disrespect from management, your brothers and sister should not receive any disrespect from you as their union rep. Keep in mind at all times that you are representing your union; do it proud.

Assistant Sunday school teacher feels bullied

Dear Ted:

I volunteer on Sunday at my local church as a Sunday school teacher. I actually assist the senior Sunday school teacher. She has been with the church for over 40 years and although she is a good volunteer, she can become very possessive of her position as the Sunday school teacher. There are times when she actually bullies the rest of us to get her own way. I know that a lot of volunteers won't even work with her and that saddens me because it affects our children. I have talked to the minister and some of the parish council members but they don't seem to want to address the issue. They tell me that I just have to learn how to handle her and that she has had the job for so many years that it is difficult to address the issues. I don't want to harm this woman and I don't want to stop teaching Sunday school, but I get sick to my stomach every Sunday. What can I do?

Believe it or not, this happens in many volunteer organizations. Volunteers are put in a position and over the years a sense of ownership comes into play. It makes it even more difficult when it occurs in a religious setting because one would think that living by the various teachings should take care of the issues, but of course our human nature comes into play each and every time.

We need to keep in mind that this person honestly believes she is right and that she is doing everything she possibly can to have the best Sunday school experience for the youth of your parish. She also may truly believe that she is right and that she knows best. The other complication is that probably no one has ever told her any different over the last 40 years, they just learned to work around her or not to volunteer at all. In my book neither of those ways of dealing is useful.

I would approach her in a way that will help her accept your suggestions by using tact and by telling her what you need and not what she is doing wrong. If she feels threatened in any way she will put up the

walls and if you do not have the backing of the parish council you are in for an uphill battle. Keep in mind you are dealing with a person whose sense of self and probably reason for being is her weekly stint as 'the' Sunday school teacher. You should also keep in mind that her attitude might be that 'we have always done it this way and it has worked so why change it now'. Remember most people don't like change and will even fight against it.

Try making little suggestions at first so she won't see you as a threat. You can even enhance her trust by having it seem like it was her idea. Little by little she will begin to trust you and not see you as this young upstart that is trying to take over her job.

A tip for the long-term volunteer

Congratulations for giving of your time not only to your parish but I also assume to other great causes as well. People who give of their time over a span of 40 years are truly dedicated to the betterment of their communities and if it wasn't for all the selfless volunteers many of the services that are available in our communities would not be possible.

I also know that as we age and as we almost become fixtures in these organizations we forget that someday it may be appropriate to hand over the reins to the next generation. Please don't look at them as trying to ease you out but look at them as the ones who will carry the torch for the next part of the journey. These young people are looking for mentors, so why not leave a lasting legacy by mentoring the next generation of volunteers and slowly and appropriately hand them the reins.

Attitude And Tone Will Save The Day

Dear Ted:

I read your job advice for a secondary school teacher with 20 years of experience. The article was in the Saturday edition of the St. Catharines Standard October 30, 2010. I have some thoughts that I'd like to share with you. As a retired teacher I believe that your fish rots from the head comment goes beyond the classroom and to the entire administration as well as the parents. Without everyone working together to solve disciplinary problems the teacher does not have a chance. I also believe that you cannot teach without discipline and disruption should have consequences. Too many students these days think that they are running the classroom and it should be the teacher who runs the classroom not the students. I am not there to entertain; they are there to learn.

You bring up a couple of good points. First the system does have to be in place to support the teacher as the old saying goes it does take a village to raise a single child. And I do believe that there should be rules and those rules should have consequences. But let's look at how and why rules are put into place and the difference between compliance and buy in.

In the old days there were strict rules in the classroom and there were dire consequences if one didn't adhere to the rules even though some of those rules may not have made too much sense. The difference in today's student is they need to understand the rule and if the rule does not make sense they will buck it.

Let me be clear, there is a difference between a rule that may be outdated such as wearing hats indoors and someone disrupting the class. Certain rules of decorum and respect must be clear and unbending. How all of the rules are communicated is what I am constantly talking about. The tone and the attitude of the teacher set the tone for the buy in. Even when the teacher is trying to get support

from the system it depends on the tone and attitude of the request for assistance.

Let's try two types of tone and attitude.

Teacher: (said in a loud commanding manner in front of the entire class) Johnston, how many times have I told you to pay attention? Are you brain dead or what? One more word out of you and you're out of this class!!! Do you understand me young man?

Teacher: (calm and quiet demeanor said privately to the student) Mr. Johnston, I know you like to talk and that you have a lot of energy, but every time you chatter at the back of the room you are distracting not only the other students, but you are distracting me as well. I really need you to respect that fact that I have a job to do and that job is to teach this class. If there is anything I can do to improve that I would be happy to hear it. If you continue, I will have to escalate this and you will be sent to the principal's office. Do you understand?

In most cases tone and attitude will save the day. Always keep in mind the 2%er will not comply and will be disciplined. But you will get buy in from the 98%.

A tip for the system

Administrators and parents need to support the good, dedicated teachers who are doing their best to educate and empower the next generation. If you drop the ball on those teachers you are in fact dropping the ball on your children and their future. Work together with proper tone and attitude and we will all be winners.

Balancing your Family Life and Professional Commitments

Dear Ted:

My husband is a real estate broker and he does quite well. I understand that he has to work weekends and nights, but he is missing many family functions. We have two children and he has missed their sporting events. He has even gone to an appointment during our daughter's birthday party because the phone rang and someone wanted to see a house. If I say anything he gets upset, and says that he has to make the money while he can. Well it's been 5 years now and my children and I are getting fed up. I love him but I don't know how much longer I can put up with the disappointments. There must be a way to balance family life with a real estate career.

Answer: Actually there is a way to balance family life with a career as a commissioned salesperson. I ran my own real estate company in the 1970s and 80s. I also wrote a book in 1986 entitled "The One Hour Qualifier" a guide for salespeople on how to sell real estate. It is about how to be in control of the sale. I have always had a policy that whatever goes into my day timer became law and only in rare occasions was it changed.

If I had to go to my daughter's soccer game on Wednesday at 7 pm I would block off those two hours and if a prospect called to see a house at that time I would say the following.

"I would love to show you that house but I already have a previous engagement. Would it be possible to show it to you after 9 pm on Wednesday or I could fit you in on Thursday at 7 pm. What would be good for you?"

