

the last word

Taking the politics out of the office: Building better workplaces

If politics is a battle for high office, then offices are often battlegrounds for politics and power-plays.

These battlegrounds have the following symptoms: teams with low morale, co-workers afraid to speak up and out, people looking fired, gossip rather than communication, high levels of stress, and overwork.

A Safe Work Australia study in March this year found that overwork and stress costs the Australian economy \$30 billion a year. Interestingly, the Safe Work report said: "While mental stress cases comprise 4 per cent of the ...cases, they contribute 9 per cent of the total cost."

This report supports earlier findings from Medicare Australia that revealed stress-related presenteeism and absenteeism directly cost Australian employers \$10.11 billion a year.

And, aside from the obvious economic cost, what about the toll on the individual, their colleagues, and their family that bear the brunt of the overwork and stress?

The first thing we need to do is save the patient. Life support requires recognition of the symptoms of stress within the workplace. Look for colleagues becoming ill-tempered or aggressive, getting easily distracted, regular absenteeism, a decline in work performance, and physical signs such as headaches, nausea, neck, and back pain.

From here individuals and management can work to construct an effective intervention through mechanisms such as stress leave and a graduated return-to-work plan.

But addressing individual symptoms does not restore our patient to health. Restoring the battleground of the office into a great place to work – one with a mentally healthy and enjoyable environment – requires good planning and sound leadership. Here are some tips to get you started on the road to recovery:

1. Use the no-complaining rule to establish a positive workplace. Battlegrounds are usually negative places to be, so use the no-complaining rule to get rid of whingeing, whining, carping, gossip, and other un-useful workplace activities. Grab a copy of *The No Complaining Rule* by Jon Gordon from your nearest library (that should be pretty easy for you all) to read more about how to implement this at work.
2. Use the three second rule for yourself. Unhappy workplaces can come from unhappy workers. Unhappy workers are more likely to lash out and use emotion as a weapon rather than a communication tool. Look at yourself and try the three second rule. Studies show three seconds is all that is needed to redirect negative thoughts to positive ones. So, count to three before you respond at work. Check out *3 Seconds 3 Seconds* by Les Parrott for more information on putting this into action.
3. Narratives. What do you want the workplace story to be? What would be the story at the moment? Developing a workplace narrative tells you, your colleagues, and others how you see, feel, and behave at work. Check your story out at the moment, and then work to change the narrative if you need to. Timothy Wilson's fantastic evidence-based book *Redirect* provides practical tips on developing healthy narratives in all sorts of scenarios. You may need to transfer these to your office!

Julia's office is one full of politics and battles. But remember, yours does not have to be. Building a better workplace starts with recognising that what we currently have needs changing and then taking action to do something differently.

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