

Workplace relationships: How to just get along

Too often, employees are 'guilty of doing a magnification,' VIRGINIA GALT writes

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We spend most of our waking hours on the job, with ample time to observe the group dynamics. Even so, it is not always easy to forge productive working relationships.

Some co-workers will never get along, and some work groups are destined to remain dysfunctional because they get trapped in what relationship counsellor Joe Rich describes as patterns of "repeated disorder": They keep encountering the same roadblocks time and time again, but no one intervenes to change the order of business.

In most situations, though, working relationships can be better managed if participants take the time to objectively analyze what is going right and where there is room for improvement, says Mr. Rich, who recently conducted a lunch-and-learn session on "relationship thinking at work" at the Toronto offices of Borden Ladner Gervais LLP.

"People in workplaces are busy, rushing to get the job done," says Mr. Rich, a social worker. There is little time for reflection, unless people make the time.

"I encourage people to pull over to the side of the road and really have a look at where they are going, where they have been and what they are doing."

Otherwise, he says, issues that can be solved often become magnified into more intractable problems.

Genuine problems should not be minimized or ignored, he says. "But most of the time, we are guilty of doing a magnification," Mr. Rich notes.

"Magnification, in therapeutic terms, is actually anxiety . . . One of the things we teach people when they are feeling anxious is not to magnify things, but to try to make them smaller."

Mr. Rich, who devotes much of his practice to marriage counselling, has branched into workplace relationships through his association with LifeSpeak Inc., a Toronto-based company that conducts workplace seminars to help employees integrate their careers and their personal lives.

Borden Ladner Gervais has commissioned a number of these seminars to provide its lawyers with advice on everything from child rearing to managing stress at work, which in turn often leads to stress at home.

So what does a relationship counsellor have to offer a group of people who, in their day-to-day working lives, are expert at resolving adversarial situations?

Apart from the fact that it is often easier to solve other people's problems, lawyer Winn Oughtred, a Toronto-based managing partner with BLG, notes that his firm, and others, have lost talented lawyers "for lifestyle reasons."

Young lawyers, in particular, have a lot of pressure on them as they strive to establish themselves and bring in new clients, Mr. Oughtred says.

"Some people get themselves into trouble, emotionally or anxiety-wise," adds Mr. Oughtred, who says his firm invests in seminars like Mr. Rich's to identify any workplace issues that might be making its lawyers' lives more difficult.

"As a managing partner, I spend a fair bit of time dealing with people. Now I think of it as dealing with relationships, and that's one of the reasons I came to hear Joe," he says.

"We can see situations where groups, or combinations, are close to dysfunctional; they don't work well. How do we change people and seats to make things work better?"

Mr. Rich says a working relationship is no different than any other relationship in that it is important to listen, observe and get a feel for what the other people in the group are comfortable with, and how they like to conduct themselves.

Lawyers and other professionals sometimes "have a little bit of the expert thing going" -- they are accustomed to people seeking them out for their expertise and opinion.

But they can only give solid advice if they understand where the other person is coming from, he notes.

For newcomers to any particular group, Mr. Rich advises, it's important to be aware of the hierarchy. "There is always a hierarchy," he says.

Toronto-based management consultant Jim Gray notes that it is particularly difficult to break into an established group and make a meaningful contribution.

Young managers and professionals, especially those under 40, are often frustrated in their attempts to make a connection and establish a presence with their older peers and managers, says Mr. Gray, a communications specialist.

"I say to young people, 'Listen more than you talk.' That's No. 1," Mr. Gray says.

Also important is to watch for an opening.

"You need to get your credentials and experience out as soon as you possibly can, especially when you get into interactions with more senior people who are not familiar

with your background . . . not in an overpromotional way, but just so they know that you belong at the table," Mr. Gray says.

And then, be quiet and listen. The less you say, the more power you have, Mr. Gray says.

"In my experience, young people speak far too often in meetings . . . trying to make an impression. They are nervous. They want to prove that they belong. But proving that you belong is not related to how much you have to say at a meeting -- it is the value of what you say."

Mr. Rich agrees that it is inadvisable to take up other people's time with too much unsolicited information. He adds that there are also professional and personal boundaries that should be observed.

Co-workers, for instance, do not want to know every last detail of someone else's personal life any more than family members want to hear a blow-by-blow description of what happened at the office on a particular day.

At BLG, lawyer Patrick Hawkins found the advice on sorting out working relationships particularly instructive.

"I spend more time here than anywhere else," he says, "so, clearly, relationships are of critical importance."