Generally the prospect will take either one of those options and if they couldn't I would then have to make a judgment call. Is this a serious prospect that could definitely lead to a sale or just a cold call looking to kick a few tires?

I see too many salespeople jump for unqualified prospects thereby wasting a lot of time with little or no results. When I did open houses I had a very simple test when a prospect walked in. I would ask them if they were working with any other agent and if they said yes, I would then tell them to look around and if they were interested in anything that they could contact their agent. If through conversation I found out that they were not happy with their agent then I would offer my assistance. Of course if they were not dealing with any agent, then game on.

The most important thing your husband should learn is how to qualify. By properly qualifying he will be able to weed out the time wasters and in the long run make more money with less effort.

A tip for the real estate agent

You may think that you need to run after every call but that is a false assumption. Learn how to qualify properly and you will do more with less.

Here is the other reality; if you are constantly breaking family commitments, you are also probably breaking commitments with friends. Here is where you are potentially losing future business because your friends and family will not see you as reliable. They will probably do business with another more reliable salesperson in the future.

Finally, you could be the top producer in your company but if you don't have a happy family then what is the point. Having a good balance of family and business life is the key to true happiness. A big commission cheque that you have to spend on child support and alimony is not a goal I would want.

Be assertive and clear when requesting an audience

Dear Ted:

I work with a person who has the annoying habit of constantly interrupting and not listening. I will go to them with something and before I can finish my sentence they interrupt and start to make excuses or deflect and go in another direction. What should take a few minutes ends up becoming very drawn-out. Stopping short of taping her mouth shut, how can I get my point across without being interrupted?

I take it from your question that you need to talk to this person to give them instruction regarding their job so I will answer based on that assumption.

One quick solution I can offer is to email your requests and then follow up with a face to face if necessary, but I am sure you have tried that. When you are in a situation where the other person is constantly interrupting, you need to become assertive when requesting silence. Here are some words that may help.

“I need to talk to you about...” “Please do not interrupt...” “Please, I am not finished...” “OK, I’ve asked you a few times not to interrupt...” “I need you to listen, please!!!”

If the constant interruptions are inhibiting you from giving the proper instructions and that interferes with you being able to do your job, then you need to take the next step and go to your supervisor or manager. When talking to the manager be sure you don’t turn it into a bashing session. Tell the manager what you need from the other person instead of what the other person is doing wrong. Always take the high road.

“Manager, I know that she really doesn’t understand how she is frustrating me by constantly interrupting me when I give her instructions or suggestions but what could take a few seconds’ turns into minutes. I would like to have a meeting with you and her in order to figure out how we can move

forward on this. I am at a point where I don’t know what to do next.”

When you do have the meeting with your manager, keep three questions in mind. State the problem, suggest a solution and state what you need to move forward.

A tip for the interrupter

You probably don’t really understand how frustrated people are when you are constantly interrupting them. You probably feel that you need to defend yourself or that you already have the answer or that you simply want to clarify something. The problem is that you may be missing the essence of what they are saying. You are not silently listening to what they need.

When you catch yourself interrupting, pause, stop speaking and wait your turn. You will get your turn to speak after they have finished. This also assures that you have heard the entire request or comment before you respond. You may jump in and get defensive before you even realize they were complimenting you. If you need to assure yourself you will get your chance to speak, you can politely ask one of these types of questions during the conversation. “When you are finished may I add something?” “May I say something?” “I would like to respond to that comment before you continue, if that is alright?”

Asking permission instead of interrupting will go a long way in mutual understanding. And besides, even as children we were taught not to interrupt. Be respectful.

Be Forceful To Get Bereavement Leave

Dear Ted

I have worked for a great company for six years now and I have taken very little sick days off until this past year. My parents live in another province and last year my father got really sick. I went to be with him during the last days of his life. My company was very good at giving me the time I needed. Soon after, my mother couldn't cope. She got sick and quickly passed away. I went back to attend the funeral but because it was winter and the ground was frozen, they couldn't bury her until this spring. I went to my supervisor to get some more time off to attend the internment and she said I would have to clear it with HR. I went to HR and was told that I couldn't have the time off. I was told that I had taken too much time off in the past year and also we were in our busy time. HR said that I had two choices stay and work or quit and go. In my mind this is pretty cold. This is my mother and I have been a good employee. Can they really stop me from going?

Every company has slightly different guidelines regarding family bereavement leave so you should definitely look into that, but let's look at this from the human angle too. You may have an HR person who thinks that she is just doing her job, and doesn't want to set precedence, but has not taken the human factor into consideration. I'm sure if she understands how important this is to you, and that you are willing to take this time off without pay, she may reconsider.

I believe it would also help your case if you went to your supervisor for support. If you have arranged for your shifts or work to be covered by other employees and you tie up any loose ends before you leave and your supervisor states that things can run smoothly while you are gone, you will have a better case. Go into this meeting well prepared and educated about the time you need off and the possible impact it may have on your co-workers. I would approach her

with something like this.

“Please help me understand why you have decided not to let me go to my mother's internment. I have been a good employee and rarely took time off in the past. Yes, I have taken a lot of time off this year, but for valid reasons. This is very important to me as well as my family. I have arranged for my co-workers to cover my work/shifts until I return. My supervisor believes that the department will run smoothly while I am gone. I would be very grateful for this time with my family.”

If you get a negative response, then I would tell her that you are not happy and need to talk to the owner of the company. I have found in the past that because the owner of the company is generally removed from the day to day operations, they rely on others to run the company the way they would. Sometimes decisions are made that would be contrary to how the owner would make them. I would go to the owner and state your case. Remember; do not bad mouth the HR person. Tell the owner how you are feeling and what it is you need, not what you feel the HR person did wrong.

I believe that you will get a positive response from the owner. If you don't get a positive response, you should ask yourself why you are working there.

A tip for the HR person

I can appreciate that you are just trying to do your job, but I have to say this one really puzzles me. You should be an advocate for the employee, not the rule police. I ask this question, “How is her taking this time off without pay going to adversely affect the company?” If it is not significant then your stance has little or no grounds. The choices you are giving this employee result in a no win situation? You may lose a valuable employee because you failed to look at the situation from the human side.

Be Professional And Have Integrity When On A Sales Pitch

Dear Ted:

I just got hired by a company to do some door to door selling of what I would consider a pretty good product. The owner of the company gave me some basics about the product but didn't really show me anything about how to sell or make a call. Do you have any tips?

