

Member's Quarterly

Winter 2022 Edition

Feature

COVID-19 Impacts Respectful Workplace Dynamics

Time to revisit workplace policies and procedures



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The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on every workplace regardless of whether employees are front line essential workers or working remotely. We all recognize the effect on productivity, efficiency and mental health, but are organizations ignoring the impact on respectful workplace interactions? These may have been overlooked when employees were working from home or as essential workers focussed on the task at hand. Post-COVID is an ideal time for organizations to revisit expectations regarding respectful workplace expectations.

Employees working under stressful conditions often display a change in usual behaviours. Incivilities erupt and the focus on reaching goals overtakes the focus on building or maintaining strong working relationships. Our exchanges start to move on a continuum from respectful (green) to incivil (yellow) or disrespectful (orange). Let's take a look at what behaviours we may notice in each of those categories.

Respectful behaviours in the green zone of the continuum include being kind and helpful, seeking input from others, listening, being attentive and open. People endeavor to recognize the efforts of others, share knowledge and information, frequently and clearly communicate and provide constructive feedback and positive reinforcement. Respectful behaviours recognize and value others' differences and our language and nonverbal gestures reflect dignity and regard.

Incivil behaviours in the yellow zone can be seen through actions such as interrupting, put downs, insults or sarcasm. Careless humour or practical jokes that embarrass others are seen as crossing the line. Inappropriate remarks in front of others, profanity, insults or gossip are conducts that also fall within this area. Often gossip can be viewed as discussing concerns with others rather than the individual involved, unless you are seeking mentoring or support in how to approach that individual. Not doing what you say you will, not permitting input or delaying or refusing to answer based on interpersonal relationship issues are all activities that fall in the yellow zone.

Disrespectful behaviours show up in the orange zone of the continuum. Angry outbursts, sexual innuendo, bullying, harassment or discrimination are indicators that behaviours have passed into this zone. Making unreasonable demands, using others' ideas as your own, starting or perpetuating malicious rumours, or isolating or excluding others is not tolerable. Retaliation against others or workplace mobbing also fall within the disrespectful workplace domain.

The red zone includes the most egregious behaviours where outside enforcement support is likely required to respond. These behaviours include assault, sexual assault, systemic discrimination, stalking, hate crimes, etc.

Problematic interactions at the incivil stage of the continuum can trigger conflict. If not managed effectively, these can create an entirely new spinoff of difficult issues such as deteriorating trust and broken working relationships, perhaps shifting behaviours into the orange or red zone.

Healthy conflict should be welcome and is needed to ensure we produce the best outcomes. Discussing differing ideas allows us to share information and collaborate with others. Engaging in a respectful dialogue to reach a creative solution is the hopeful outcome of resolving conflict. If a disagreement is not resolved productively, conflict can escalate creating negative aftereffects.

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Feature continued

If you notice changing behaviours in your workplace, it's time to revisit respectful workplace policies and procedures. Along with this, create an opportunity for employees to come together and have a dialogue about the impacts of COVID-19 on their own work. Remember to set a safe space for the dialogue by agreeing to confidentiality and creating protocols for productive engagement. Questions like the following can be developed to guide the conversation:

- What was your working experience during COVID-19 and what are you experiencing now that we are entering the Post-COVID period?
- How has COVID-19 and the stress of this time impacted your working behaviours?
- What have you noticed with regards to your own behaviours?
- What can we do to ensure that our workplace interactions remain respectful?
- How can we resolve conflict effectively?
- What is needed now to ensure we can all work together successfully?

COVID-19 may have impacted respectful workplace dynamics in your organization, so watch for warning signs such as changing behaviours. Creating an opportunity for open and safe dialogue will enable your employees to build understanding and find solutions that reiterate existing protocols and where needed, generate new norms for successful workplace interactions.

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