

Successful Learning Organizations Understand the Power of Positive Workplaces

By Catherine Mattice, MA
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Introduction by Jim Kirkpatrick

I met Catherine in the Fall of 2009 in San Diego. At first take, our professional worlds were interesting to each other but we saw no other correlation. Soon into our discussion, however, we saw the tremendous potential synergy.

Within the Kirkpatrick Business Partnership Model there is a step called “Necessities for Success.” In short, this consists of relevant business partners examining the culture of an organization to see if certain conditions can be enhanced or mitigated that might otherwise negatively affect the potential impact of a subsequent learning/performance initiative.

Catherine introduced me to the concept of “a culture of bullying”, which can and will be a powerful derailer of an otherwise strong training event or learning initiative. Consider, for instance, a program where mass training has occurred to teach employees how to handle difficult conversations, respect differences in others, or utilize innovation and creativity in the workplace. Then imagine these training graduates walking into a culture of bullying. It will knock the potential impact of such programs almost to zero. That’s enough from me. It’s all yours, Catherine.

Bullying in the Workplace

American businesses spend \$5 to \$6 million per year on workplace bullying, according to the Bureau of National Affairs. Bottom lines all across America (and the world) suffer as a result of high absenteeism and turnover, declined mental and physical health, reduced productivity, poor work quality, and the severe internal communication breakdown bullies promote.

Although 25 years of international research continues to indicate approximately 70% of employees are bullied, the corporate world is only recently beginning to pay attention to this damaging phenomenon. We have, however, long since paid attention to hostile work environments, workplace

violence, sexual harassment, diversity issues, and “difficult people”. To be clear, workplace bullying is ongoing, negative acts that cause psychological damage to targets and witnesses. Behaviors include isolation, uber-excessive micro-management, arbitrary punishment, intimidation, assigning unmanageable workloads, and the like.



In any case, it is important to understand that when sexual harassment, bullying or violence occurs within an organization the perpetrator is not the only person to blame. This sort of thing doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Negative organizational goings-ons are a result of something happening within the organizational culture, and they will only stop when the corporate culture doesn’t allow that type of behavior to thrive anymore. As such, handling the grievance and providing training, by themselves, are not the answer.

The Effects of Negative Relationships

Organizational success depends on a climate of fairness and supportiveness – where members are listening and being sensitive to one another’s needs and aware of how the things they say are perceived by others. In essence, positive communication processes within an organization facilitate the meeting of organizational goals - and internal relationships are the mediating factor. When relationships are on fire, however:

- Communication ceases
- Problems can’t be solved

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- Nothing can be learned
- Customer needs become secondary to survival in a hostile environment
- Gossip takes over (the Canadian Safety Council reports that targets of bullying spend 52% of their day talking to other employees about being bullied instead of working)
- Performance goes down
- Stress prevents effective decision making

The list goes on and on.



Creating a Supportive Working Environment

This is important because supportive working environments are consistently identified as an important attribute of an effective learning and performance organization. The authors of *Is Yours a Learning Organization?* (Harvard Business Review, 2008) operationalize this concept with psychological safety, appreciation of differences, openness to new ideas, and time for reflection. In other words, in order to learn, employees must feel safe to disagree, to ask questions and to make mistakes. They must recognize the value of competing ideas and allow those ideas to spark new ones within themselves. Employees must feel encouraged to take risks, and feel they have time for thoughtful reflection of organizational processes. None of this can happen when a bully is lurking among the cubicle walls.

In order to make this supportive environment a reality, dynamic and empathetic leadership must

exist systemically. Allstate Insurance exemplifies this with its own definition of leadership: “achieving results and *creating a supportive work environment*” (Stephens, 1999, p. 12).

Once leadership is on board, organizational support for a positive workplace can be gained by engaging all members in the development of a new vision of healthy culture. If staff helps create the vision, it is easier to hold them accountable to it – not to mention they are more likely to take heed simply because they have a vested interest in doing so.

Of course training is also an important tool in a strategic culture shift. Training programs taking place in this new safe workplace should include such topics as conflict resolution, negotiation, interpersonal communication, assertiveness, empathy, stress management, leadership, optimism, and self-examination. These types of subjects should be identified as core competencies of each employee, and targeted outcomes defined (Kirkpatrick Levels 3 and 4). A manager who receives unsatisfactory marks in the relationship component of his 360° review, for example, should receive training; interpersonal competency should then be added to his personal goals and job description, and a specific score identified on his next 360° review as a requirement to keep his position.



While on the topic of training, it is important to note that research tells us that training in and of itself brings surprisingly little impact to the bottom line. That is precisely why reducing the poison of a bullying culture not only makes the lives of countless workers more positive, but allows for the

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successful leveraging of training programs *specifically in terms of application to the job.*

Ultimately, the benefits of a healthy, civil, safe, positive and working environment are endless. A supportive workplace:

- Facilitates a desire to learn
- Motivates and inspires
- Decreases turnover
- Minimizes workplace politics
- Improves internal communication
- Advances relationships with customers
- Increases quality and quantity of work product
- Reduces stress
- Improves the health of the organization and its employees
- Promotes excitement among employees to do great things

References:

Garvin, D.A., Edmondson, A.C., & Gino, F. (2008). Is yours a learning organization? *Harvard Business Review*, Mar, 109-116.

Stephens, T. (1999). Leadership development as a business strategy. In J.J. Phillips, & F.C. Ashby (Eds.), *Developing Effective Leadership Programs* (pp. 11-29). Alexandria, VA: ASTD.

Catherine Mattice is a consultant and trainer who focuses on building positive workplaces through her business, Civility Partners, LLC (www.CivilityPartners.com), and is an SME in workplace bullying. (See her educational site, www.NoWorkplaceBullies.com for more information about workplace bullying specifically). She has published several works in the area and has presented her research both nationally and internationally at a variety of conferences. She is the 2010 President-Elect of the San Diego Chapter of the American Society of Training and Development, and is also a very active member with the International Association of Workplace Bullying. She received her BA and MA in Organizational Communication from San Diego State University and has appeared several times on FOX, NBC, and ABC.