I have been selling since I was 19 in 1967 and I have been trained by the best. There is an old adage that it takes a salesperson fifteen minutes to sell a product and then the next thirty minutes to buy it back. Most salespeople talk too much. They pitch and pitch and pitch without figuring out if the other person is actually catching what they are pitching.

The second part to this is that most salespeople memorize a very slick presentation, but they forget to close or ask for the order. Don't be afraid to say, "Well do you want to buy one?"

The sale is broken down into four areas; first you get the appointment, and then apply for the job. Once you have the job, you sell them something and after you sell them something, you follow up to get more business. Once you get the appointment and are going through your pitch about the company and the product, make sure you ask your prospect questions about who they are and their interests as you are trying to figure out how your product fits into their needs. If your prospect can't identify a need then they will not buy. Once the need has been identified, ask for the sale. If they still have a few questions, answer the questions and then again, ask for the sale.

If they still want to think about it, then set a date and time to call them back. Do not say, "Well when you are ready, give me a call." Frankly they rarely call. Instead say, "Why don't I give you a few days to think about this. I will call you on Friday if that's OK." Always be in control of the call back or the follow up.

The key to longevity in sales is the fourth and final step. Follow up to make sure the new customer is happy and if there is anything further you can do to assist them. This is also a good time to ask for any referrals.

I have a few caveats for you. Never, ever sell something to someone who does not have a need or simply can't afford to buy your product. Trying to get a fast buck in the sales business will only lead to a poor reputation and a lot of returned items. I pride myself in the fact that I have never been embarrassed to meet anyone who I have previously sold an item to. Yes, I sleep well at night.

Being a long term salesperson is a very rewarding career and can bring many benefits to one's life. The key to this longevity is honesty and integrity. You are looking for customers for life. Walt Disney said it best, "Do what you do so well that people will want to come back and see you do it again and they will tell others what you do."

A tip for the owner of the company

It's great to hire people to sell your product, especially when they are on commission because you don't have to pay a salary and the salesperson either sinks or swims. But without proper support and training you are actually losing money because if you help that salesperson to be successful you will sell a lot of product and you will be successful as well. Treat them well and they will fill up your till.

Be Truthful When Being Investigated

Dear Ted:

I work for a not for profit agency that deals with people who sometimes need to be restrained. We are taught the proper way to restrain and last week I had to actually use the techniques to restrain one of our clients. I was under the impression that all went well and I did what I needed to do well within our mandate. The client put a complaint in about me and I was suspended with pay pending an investigation. No one has contacted me and it has been a few weeks since the incident. Can they do this?

The short answer is yes they can suspend you with pay and do an investigation.

Generally when someone is accused of something serious as alleged physical harm to a client, especially in a not for profit public organization they must take all precautions to ensure that the client is protected. Once a complaint has been lodged, they would immediately have you leave and begin the investigation.

They would generally interview the complainant and any witnesses as well as getting your side of the story. Many things have to be taken into consideration when a complaint is lodged. Getting to the real truth can be tricky and complicated. I always say there are four truths; there's my side, there's your side, there's the real truth and there's what the judge decides. We never want to let anything get to a point where the judge needs to decide. So let me give you some advice as how to handle your part in the investigation.

It is important for everyone in a situation like this to tell the whole truth, how they perceive it. Sometimes people couch their comments and then when new evidence comes forth it does not look good if that evidence counters previous statements. So when they do finally come to you for your side, be completely candid.

Another thing I recommend is always be prepared to apologize for how your actions affected the other person. We seemed to get caught up in defending our actions rather than looking at the action from the other person's perspective, even if we think that perspective is flawed. Here are some words that may help.

"I am really sorry that the client felt that I harmed her in any way. I simply did what I thought was proper procedure but if she felt I crossed a line I am prepared to apologize."

That will go along way to getting the issue dealt with. Gandhi once said, "Justice is rendered quickest by giving justice to the other party first."

A tip for the manager

You get a complaint, send the respondent home (with pay) and begin the investigation; so far so good. But there are many issues to keep in mind. The investigation MUST be fair to all parties involved. I have seen workplaces where the respondent is guilty before the investigation is complete and then they find out the complainant did not tell the entire truth and the respondent's reputation is ruined.

Investigations must be taken seriously and must be handled confidentially. Remember you are just trying to get to the truth. Once the truth is uncovered it will lead to a satisfactory conclusion and settlement.

As far as the respondent, call and let them know what is happening. It is very difficult when someone is accused of something, to be told to go home and wait to be contacted. Sitting at home wondering is not a good way to treat an employee, guilty of the act or not.

Dealing With Difficult New Managers Is Common In The Workplace

Dear Ted:

We have a new assistant general manager and she is causing serious problems in the workplace. She seems to have come in with the "I'll fix everything" kind of attitude when none of us think it needed fixing including our supervisors. She is rude, demanding and condescending in her tone. She second guesses everything and everyone. Most of us have been there for a long time and are very competent in our abilities to do our jobs. Now we are all being treated like we are stupid and inadequate. She isn't going anywhere, we have to deal with her and we are all feeling the stress of her presence daily. How can we make things better before we all quit? Help!

This is something that can be common in the workplace. A new person comes into the management team and wants to make a mark. Sometimes a company hires someone in that position for a number of reasons. We don't know what she has been told by senior management or what her job description is. I would approach her with your concerns about her management style and how she is making you feel.

The best way to do this is if you can get a few others to go with you for support. If you go alone, don't become the spokesperson for the rest of the staff, they have to speak up for themselves. I have seen others put themselves in an awkward position by saying they are speaking for the entire staff and when management calls a meeting to ask who is upset, there is great deal of silence. You could look foolish. Try these words.

"Being that you are new here, I have to tell you how I am feeling lately. You may not know this but I have been with the company for a long time and I believe that I have been doing a good job. I would like to help you understand the culture we have here. In the past we have been allowed to do our jobs and I am getting the feeling you are second

guessing us. There are other times when you approach me that I feel you are annoyed about something but I don't know what I did that deserved a condescending comment. I would like us all to work well together with mutual trust and respect. Is there anything I can do to help you make your job easier?"

