

3 beliefs that will sink your ship

Damaging beliefs that go unchecked can cause major issues

What is the common denominator among the following: “Boys will be boys,” “Frank’s rough behaviour is part of his stellar sales record” and “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas”?

All three are beliefs that sanction questionable behaviours. Boys will be boys is a time-honoured mantra that enables schoolyard bullying. The notion that a person’s abrasive conduct is crucial to his success permits employers to turn a blind eye to the distress he causes. And the Vegas notion has protected many a wild behaviour from scrutiny — and sanction.

There are several underlying beliefs that cause chronic damage to the work environment. So if you want your workplace culture to deteriorate in a hurry, make sure people hold the following three beliefs near and dear to their hearts — negative results are guaranteed.

‘We’re like a family here’

I hear the “We’re like a family here” most frequently at organizations that suffer widespread incivility. At the heart of this belief lies the notion that the closeness and caring that characterize family life allow employees to freely cross colleagues’ personal boundaries without being hurtful or inappropriate. But families are deeply flawed entities. They are not idyllic structures imbued with nothing but love and support. In real life, families often cause their members intense pain. And in work environments fraught with incivility, people use the family analogy as window dressing that permits them to treat each other rudely, sarcastically or in otherwise destructive ways. The “family” notion stops accountability at the door.

In the workplace, let’s keep the worthy parts of family (connection, support, informality) and decisively weed out the counterproductive parts. From a leadership perspective, practise extra care when you encourage people to think of the workplace as a family. Fostering close bonds amongst employees is laudable and useful. However, touting the family notion will lead to risky terrain in a hurry. It can inadvertently erode people’s



GUEST COMMENTARY

SHARONE BAR-DAVID

sense of safety.

‘I know my colleagues’

People claim that knowing their colleagues’ sensitivities enables them to decipher which lines not to cross. The truth is this belief is used to allow them to say and do things that are offensive, uncivil and sometimes outright prejudiced.

An enduring example of the damaging results of this belief took place during a harassment session I facilitated several years ago at an organization I fondly came to think of as the Wild West. Incivility was rampant, along with many behaviours that would qualify as low-level harassment.

One of the participants in this session, a tiny, spirited female employee, referred to passing to the large-framed male sitting beside her as “fatso.” When I inquired about this, she explained he was her close pal and she had obtained his permission to call him fatso five years earlier, when he first joined the team.

I probed further, asking her whether that name may have made him uncomfortable. She replied that she knew her friend very well and, therefore, she knew exactly which lines not to cross. I decided to seize the moment and turn it into a learning opportunity — I asked the man whether he was comfortable being called fatso. A long pause ensued and then he said: “No, I’m not comfortable at all. In fact, I don’t like it one bit and never did.”

Thinking that you know your colleagues’ sensitivities is an illusion. In fact, you know

very little about your fellow co-workers — even those you’ve worked with for many years.

So, when in doubt, cut it out.

‘We have the right to vent’

You may have noticed that people hold onto their right to vent as if it were one of the Ten Commandments. They use it to justify uncensored bad-mouthing of colleagues and managers behind their unsuspecting backs.

Employees and managers alike tell me that venting is a legitimate way to release steam. After all, there’s lots of stress in the workplace and when a colleague does something that’s frustrating or upsetting, the best way to handle it is by going to another colleague to express your authentic frustration. Doing so has a cleansing effect that enables them to return to their work relieved and relaxed.

Here’s my frank response: We are not machines that require the release of steam in order to operate properly. We are living organisms and our actions can cause much distress to fellow living organisms. In the workplace, if you’re frustrated with a colleague, it is incumbent upon you as an adult and professional to handle it in ways that do not involve spreading incivility and hurtful gossip. Need to vent? Do so at home with your husband, dog or friend. Or call your company EAP for professional help.

Prevent collateral damage

Damaging beliefs have a way of creeping up on you. Once they do, they blind your vision and lead you to behaviours that are hurtful and damaging. At your organization or in your team, it is crucial to leverage the human species’ unique capacity to critically examine beliefs. Once you do, you can enhance the quality of your workplace by encouraging people to replace these beliefs with more helpful ones.

Sharone Bar-David is president of Toronto-based Bar-David Consulting, a company offering solutions for creating respectful work environments. She can be reached at sharone@sharonebardavid.com or visit www.sharonebardavid.com for more information.