Civil Behavior in the Workplace

A workplace is more than just a place of business — it is a shared space where employees spend a substantial percentage of their daily lives. Over time, petty annoyances and small grievances may begin to pile up, resulting in tension, irritation, and mistrust. These feelings may impact both productivity and morale and could result in behaviors that affect the entire workplace, such as:

- Angry outbursts or blow-ups between co-workers
- Bullying
- Gossip or innuendo
- Backstabbing
- Passive-aggressive behavior
- Harassment

While an occasional lapse in politeness is inevitable, a generally lax attitude toward manners may have a corrosive effect on morale. When managers establish an expectation of civil behavior, it helps to create a collegial atmosphere and minimizes the chance that small spats could snowball into major conflicts.

The following areas are ones in which it may be helpful to establish ground rules about appropriate behavior:

- **Communication.** Communication is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to collaboration and teamwork. To foster good communication within your team:
  - Encourage team members to listen to each other without interruption and avoid jumping to conclusions
  - Ask open-ended questions (why, how, what, etc.) that increase opportunities for discussion in meetings and encourage your employees to do the same
  - Lead by example by saying “please” and “thank you” and avoiding the use of negative or derogatory language

- **Personal beliefs.** Employees are people first, and their values

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and interests will inform their attitudes toward their work and relationships with co-workers. While a diversity of viewpoints may lead to a more well-rounded workplace, it could also increase tension and conflict. These ground rules may help:

- Establish an expectation that employees will treat each other with respect at all times
- Encourage employees to "agree to disagree" about hot-button issues in the news or to avoid discussions that could lead to conflict
- Maintain and follow company policy on the distribution of political or religious literature or attire with political or social messages

**Noise.** Music and conversation may be a considerable distraction, especially in shared spaces such as a work station or cubicle area. Some tips for minimizing noise disruptions include:

- Ask employees to use their "indoor voices" when conversing with others or while on the phone
- If listening to music or the radio while working is allowed, ask employees to keep the volume at a reasonable level or use headphones while in shared spaces

**Kitchen and lunchroom areas.** The office kitchen or lunch room is often a surprising source of conflict. Common issues include:

- One employee’s food being taken by another
- Monopolizing refrigerator space or leaving food to rot
- Leaving a mess in the microwave or on the counters

To avoid conflicts over these sorts of issues, it may help to post a list of kitchen rules that everyone is expected to follow. In addition, assigning kitchen or refrigerator clean-up duty to all team members on a rotating basis may promote considerate behavior.

**Work areas.** Encourage employees to respect each other’s personal work space. For instance:

- Remind staff that it is polite to knock or ask permission before coming into someone else’s office or cubicle
- If two employees share a cubicle or office, advise them to mutually agree on the rules for their shared space and to work out disagreements respectfully
- Establish ground rules for use of shared equipment or space in common areas

Before creating any guidelines for behavior within your team or work group, it’s important to review company policy and consult with Human Resources. In addition, the LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can provide assistance with addressing personality conflicts, morale issues, and other impediments to team cohesiveness. Call 24/7/365 with any concern. We’re always here.
How Do I Say That? Avoiding Cliques

Cliques are a common aspect of interpersonal relationships at work. Small sub-groups may form for a variety of reasons, such as similar positions, common interests, or closeness in age or background. In some instances, these small groups may have a negative effect on team dynamics.

If you are concerned that a clique is undermining team cohesiveness, consider these steps:

1. **Consult with Human Resources.** When a clique causes problems, it is usually for one of two reasons: a) a small group gaining an oversized amount of sway within the larger team or b) the isolation or ostracization of other team members. In both instances, HR can help you review relevant policies and provide suggestions for how to address your concerns. LifeMatters can also offer consultation and guidance.

2. **Schedule separate, private meetings with each employee.** Outline your concerns and explain what behaviors are considered inappropriate. If there are allegations of bullying or harassment, address them in accordance with company policy.

   _Sample language:_ “When you exclude other team members within the workplace, it affects morale. It’s important that everyone feels welcome and respected within the team.”

3. **Listen.** Ask each employee to provide his or her observations of what may be happening. If your concerns are related to a specific incident, ask the employee to provide her or his perspective on the event.

   _Sample language:_ “Could you please provide your view of these events? I’d like to understand your perspective.”

4. **Outline your expectations.** Clearly explain what changes you would like to see. If there are issues with workflow or the members of the group are not following proper procedures, outline what should happen in the future.

   _Sample language:_ “I understand that personal friendships sometimes spill over into the workplace. However, that can’t get in the way of team goals. Here is what I expect in the future.”

5. **Make a referral to LifeMatters.** If you feel it is warranted, make a performance referral to LifeMatters for one or more members of the group.
Sample language: “LifeMatters can work with you to improve your on-the-job performance, as well as assist with any personal concerns. Please give them a call.”

**Follow up.** Meet with each employee at a later date. Note any improvements in the employee’s work performance and behavior and outline where change is still needed. If your concerns about the behavior of one or more employees persists, consult with Human Resources.

Sample language: “Let’s meet again to talk about how things are going in a week. In the meantime, I’m available to answer any questions you may have.”

One of the best ways to keep cliques from becoming problematic is to avoid playing favorites. By setting an example of fair behavior, you establish the same expectation for others.

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is available to help you address any issue that impacts your team. Call 24/7/365.

Management Consultation

LifeMatters is available to help with:

- Confronting an employee about performance issues
- An employee’s personal problem
- Suspected drug or alcohol use on the job
- Interpersonal conflicts between team members
- Establishing clear, attainable expectations for performance
- Addressing crisis situations, such as a violent incident, the death of an employee, or a natural disaster
- Your own personal concerns
- Any other work-related issue

LifeMatters offers professional management consultation when you need it, as often as you need it. Call anytime.