If she understands where you are coming from and is open to help and dialogue then you have accomplished what you need. Now help her be the best assistant manager she can be. On the other hand if she reacts badly then you need to tell her that you are going to talk to the manager about her behaviour.

A tip for the new assistant manager

I understand that you are trying to make a mark and that you want to impress upper management, but the simple fact is you get more with mutual trust and respect, not power and ownership.

I suggest to new managers that they sit back for a bit when they take over a new department and assess the jobs and the people. You will soon find out who the good workers are and who the 2%ers are. Take your time; you don't need to go in like a bull in a china shop. Ask the staff what you can do for them to make their job easier. Do not micro manage, especially if they had a previous manager who let them be. I know you have your way of managing and don't want to be compared to the previous manager, but you need to integrate your way of management with their way of working.

If you take the time to build trust you will find you will have more allies. You will not only get compliance with what you need done, but you will also get buy-in and that is important for cohesiveness in a team.

Blanket Emails Not The Way To Deal With Individual Situations

Dear Ted:

I work for a manager who seems to think that the only way to communicate is through email. She sends out blanket emails to deal with individual situations that could just as easily be dealt with by walking ten passes to my office and talking to me directly. I don't know if she is afraid of me or just too lazy to get up and take the time to talk to me. Email is so impersonal and sometimes I can misread her tone. How should I approach her?

Sometimes technology that is supposed to help can create new issues. I think that too many people overuse email when picking up the phone or walking to the other person's office could serve just as well to communicate a need. You are also correct that email can be misread as to tone and attitude. We need to put the humanity back into our time at work. Try these words as a possible way of dealing with your manager.

"I appreciate that you want to keep us all on the same page but maybe trying to correct behaviour issues could be handled on an individual basis. I'm sure that sending out blanket emails may seem like a good way to handle an issue in the workplace however, I don't necessarily want to know about all the issues that arise in this office. It can also be taken as impersonal to try to resolve things by email as opposed to speaking with someone directly. It would be seen as more personal and confidential for everyone concerned if you deal with individuals privately."

Hopefully your manager will take this suggestion to heart and alter the way she handles her communications, especially with regards to blanket emails.

A tip for the manager

You may think that sending out a blanket email will be a soft way of dealing with a situation and that by sending the email to everyone, you won't be seen as targeting an

individual, but this way of communicating can and does have a real negative impact on the workplace.

Generally, everyone already knows who the email is directed at and all you have done is publicly scolded the target of the email. Also, those who are not part of this issue feel dragged into something they would frankly like to stay out of. The other thing that happens is that the email and the situation becomes a focus on the water cooler chatter. You wouldn't want to be publicly corrected and I know you would not want to embarrass any of your staff. Also remember that email does have a tone to it and you should always review the email before it is sent to make certain that the tone is what you intended.

If you feel that you don't have the skills to deal with your staff individually, then maybe you should ask your supervisor for some courses on how to handle difficult situations or difficult employees.

Blanket emails are not the way to deal with any individual situation. Blanket emails are great for communicating information that everyone needs to know, but not for correcting individual behaviour.

Board Member Making Worker Ill

Dear Ted:

I work for a nonprofit organization as a receptionist. I love my job and have been here for five years. Recently I have been getting sick to my stomach when I go to work. One of the newly elected board members comes in on a regular basis and criticizes me, my work and my appearance. I have approached the executive director and she said there is nothing she can do because he was elected and that we actually work for the board of directors, which he is a part of. Please help me!

Your situation is actually not uncommon. Some nonprofit organizations have bully presidents and directors from time to time. People get elected to these positions without any training as to what responsibilities and obligations they have under the law. In most organizations it is the membership that has the final say and the board of directors is charged with implementing the will of that membership. So, technically you work for the membership under the direction of the board. You also work under the direction of the executive director who is your immediate supervisor.

It sounds a little complicated but it really is quite simple. There are still obligations under labour law (depending on where you live) and common law that need to be followed. In most places it is incumbent upon the employer to ensure that the workplace is safe from bullying and harassment. Your employer is obligated to keep you safe and therefore not be subjected to a toxic work environment.

In your case you have two people who are obliged to act on your behalf, the executive director and the president. You should approach your executive director first and if she can't or won't do anything, then let her know that you need to go to the president because the situation is making you ill.

Having said all that, I always recommend that you go first to the person who you are at odds with. This board member may not even realize how his actions are adversely affecting you. Try these words.

"I really like working here and I think that I do a pretty good job, but every time you come in I feel that you are not happy with me or my work. Did I do anything to get you to feel this way

about me? The other issue I have is that technically I work under the direction of the executive director and as far as I know, she is pleased with the way I am conducting my work, but if there is something I can do to do a better job, I would love to have a meeting with you and her to see where I can improve."

This opens the door for discussion with the board member. If you get a poor response, you need to take this up with the executive director and possibly with the president as they can also be held accountable.

A Tip for the board member and the executive director

As a board member, you are not in charge of directing any staff members. That must be done through the executive director. This is standard practice in any organization where there are elected board members and hired staff. The executive director was hired to manage the hired staff. If you cross that line it can create confusion and frustration.

The executive director and the president have an obligation to make sure that all employees are treated fairly and that they are not subjected to any type of harassment. Everyone is entitled to work in a toxic free work environment.

Boss Needs To See World From Workers' Perspective

Dear Ted:

I have been working in a large company for almost forty years now and have worked my way up the ladder to a very senior position. Lately I have had a number of employees challenge the way I manage. They have even gone to human resources to complain about me. Now HR is telling me to change the way I manage or I will have to leave. How dare they do that to me after all I have given to this company. I am really upset that my staff has gone over my head and complained about me to HR. They have no business doing that. I'm the boss and they report to me, not some young HR person who has no idea how I run my department. I know I run a tight ship, but I get results and if certain people don't want to work under me, "they" can certainly leave. In my day, when the boss said to do something we did it and shut up about it. I really don't understand the workplace today.

I feel really bad for people like you because I understand that you actually don't know what you are doing wrong or how to correct it. Simply put, the workplace has changed over the years and anyone who manages from a place of power and ownership instead of mutual trust and respect are doomed to early retirement or even a career adjustment. I know it is difficult to understand what they want when you have been conducting yourself a certain way for many years and no one has challenged you in the past.

