The Toxic Workplace

How does your workplace shape up?
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In my last blog, I talked about some of the characteristics of a healthy workplace. Using Buckingham and Coffman's (1999) 12 key questions that help to ascertain the overall healthiness of one's workplace, we get a picture of what it is like to work in a setting where one feels valued, respected, validated and has opportunities to learn and grow. What can be better than that? Probably we could add to the list, fair compensation for one's work, which includes incentives for work well done. However, research indicates that pay alone is not a guarantee of job satisfaction.

Although Buckingham and Coffman's key questions certainly capture how workers would like to be treated, can we assume that a dysfunctional or toxic workplace embodies much of the opposite qualities implied in Buckingham and Coffman's key questions (e.g. people feel invalidated, not valued, their opinions don't count, they are not respected and they feel stagnant in their work)? In many respects that probably would be an accurate description of a rather unfulfilling job that lends itself to low job satisfaction. Yet, when we think of a truly toxic workplace, we would tend to think of work settings where people are treated abusively, are bullied, are harassed or feel threatened and intimidated. Being neglected and unsupported may exist at one of a continuum of unhealthy workplaces dynamics whereas abuse and harassment seems to exist at the other end.

Abusive behavior can take many forms most notably, verbal abuse. Constructive criticism is usually perceived by the person on the receiving end as being helpful or instructive in some way, whereas verbal abuse is meant to hurt, demean and is often purely vitriolic in nature. Verbal abuse can include name-calling, verbal insults, racial, gender, religious or ethnic slurs, and attacks on one's character, motivation, physical appearance (e.g. "You're a lazy, slob who will never amount to anything. Typical for someone of your race/ethnicity /religion/gender etc." This type of verbal abuse often constitutes what attorneys refer to as a "hostile workplace environment" and can be grounds for a EEOC complaint or in some instances a lawsuit against one's employer (see Barnes 2012). Verbal abusiveness is one type of attack and tactic used by workplace bullies. However, bullies usually employ other methods to torture their coworker victims. Threats are usually part of the bully's arsenal and these can include threats to file false reports against the coworker, threats to have them fired, threats to their livelihood, (e.g. ability to obtain another job), threats to have them demoted, threats to withhold pay or bonuses. The goal of the workplace bully is often to intimidate their co-worker perhaps as a means of getting them to do exactly what they want. Yet, there are bullies who derive great joy merely out of watching their coworker suffer. These are usually the worst and most sadistic type of bullies.

Harassment is another type of abusive behavior. Whenever we hear of harassment in the workplace, we think of sexual harassment, although harassment can take other forms (e.g. other types of threats or intimidation) the key is that both create what attorneys refer to as a "hostile work environment". In a recent, well-publicized case involving sexual harassment of three women, San Diego former Mayor Bob Filner pled guilty to sexual harassment, false imprisonment and battery charges. In the aftermath of the allegations of these three women, seventeen women came forward with similar allegations. This is reminiscent of allegations of sexual harassment brought against the former Oregon US Senator, Robert Packwood who resigned his senate seat in the aftermath of allegations of harassment by women on his staff.

Toxic workplaces can take many different forms to those in which overt bullying is condoned, to jobs where harassment and hostile workplace characteristics are commonplace, to those in which hard work is taken for granted and workers feel neglected and invalidated. Granted work is not supposed to fun but on the other hand it shouldn't be punishing or demeaning right?

Suggested Readings

Barnes, P.G. (2012) *Surviving bullies, queen bees and psychopaths in the workplace*.
        http://abusergoestowork.com

Buckingham, M., & Coffman, C. (1999). *First break all the rules: What the world's
greatest   managers do differently.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Kusy, M. & Holloway, E. (2009). *Toxic Workplace: Managing toxic personalities and their systems of
power.* San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass/Wiley & Sons

Tehrani, N. (2012) *Workplace Bullying: Symptoms & Solutions.* New York: Taylor & Francis
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