# THE CENTRE FOR ORGANIZATION EFFECTIVENESS

# Creating a Positive and Civil Workplace:
# A Cultural Approach to
# Ending Workplace Harassment

> "Life is not so short but that there is always time enough for courtesy."
>
> *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Businesses have long paid attention to hostile work environments, workplace violence, sexual harassment, diversity issues, and difficult people. Type any of these phrases in Google to learn how to resolve them - and the number of articles you find will be mind boggling.

It's no secret that harassment has a tremendous impact on the workplace. Even when employees don't necessarily feel harassed themselves, they also suffer from anger, anxiety, discouragement, depression and burnout as witnesses to the behavior. Watching harassment happen, or hearing about it through the grapevine, causes just as much distress and negatively affects work quality and work product. In turn, businesses spend millions of dollars annually in absenteeism and turnover, workers compensation claims due to stress, reduced work product, lower levels of job satisfaction, communication breakdown and even a bad reputation within the community.

Many managers and Human Resource professionals facing the problem of resolving a harassment or hostile work environment grievance focus on resolving the specific issue. Of course, by law they must investigate, document, and make a formal finding. While these are important steps, they are simply a band-aid approach to resolution.

Negative behavior is an organizational culture problem, not just an individual problem. Since culture dictates behavior, the investigation isn't solving the bigger issue. There is a better approach to resolving these common and familiar challenges. Instead of attempting to end violence, harassment and workplace bullying, focus on building a positive workplace instead. A culture of positivity and civility will push the bad behaviors out.

A nice side benefit of building a civil work culture is a better bottom line. For example, according to a study conducted by global consulting firm, Watson Wyatt, in 2003, companies that openly promote civility among employees earn 30% more revenue than competitors, are 4 times more likely to have highly engaged employees, and are 20% more likely to report reduced turnover. Another study by GreatPlaceJobs.com found that only 44% of companies who had won a great workplace award laid off workers in 2008, while a whopping 86% of Fortune 100 companies without this recognition laid employees off.

*"Always treat your employees exactly as you want them to treat your best customers."*

*Steven Covey*

*Here are five key steps to successful implementation of a healthy, civil, and positive workplace culture:*

## 1.  Have a conversation about what leadership really means.

In order for a positive culture to exist, leadership at all levels needs to be on board. Start talking to leaders about what leadership means in your organization, and guide them into understanding that leadership means support, empathy, civil communication… in addition to achieving results. In fact, you can't have the latter without the former.

## 2. Gain buy-in from the masses.

The best way to do this is through a vision and values building exercise. Gather employees and ask them what the organizational culture is now, and what it should be. Then ask them to help define values statements – a list of specific behaviors that will help you reach the vision. At first this sounds like a grueling task, but it's not.  Every human being, no matter where they work, wants the same things, no matter what industry or size of organization they work for.  The values list will no doubt include trust, respect, accountability, friendliness, and other such civil behaviors, no matter what type of organization is completing this exercise.  This vision and values activity will create buy-in to culture change, so this is an important step.

## 3.  Roll-out a *Healthy-Workplace Policy*.

No doubt you already have several policies that tell employees what not to do – they can't physically harass, tell dirty jokes, or discriminate against protected classes. But do your policies tell employees what they should do? It seems obvious; we're supposed to treat each other professionally, right? But "professional" doesn't have the same meaning for everyone.  Once the values statements that will lead you to a civil workplace are created, put them in a healthy workplace policy so acceptable behaviors are very clear. When people exemplify the behaviors on the list, acknowledge them publicly. Let others know they are being watched, and people who are on board with the civil workplace will be rewarded.

## 4.  Conduct training.

The current training programs likely tell employees what **not to do**, such as the mandatory California AB1825 training. But to create a positive workplace, it is necessary to tell employees what they **should do**.  Specifically, what behaviors do you want to see?  This helps them to understand how to act and what changes they need to make to contribute to a positive workplace culture.  At the very least, training should remind employees and managers that they have a responsibility to contribute to achieving a healthy and civil work environment that does not tolerate bullying, harassment and other negative behaviors. But training programs under the umbrella of positivity

–optimism, resilience, assertiveness, emotional intelligence, controlling stress, team work, and altruism, for example – are very powerful.

Further, managers and leaders should receive training on guiding their employees through change because although it's a good thing, the culture change will be a difficult journey for many employees. When change is imminent, people start wondering what it means for them and how it will affect their level of comfort. Managers need to know how to address this, as well as how to become positive leaders.

> "You do not lead by hitting people over the head –that's assault, not leadership."
> *Dwight D. Eisenhower*

## Step 5: Measure your internal processes and employee behaviors.

This final step has two elements. First, it is important to perform periodic culture audits. Audits offer a comprehensive review of communication patterns and will provide information about effectiveness of communication, and employee support for the organization, leaders, superiors and each other. These audits can be done via brief surveys, focus groups, or brown bag lunches. Any opportunity to gain insight from the employee perspective can be an opportunity to audit the culture. The insight will provide a big picture view of the culture so adjustments can be made accordingly.

Second, the use of 360-degree reviews as part of the professional development process for employees is an effective way to give each and every organizational member insight from those they work with including peers, managers, and subordinates. This provides each individual with very useful feedback from all levels about how they are seen by and impact others. The reviews also allow the organization to get a "whole" view (multiple perspectives) of each individual so that action plans can be made at the individual level to align them with the positive work culture.

Ultimately, many good things can come from having a positive and civil workplace. Increases in employee retention and reduction in turnover, less absenteeism and use of medical leave, management and leveraging of the organizational brand, motivating and developing staff, minimizing workplace politics, improvements in internal communication and customer service, protection of the organizational reputation, increase in the quality and quantity of work product, improvement in community awareness, reduction of workplace stress, and improvement in the health of employees and the overall organization – to name only a few of the benefits. It's a great time to consider how to ensure your workplace is a civil workplace!

For more information on creating a positive and civil workplace, contact us at info@tcfoe.com

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