I am afraid to say that the old ways of management are dead and in some cases certain behaviour is now against the law in many jurisdictions. Let me try to give you a way to see if you are actually the problem. I would like you to take the next few weeks and do some very serious self-examination. Look at how your tone and attitude is affecting those under you. Look at how you are affecting others. This is not going to be easy, as initially you will not see it. Study how you address and instruct others and how they receive your commands.

You say that no one has challenged you over the years? That is because your staff do not feel safe to be able to tell you how they are really feeling, and it has only been recently that people are speaking up in many workplaces.

Dante said that we don't see the world as it truly is, we only see the world from where we stand. You need to see the world from where your workers stand. And then you need to look at how you would receive the directions you are giving from their standpoint. Having coached many people like yourself, I know for a fact that you would never put up with the tone and attitude you are likely giving others.

When people feel safe, they will tell you the truth, and that will take a lot of courage on their behalf. As they do come forward please do not discount what they are telling you and what ever you do, do not justify your behaviour. The key is not how you see it, but how they see it. Another way to understand how you are affecting others is to have someone tape you being you. It will blow you away to actually see and hear what they are seeing and hearing.

A tip for the HR department

When workers get up the courage to take on an old horse, you must make it safe for them to do so. The more you circle the wagons the less protected the workers will feel, and then it will all go underground. The sad thing in many workplaces is that upper management gets believed and the worker gets ignored.

You have the power to change that and protect a good worker from a tyrant boss. You also have the ability to change that tyrant boss and train him or her to see the new ways that workers deserve to be treated. It will ultimately make the workplace happier and safer for everyone.

Bully Boss Has Poisoned The Work Environment For Employees

Dear Ted:

I am dealing with a boss at work who has been bullying me for over two years. I have filed grievances at work which are going to arbitration. Presently I am off on a stress leave for 2 weeks and I am wondering what other action I can follow other than union grievances. We have a workplace harassment policy but it is on certain grounds (i.e. colour, race etc.) which don't fall under bullying and harassment. This boss has poisoned my work environment and I am not alone. She has a past history but people end up quitting and I am not prepared to do that. What can I do? Please help me!! Thank you.

What you are saying is a dilemma that a lot of employees are in. There are harassment policies that deal with human rights such as race, religion, gender and sexual orientation, but these policies don't seem to cover bullying and psychological harassment. Some employers are not up to speed yet with how the laws are changing and the fact that it is the employer's responsibility to make sure that your workplace is harassment free.

From your letter I take it that this boss is your immediate supervisor and I will base my comments on that fact. In some companies once you put in a grievance you basically have to let it run its course. But you still have other avenues that you can pursue. I would suggest that you go to your HR department or to your boss's immediate supervisor. Explain your situation and ask for help. Here are suggested words you may want to try.

"For the last two years I have been having some issues of bullying from my boss. I have put in several grievances and nothing seems to be happening. I have tried to use the process that we have in place but I am coming to you because this is really affecting my health. I have been doing some research on bullying and psychological harassment in the workplace.

I'm not sure if you are aware but it is your responsibility and the responsibility of the company to ensure that I enjoy a harassment free work environment. Even though there presently is not statute law in this province, there is certainly common law that addresses this issue. I need to be in a safe work environment and I am asking for your help in attaining that goal. I am willing to work with my boss in order for her to truly understand how she is affecting me and my fellow co-workers. Can you help me?"

Many employers don't know that they are in fact responsible and need to protect workers from bullies. Even though they cannot point to policy or legislation, they are responsible.

A tip for the bully boss

You may think that your behaviour is not breaking any laws or that maybe this employee has nothing to hang her hat on, but if she feels that she is being bullied, then you need to re-evaluate your behaviour. Any common law or legislation regarding bullying is not about how you feel about the accusations, but how the target is feeling.

A tip for the employer

Although you may not have a policy in place for bullying and psychological harassment you are still responsible for how the target is feeling about being bullied by her boss. In the past, it was easy to blame the victim and support the boss who you knew could and does cross the line. Those times are over. You must protect the victim and create and ensure a safe and healthy workplace.

Celebrate In Your Own Way

Dear Ted:

Everyone in the office is celebrating Christmas. The committee that organizes the gift exchange and staff party is so enthusiastic about the holidays. I am not against Christmas, but it is not my favorite time of the year. My problem is that I'm feeling a lot of pressure from my coworkers and management to be part of their celebrations. All I want is to be left alone but, I don't want to be seen as not being a team player. What should I do?

This holiday season means many different things to many different people. For some it can be very exciting and festive but for others it can be very overwhelming. No matter what your feelings are about Christmas or this time of year in general; no matter what your religious beliefs are or your family traditions; celebrate in your own way.

There is nothing wrong with not wanting to be involved with the office Christmas celebrations. Just explain to your co-workers that it just isn't your thing. If you are honest about your feelings, they should respect that and let you celebrate in your own way. I would bet you they will be more understanding than you think.

Remember that there is a difference in not wanting to be involved in the celebrations and putting everyone else down for holding those celebrations. You have the right not to participate however; do not try to prevent them from enjoying themselves. Try explaining your feelings something like this;

"Thanks for the invitation to the party and to be part of the gift exchange, but I would rather not participate. I know Christmas is special to you and that you really enjoy this time of year, but it is just not my thing. I hope you understand and I know you and the rest of the staff will have a great time. Thanks again for the invitation."

That is a nice way to say "no thank you" without getting into a conflict as to whether Christmas is a good thing or a bad thing.

A hint for the Christmas organizers

Even though celebrating Christmas in our society has been a tradition for generations, times are changing. Many people actually don't celebrate Christmas; they celebrate other festivals at this time of year and we as a society are becoming more aware of the other cultures and traditions around us. There are also some people who just don't want to celebrate Christmas and that is OK too.

I am not saying you get rid of the Christmas traditions in your workplace. I am saying that you should remember that others may not be as excited about this time of year as you are; or maybe they celebrate in a different way than you do.

In front of city hall there is a nativity scene and behind it are four signs that read Happy Hanukah, Happy Diwali, Happy Eid and Merry Christmas. So, instead of putting Christmas in the closet, be inclusive and celebrate everyone's festival and celebrate even those who choose not to participate.

No one should ever feel pressured into being part of something they don't want to be a part of. When you think about it, that wouldn't be very "Christmassy", would it?

