

## Critical exception to 'correct in private' rule

### Public correction sometimes necessary

It's time to challenge a long-held tenet of both HR and management. Devout followers of the "praise publicly, correct privately" rule may want to reconsider that belief. I realize, in suggesting this, I'm bumping up against a time-honoured tradition. As early as 35 BC, Publilius Syrus said: "Admonish your friends privately but praise them openly." In the 18th Century, Russia's Catherine the Great said she liked to "praise and reward loudly, to blame quietly." And famed football coach Vince Lombardi said his recipe for team success relied on a "praise in public, criticize in private" paradigm.

There are good reasons why this rule has gained such traction. It helps maintain people's sense of dignity. It helps avoid resistance and anger amongst team members in response to public criticism of a colleague. And, let's face it, people respond better to criticism when there is no "observer effect."

But here's the catch: When it comes to maintaining a civil, respectful workplace, the correct-privately notion is not only flawed, it is potentially harmful. In fact, in the respect arena, the opposite applies: "What's done in public is corrected publicly."

When uncivil or offensive public behaviour takes place with no managerial response, employees could rightfully conclude this behaviour is condoned. Furthermore, by responding in private, employers miss invaluable opportunities to set the standard for all to grasp and follow.

#### The barriers

It's easy to say "what's done in public is corrected publicly" but in real life there are several formidable barriers to overcome. At the heart of these barriers lie HR and managerial attitudes and fears that interfere with getting things done right.

First, there's a pervasive aversion to confrontation in the Canadian workplace. As diverse as we have become, the workplace still seems to follow a being-nice-at-all-costs imperative. It's not the Canadian way to deal with controversial issues directly and publicly. The task becomes exceedingly difficult against the backdrop of a longstanding correct-in-private tradition.

Second, many managers and HR professionals want to be liked. To confront someone publicly regarding an off-colour joke or comment threatens this ingrained emotional need.

Third, even if they want to respond in pub-



#### ■ GUEST COMMENTARY

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lic, most managers and HR professionals are not sure how to respond. And without the skill set, they tend to avoid a response altogether.

Finally, most situations involving offensive or crossing-the-line behaviour happen very fast as a comment, a sneer, a joke or a gesture, often in the midst of a busy environment, making it difficult to respond immediately.

#### Mistakes to avoid

There are three common mistakes to avoid when responding in public to any respect-related situation.

As a manager or an HR professional, avoid using "I" statements in these situations. Don't say, "I was offended by that joke." Instead, say, "Jokes that focus on people's physical attributes are not appropriate in our environment." The purpose of correcting offensive behaviour is to create common standards and to enforce organizational values. Whether or not you personally were offended is, frankly, irrelevant.

When it comes to non-managerial staff, the "I" statement certainly has a rightful place in the respect arena. In fact, it is the single most important tool for employees to deal directly with offensive situations. However, for managers and HR, it is a definite no-no.

Another common pitfall is the use of humour when correcting in public. Humour is a wonderful device but when it comes to correcting behaviour, people may not get the message and your objectives won't be met. Try using a light touch instead.

Finally, never dispute the accuracy of what has been said. If someone makes a comment that characterizes a certain ethnic group, never say, "Well, actually that is factually incorrect. The truth is people of this group..." By

doing so, you are inadvertently deepening the offensive discussion that stereotypes groups of people. Besides, you're opening the door to a debate and chances are you'll find yourself on the losing side.

#### Doing it right

The objectives of any public response are always the same, regardless of the specifics of the situation. Get the behaviour to stop. Send a clear message to observers. Maintain the dignity of those involved. And, of course, reinforce organizational values. Correcting publicly is a delicate and complex affair. The challenge is to do it well while still meeting these objectives. Here are some options to consider:

**Now or later?** Sometimes it makes sense to respond on the spot, other times to respond later. Sometimes a combination of both is required.

Most managers and HR professionals have a knee-jerk, "let's do it later" reaction. Often this is a manifestation of the aversion to controversy discussed above. Whenever possible, respond immediately and don't wait for tomorrow.

**Light touch or heavy-handed?** Some situations require a light-touch response, others a heavy-handed one. You may choose to use a phrase such as, "Guys, let's cut it out. We don't talk that way here." Or a heavier, "This type of talk is unacceptable and in fact constitutes harassment under our harassment policy. Continuing with this could lead to serious consequences." It's your choice, depending on the circumstances.

**Short or long?** Depending on the variables of the situation, a short and sweet response may be best. Other times, a longer, more educational approach is warranted, such as: "This type of banter can make people feel uncomfortable. Even if there's no one around who seems to be affected, we aim to maintain a respectful environment at all times. It helps us live up to our values and create the inclusive environment we want to be proud of."

Good judgment is key in deciding which approach or combination of approaches to use. Responding in public to respect issues takes both courage and skill. And it sure is worth it.

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