



CREATING A CULTURE OF RESPECT

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What you want
Baby, I got it
What you need
Do you know I got it
All I'm askin'
Is for a little respect . . .

["Respect" lyrics sung by Aretha Franklin]

Lack of respect, as in disrespect, is exhibited in many ways including contempt, discourtesy, impoliteness, incivility, insolence, disparagement, and disregard. Respect can slowly erode from the day-to-day stresses and strains which cause people with inadequate coping skills to vent frustration on others. Disrespect can also evolve from continual inability to successfully manage conflicts or differences without one or more parties to the conflict descends into anger, avoidance and/or blaming behavior.

Most of us have either been the target of disrespectful behavior, or witnessed it close by. While most acknowledge that disrespect is undesirable at least, and creates discomfort for all, we often fail to realize the pernicious effect of disrespect in the workplace.

Teamwork becomes the first victim of disrespect in the workplace. When criticism, disregard and/or a level of hostility exists, people go into self-preservation mode. Whereas a high level of teamwork is essential to success at a law firm, disrespect makes trust, cooperation and teamwork nearly impossible. Lack of respect between staff members can impair communication firm-wide. It can interfere with delegation of work to the most effective person(s). It can fuel gossip and rumor.

Turnover is a meaningful indicator that the work environment may be viewed as unhealthy. Nowadays, talented individuals don't have to put up with a disrespectful workplace. They can easily relocate to a job where they feel respected. Note that this is not the same as those leaving over money issues. In fact, over the

years I have noted time and again that people will actually move for the same or less compensation and benefits, in order to work in a more suitable environment.

Of course, if teamwork is lacking and/or turnover is increased, there will be negative economic consequences. When people are distracted from productive work to deal increasingly with trying to diffuse conflicts, fill open positions, or take “mental health” days, profits will suffer. Ask an employment law attorney, and you will also find that disrespectful environments can lead to lawsuits for wrongful termination, discrimination, or harassment.

David Zinger, founder and host of the 7000+ member Employee Engagement Network, said it perfectly: “Respect is like oxygen: it helps people breathe and inspires trust and connection, while a lack of respect will suck the breath of life out of work.”

Changing the culture of a firm into one of respect means more than just eliminating negative behaviors. It means one must establish a culture of positive behaviors: considering opinions of others; considering the needs of others; considering the feelings of others; and compromising and negotiating with others. It means that from the top down, respect for others must be a clearly expressed **requirement** for success, and all must be accountable for disrespectful behavior.

On an individual basis, what we’re talking about, folks, is EQ: emotional intelligence. Those with low EQ must learn how to have *productive* conflict, avoid damaging behaviors, and navigate difficult conversations. They must learn how to build personal resilience so that stressors in the workplace or home don’t lead to the evisceration of some hapless victim in their path. They must learn that win/lose is just one method of conflict resolution; usually not the best. Probably most important, they must build an awareness of how their words and actions affect others, and actually care when the effect is negative.

Fortunately, EQ can be improved. Anyone willing and ready to improve EQ can find vast resources to help, including articles, seminars, personality assessments and personal coaching. PBA members are encouraged to contact me for referrals to coaches. Here are some starting points:

- Turn your focus outward. Consider how your words and actions will impact others *before* you speak. Approach each interaction with respect, regardless of whether you think others have “earned” the respect.



- Listen actively and openly to others, without interruption. Be aware of the respect you display in all forms of your communication including voice tone, body language, and indicating understanding about what others are expressing.
- Get to know your “hot buttons” or “triggers” so that you can manage your reactions and respond more appropriately. There’s a difference between responding and reacting. Practice self-restraint.
- Praise much more frequently than you criticize. Encourage others to praise and recognize each other. Don’t criticize over little things, belittle, judge, demean or patronize. A series of seemingly trivial criticisms, added up over time, will be perceived as bullying.
- Treat others the same or better than you would wish to be treated.

I have long been aware of the significance of corporate culture. It impacts every aspect of a firm; from the talent it hires and retains, to the level and effectiveness of teams and communications, to its reputation in the marketplace, to the bottom line.

I have managed firms with all types of cultures. The worst was a firm where stress hung on the walls like artwork. People hid behind closed doors. Facial expressions were strained. Teamwork was non-existent. Turnover was high. Laughter was never heard. Frequent heated outbursts occurred in hallways, open doorways, and in partner meetings behind closed doors. Every molehill was a mountain. In retrospect, I now realize the managing partner had a very low EQ, which led to the development of the toxic culture.

One would think that an opposite culture would be ideal. I managed a firm at the other end of the extreme. I joke that at 5:00 pm each day the partners would join hands in a circle and sing Kumbaya. There was never any shouting, and a noticeable absence of any public criticism. Voices were never raised at partner meetings. It was a kinder, gentler firm for sure. But it ultimately failed because there was a total absence of any criticism, including for those who fell well below standards.

Extremes are to be avoided. Take a look at your firm. Are you dealing with normal conflicts in a healthy manner? Are the employees of your firm, from the top down, treating one another with respect? Do you have one or more people of low EQ who create toxicity around them, making others feel disrespected? If so, what, if

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anything, will you do about it? Just think about it. Life is too short to dread the walk from the car to the office door. Maybe a good starting point will be a call to the Law Practice Management hotline.

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