Change In Workplace Culture Leaves Manager Out In The Cold

Dear Ted:

We have had a major retool of our workplace and it has never been better. We have a new director and a few new managers in place and most of the old managers have really changed how they deal with the staff. My employer spent a lot of time and money for relationship training and it is really working for most of us.

Unfortunately we have one manager who just won't come around. She actually seems to have shut down and all she does is complain about things. How do we get her to realize that this workplace has changed and she is the only one who can't see it?

This is not an uncommon occurrence in the workplace. Some people just can't let go of the past and that is because in some way the past had become an integral part of their being.

Let me draw a picture of this type of person. She was always part of the gossip pool and she was always the one who came to the other managers with words like these, "everyone is upset with that last decision", or "did you hear what so and so did to their staff?". She was the person who was the go to for the complainers and the person who everyone knew would spread the word, especially if she was told that she was being told something in confidence.

So, here is the issue. Because the workplace has in fact changed and I am sure the disgruntled people have little to complain about and I am sure you have a mechanism in place if anyone does have an issue, you actually cut her out of her role as the helper, and in her mind, the perceived "fixer". She has actually lost her identity and role. Because of that she needs to try to keep the water moving so she can find something or someone to fix.

She will be the type who will tell you that something is wrong but won't really have constructive solutions to the problems. This person will begin to shut down when she believes that no one is listening to her. Generally this will be a long-term employee who has a lot of history with the company. She will hang onto past management as being better than the ones in charge today. However, she was also the one complaining about those old managers in the past.

There is not much that can be said to a person like this except to box her in when she begins her quest to disrupt. Here is an example of what I mean. "Wow, do you really think that is happening? I am having a hard time believing that he actually said that. You need to go straight to your manager and tell them what you know. You know we have changed this workplace and that type of behavior is not allowed. Let's get this straightened out right away."

I will guarantee you that she will not take you up on that by saying that nothing will get done and that they will see her as just a complainer. This type of person will rarely step up to the plate and confront the issue head on. She will try to be the puppeteer and get others to climb on board. Once an organization stops the triangling, the puppeteering and the gossip groups, this person has no one to turn to and will begin to shut down.

A tip for the disgruntled manager

This is going to sound harsh, but you need to let go. If in fact the workplace has changed and people are actually happy to come to work, then you might want to do some self-examination to see where the problem really lies.

I understand it is difficult not to be the person you used to be. It is also difficult to feel that no one needs you the way they did in the past, but remember, maybe it is actually fixed and your job is done. If you are a long time employee and are close to retirement maybe you need to walk away. Not for the company but for you. No one should be unhappy at work. Maybe it is time to hang up your skates.

Check Bylaws First To See What's Expected Of Volunteers On The Board

Dear Ted:

I am a member of a volunteer board of directors for a large professional organization and I have a frustration that I hope you can help me with. I know we don't get paid and it is a volunteer position, but there are a few board members who don't do much of anything and when they do, they don't seem to follow through and the rest of us have to pick up the slack. What can be done in this situation?

Volunteer boards are interesting creatures. You have people who volunteer because they believe in the association and you have others who volunteer because it looks good on the resume. The second are the ones who you are probably talking about. I would suggest that you have a look at the bylaws and see if there is a section with guidelines for how much work is expected of each board member. Then I would, if necessary, have the board make some amendments that will make it easier to manage the affairs of the association.

Do not make changes based on the person as it is better to replace the person than add a new bylaw, but if you look at the situation without making it personal you may see that in fact the bylaw may need to be strengthened. If the bylaw is fine, then the chair needs to approach the person with your concerns by using the bylaw as support.

Remember not to make it personal and I would of course, according to my Model, approach the person first myself with my concerns. Try these words on for size.

“I noticed that you don't have a committee and I need some help with the committee I chair. Would you like to sit on my committee as I believe with your knowledge you would be an asset?”

You may be saying, “Why should I take on someone who won't do anything as it stands?” Well the reason I give you this

advice is that maybe they only need to be encouraged to participate. If you get them on your committee, you are in control of what they do or don't do. You can then hold them accountable for the work they are responsible for. I can tell you that you may be surprised at how well a person works when they are asked and supported. No one ever wants to let anyone down.

If this person is truly a non-performer, then the only alternative is to not have them appointed at the next AGM.

A tip for the non-performing board member

At the beginning of the term you put in your name to the board as a volunteer. I don't need to ask the reason why, but you should keep in mind that many others are affected by your actions or inactions.

Being a member of a board means participating in the affairs of that board as equally as possible. If something has changed in your business or personal life that would not allow you to have the time to contribute you need to tell the chair so other arrangements can be made.

You are not doing yourself or your reputation in your community any justice by not being a full participant in the governance of the board. Remember you have taken a position that could have gone to someone else who may contribute more. If you can't cut it, or don't want to cut it then do the right thing and step down.

Colleagues Not Pulling Their Weight

Dear Ted:

I have been put in a very awkward position. I am a high achiever and I am supposed to be working in a team with six other people. Most of us do a great job and work well together, but there are two people who never seem to hold their own. We have team meetings to delegate work and these two employees very rarely put their hands up to volunteer to take parts of the project. I can only speak for myself, but I am feeling that the rest of us are doing all of the work and yet everyone is taking credit on the reports. How can I address this without causing a huge backlash?

Teamwork is always difficult as there will usually be someone who feels that they are doing more than others. I subscribe to the theory that a committee should be an odd number and that three is too many. But reality is that we do have to work with others and learn how to collaborate on projects.

First you need to come to the realization that no one can ever come up to your standards and you should never drop your standards for anyone else. So here is the problem, how do you keep up the momentum, yet not feel put upon. I am also a high achiever and what I have learned to do is to know when enough is enough and when I have to delegate or ask for help.

You cannot change the other person but you can change how you handle the situation. Here are some hints that I have used in the past. At an initial meeting, set out what needs to be done and then ask who would like to do what task. When you get down to the two who have not put their name to a task, then it will be time to delegate. Try these words.

“Ok, we have four items left to be done and I notice that A and B have not got their name on any task as of yet, so which one of you will take what?”

Don't be afraid to put them on the spot and actually ask, then delegate. Remember they are supposed to be part of a team and they are supposed to contribute as equally as possible. You may need to talk to your supervisor ahead of time to make sure they are on board as this tactic could create a bit of a backlash.

A tip for the non-participant

Whether you like it or not you are part of a team and you need to step up to the plate. Maybe you didn't volunteer to be part of this team but it is probably part of your job description, so you need to do your fair share of the work.

The funny thing is that the longer you keep your hand down the worse job you are going to get saddled with. So my advice to you is to check out what has to be done and then volunteer for the task that you would most like to do. You are going to get one in any case so why not be in control of what you get instead of getting something you don't want.

Another thing to keep in mind is that if you do your fair share, when it comes to asking others for help with a pet project of yours, you will have better results. It always comes back to treating people how you would like to be treated.

Company Officials Should Lead By Example By Living the Core Values

Dear Ted:

Why is there a double standard in the workplace? It seems that every workplace has these touchy feely types of statements on the walls and on their web sites, but no one is walking the walk. People talk a good talk and use these statements to shore up their own personal agendas but they don't seem to be able to take a stand against the ones who are actually not following the essence of the statements. I think it's hypocritical and two faced.

You are right on with your last statement. In fact, there are companies out there who actually don't walk the walk and simply give lip service to those who will challenge the ones who think they are untouchable. I have done many seminars when a manager comes out and says, "This is great stuff Ted, "they" can really use this." When I hear this kind of statement, I believe that this person feels that either they are exempt from the company policy or they just don't know how they are affecting others.

In some companies they feel that it is just going to take too much to deal with the disruptors, especially if that person is in upper management. I am not trying to make excuses; I am just stating what reality is. In a way they feel it takes less energy by ignoring than dealing with the issue.

Here's the thing; there is an old Armenian saying, "The fish rots from the head". The head of the country, the head of the church, the head of the company, the head of the department, the head of the classroom, the head of the family and our own heads. When I investigate problems in a company or in a department, it all comes down to how that company or department is managed. The managers who adhere to the company policies and actually walk the walk have much less conflict and stress, which adds to productivity. This in turn enhances employee satisfaction, which leads to better customer service and so on.

A tip for the leaders of the company

Start walking the walk. Lead by example. You need to hold yourself at the highest level for personal interaction, as you are what you say the company is. If you are not following the company's core values yet expecting others to do so, it all comes off as empty words. And it will reflect in the employees' attitudes and work ethics.

That is like the parent who is smoking and says to his children, "If I ever catch you smoking..." Or the parent who sees one child hit another and the parent spansks as punishment along with the words, "Don't hit!"

By constantly espousing your company's core values and then not holding yourself and your senior management team to account, you are sending a false message to your staff. It basically says 'do as I say, not as I do'.

There is nothing better than a company whose employees can say that the leaders actually live the core values and that no one ever has to be concerned about dealing with bad behaviour.

You have heard the saying that 'one bad apple can spoil the barrel', well can you imagine what it is like in a company when the bad apple is the boss. If you walk the walk, you will actually be empowering your staff to reach for greater heights.

Confronting Office Thief Is The Right Thing To Do

Dear Ted.

I work in a large firm with many employees and one of my co-workers is stealing office supplies from the company. When I saw her do it, she said that I better not turn her in or she will make my life at work a living hell. This whole situation is making me feel very uncomfortable. Help!!!

No one ever wants to be in a situation like this. Having to confront a co-worker about a theft is not an easy task but you know in your heart that it is the right thing to do. If your supervisor came to you and asked if you knew anything about the missing supplies, you would be honest about what you know. Don't wait for that confrontation. Do what you know is right.

Don't question your values and your integrity because of a dishonest person. Approach your co-worker with your concerns and let her know how her actions are adversely affecting you.

"The fact that you have been taking office supplies from the company makes me feel very uncomfortable. I think you should be honest with our supervisor about what you have been doing. You have put me in a really difficult position. I am going to have to report it if you don't. I hope you understand that I don't want to "rat" you out but I have to think about my career and my reputation."

If she takes it poorly and says that she is going to "make your life hell",

remember that she has no power over you. She is not in a position to really harm you. Bullies only have power when you allow them that power. Remember that you didn't do anything wrong.

Be assertive but not aggressive when dealing with this individual. Don't get into a verbal battle. Just tell her how you feel and give her a day or so to come clean. If she doesn't, then go to your supervisor privately.

You will be surprised how many of your co-workers will praise you for your honesty. Many people in a workplace are just waiting for someone to take on the office bully. 98% of your co-workers are good people; don't let the other 2% ruin it for the rest of you.

Here is a tip for the dishonest co-worker.

You may think that you are not really harming anyone and who is really going to miss a few office supplies, right? The fact is that you are not only harming your employer but you are harming your co-workers and yourself with your dishonesty.

Too many times we do things without thinking through how our actions are actually affecting the people we care about. In any workplace when you do something that is less than honorable, you are in fact harming those around you.

Contracts, Laws Must Be Honoured

Dear Ted:

Recently I have been promoted from a supervisor to a manager. As a supervisor my only responsibility was to make sure things got done under the manager's direction. I now have the authority to make decisions and I am finding it really difficult. As a matter of fact it is getting me in trouble with other departments, especially HR. I do my best to accommodate everyone and HR says that I have to learn how to say no. Ted, that is really hard to do as I don't see a problem in bending the rules to help someone out.

It always is a challenge to go from one of the boys to someone who is responsible for making some tough decisions. The problem is not that you shouldn't do your best to accommodate your staff; it is when your decision (albeit with good intentions) creates a problem for another department. You also need to be seen as a manager whose decisions are consistent.

Another aspect to this involves labour laws and collective agreements. Those are issues that you can't just change when you see fit. They do involve government and contracts. I also believe your problem is that you are so interested in accommodating you don't realize that you do have options.

If you don't know for sure if you can do what is asked or not, then simply say that you need to check first. Here are some words that may help.

"I would really like to accommodate your request, but I don't know if I can based on the collective agreement, so I need to check with HR to see if we can in fact do what you request. I will get back to you by the end of the day."

Now if you get push back from the employee, maybe they don't have your best interests at heart. If you are now known as a pushover, then you may need to reassert your position and be firm. I know a mother who used to say to her children that if they

wanted to force an answer to a request right away, then the answer is no. If they allowed her to think about it, then the answer may well be yes.

Remember, you are working in an organization that does have rules that all departments need to adhere to. That doesn't mean that the rules cannot be changed or varied, you just need to go through the proper channels to get it done.

A tip for the employee.

When you want to get something special from your manager, don't go up to him at the last minute and expect an answer, give him some time to work it out. Also, don't guilt him into granting your request because he has been a nice guy in the past because you will only be getting him into trouble and possibly losing him as a manager and you don't want that to happen.

Work together and understand that he has people he needs to answer to and also understand that he may not be able to grant all of your requests, but I am sure he will do his best. The less you take advantage of him the more you will get in the end.

A tip for HR.

Make sure you are not just saying no for the sake of saying no. When a manager comes to you with a request, try to do your best to accommodate him. You will find that it will lead to happier employees and this better productivity.

Coping With a Negative Co-worker

Dear Ted:

I work at the front counter of a customer service desk at a large department store. I really like my job and understand that my goal is great customer service. Some days I get some pretty angry people coming up to the counter, but I always try to use a positive attitude to ease the situation. My problem is the person I work with. She is always talking bad about the customers and seems to constantly be short with them. I don't know how to approach her, as we are equals. I am not sure it would be a good idea to talk to the supervisor, as I don't want to get her in trouble. I just don't understand why she can't have a positive attitude.

There are many people in many jobs that don't seem to be having fun or they don't seem to be the right person for the job they are doing. A customer service representative takes a special person with a special talent. I congratulate you on your attitude. Many more customer service reps could certainly take a chapter from your book.

It is always difficult working next to a negative person, especially if that person does not really understand how they are affecting the customer or the people they work with. I would try something like this.

“We have been working together for a while now and I have noticed that I don't seem to have the same issues with our customers that you do. I see us as coming at this job from two different angles. I am having fun and I try to make the best of every situation but you seem to always be upset and lack patience with some of the customers. We are here everyday working together and it would be nice if we could both have a good time helping people. Is there anything I can do to help?”

By concentrating on trying to help rather than pointing out her flaws you will have a better chance at getting her to listen to what you have to say. Another way to help is by

your actions. Always talk positively about the customers and share good stories about them, especially when a customer comes in unhappy and you are able to turn that mood around. Unless your co-worker is what we call a 2%er she will see that you are having fun and she is not. Slowly she will change.

A tip for the negative customer service rep

Your job is customer service and being a customer service rep you are going to get yelled at from time to time. Try to put yourself in your customer's place. They bought something that they needed or were looking forward to it and for whatever reason they have to return it. Most people don't like conflict, and believe it or not, some of them think that they are going to get into a fight when they return the item.

I am sure your company policy is to make certain the customer is happy or they would not have a customer service department. So, why not do your best to make sure the customer does go away happy. They will react in the same way you treat them. If you are gruff they will be gruff. If you are accommodating they will also be accommodating. I have often said that if you deal with ten customers and you are upset with two of them, that is normal. If you deal with ten customers and you are upset with eight of them, you may have burnout and need to rethink your job or your attitude.

If this job is not for you then maybe it is time to move on to something else. However, if you really do like your job then come in tomorrow with a fresh new attitude and be proud to be the best customer service representative that you can be. And remember to smile...it is contagious!

Could Be Time For BlackBerry Protocol

Dear Ted:

I am part of a large management team and we have regularly scheduled operational meetings. My problem is that throughout the entire meeting the majority of the attendees are on their Blackberrys either texting or answering calls. I think that this is rude and should be stopped. I seem to be able to go without looking at my phone and I don't know why the others can't. How should I approach this with the team?

Yes I know, welcome to the twenty first century. This is a common problem in many workplaces. It seems that senior management teams are given company Blackberrys and told to use them, but in many companies there does not seem to be proper protocol put in place. I also agree with you that it is rude and unless there is an emergency the behavior should not be encouraged. Nobody is that important that they can't be out of reach for a one or two hour meeting.

Of course it would be up to the chair of the meeting to set the parameters. I know that when I am a presenter I will ask the audience to turn their phones or pagers off and unless someone tells me that they have an emergency call they are waiting for, they don't need to answer anything.

I would suggest that you first see if there are others who feel the same way you do about this situation. You may find that you are the only one and then unfortunately that is the way it will be, especially if the chair will not enforce the rule. Once you know that you have some support for the idea then I would make sure it is put on the next agenda for discussion. During that debate you will find those who will agree with you and those who will say that they need to constantly be in touch with their staff.

Frankly, I don't understand why a person feels that they are so valuable that they need to be constantly in touch with others. In my experience, there could be something lacking in their management style or the types of people they have working with

them. Some people are actually afraid to delegate.

Try something like this. "During meetings I find it highly disruptive to have one or more of you answering your phones or texting on your Blackberry. I feel that the material that we cover during these meetings is important and needs all of our full attention. Could we please discuss the options for limiting or restricting the use of these devices until after the meetings are over?"

Ultimately it will be up to the chair and company to officially impose any restrictions.

A tip for the Blackberry addict

I realize that in this age of new technology people have become accustomed the instant response. It is however, perfectly acceptable to be unavailable for comment from time to time. Adding an auto-reply that lets your staff know you are in a meeting and will reply when you are available may help you focus more on the content and give your colleagues the respect of having your full attention.

About The Authors

Ted Mouradian is the owner of his family business, The Mouradian Group Inc., a consulting company based out of St. Catharines, Ontario which deals with workplace relations, specializing in conflict and bullying. He has provided training workshops to organizations throughout Canada, the United States and as far away as Australia.

As a Relationship Management Consultant, Ted deals with relationships both professional and personal. Author of two previous books, Ted is currently working on his new book on bullying and conflict in the workplace that features the acclaimed Mouradian Model for Cooperative Action®. Ted is able to solve any conflict or issue through his cooperative action theory. Ted's philosophy is "Most solutions are simple; we complicate them."

Gavin Rouble is a fully Certified Business Outcomes Specialist and Coach with FocalPoint Business Coaching and is owner and President of Partner4Success Inc., a company based out of Stoney Creek, Ontario which works with Business Owners, Executives, and Managers to achieve superior business performance and results. He has provided industry training at both provincial and North American levels.

As a Certified Management Accountant and former Chief Financial Officer, Gavin knows that for business owners and executives, the line between one's personal life and business life doesn't really exist. Family concerns affect business decisions and the stress of running a business impacts the quality of family relationships. It is this basic "business" reality that drives Gavin to teach his clients that success in one area of life does NOT mean compromise in the others.