

7.3: Contributing to a Positive Work Atmosphere

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain employees' responsibility to treat their peers with respect
- Describe employees' duty to follow company policy and the code of conduct
- Discuss types of workplace violence

You may spend more time with your coworkers than you spend with anyone else, including your family and friends. Thus, your ability to get along with work colleagues can have a significant impact on your life, as well as your attitude toward your job and your employer. All sorts of personalities populate our workplaces, but regardless of their working style, preferences, or quirks, employees owe one another courtesy and respect. That does not mean always agreeing with them, because evaluating a diversity of perspectives on business problems and opportunities is often essential for finding solutions. At the same time, however, we are responsible for limiting our arguments to principles, not personalities. This is what we owe to one another as human beings, as well as to the firm, so worksite arguments do not inflict lasting harm on the people who work there or on the company itself.

Getting Along with Coworkers

An employee who gets along with coworkers can help the company perform better. What can employees do to help create a more harmonious workplace with a positive atmosphere?

One thing you can do is to keep an open mind. You may be wondering as you start a new job whether you will get along with your colleagues as well as you did at your old job. Or, if you did not get along with the people there and were looking for a change, you might fear things will be the same at the new job. Do not make any prejudgments. Get to know a bit about your new coworkers. Accept, or extend, lunch invitations, join weekend activities and office social events, and perhaps join those office traditions that bind long-serving employees and newcomers together in a collaborative spirit.

Another thing you can do is to remember to be kind. Everyone has a bad day every now and then, and if you spot a coworker having one, performing a random act of kindness may make that person's day better. You do not need to be extravagant. Offer to stay late to help the person meet a tight deadline, or bring coffee or a healthy snack to someone working on particularly difficult tasks. Remember the adage, "It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice."

For any relationship to succeed, including the relationship between coworkers, the parties must respect each other—and show it. Avoid doing things that might offend others. For example, do not take credit for someone else's work. Do not be narrow minded; when someone brings up a topic such as politics or religion, be willing to listen and tolerate differing points of view.

A related directive is to avoid sexual jokes, stories, anecdotes, and innuendos. You might think it is okay to talk about anything and everything at work, but it is not. Others may not find the topic funny and feel offended, and you may make yourself vulnerable to action by management if such behavior is reported. Your coworkers might be a captive audience, but you should never place them in an awkward position.

Make an effort to get along with everyone, even difficult people. You did not choose your coworkers, and some may be hard to get along with. But professionalism requires that we attempt to establish the best working relationships we can on the job, no matter the opinions we might have about our colleagues. Normally, we might like some of them very much, be neutral about some others, and genuinely dislike still others. Yet our responsibility in the workplace is to respect and act at least civilly toward all of them. We likely will feel better about ourselves as professionals and also live up to our commitments to our companies.

Finally, do not use social media to gossip. Gossiping at work can cause problems anywhere, perhaps especially on social media, so resist the urge to vent online about your coworkers. It makes you appear petty, small, and untrustworthy, and colleagues may stop communicating with you. You may also run afoul of your employer's social media policy and risk disciplinary action or dismissal.

Understanding Personalities

Understanding the various personalities at work can be a complex task, but it is a vital one for developing a sense of collegiality. One technique that may be helpful is to develop your own emotional intelligence, which is the capacity to recognize other people's

emotions and also to know and manage your own. One aspect of using emotional intelligence is showing empathy, the willingness to step into someone else's shoes.

📌 link to learning

Do you think you know yourself? Take this [free online personality test](#) from IDR Labs; it may tell you something you did not know that you can use to your benefit at work.

All of us have different **workplace personalities**, which express the way we think and act on the job. There are many such personalities, and none is superior or inferior to another, but they are a way in which we exhibit our uniqueness on the job (Figure 7.6). Some of us lead with our brains and emphasize logic and reason. Others lead with our hearts, always emphasizing mercy over justice in our relationships with others.



Figure 7.3.6: Which type of personality are you? (credit: Jackson Ceszyk/Flickr, CC BY 4.0)

Employees can also have very different **work styles**, the way in which we are most comfortable accomplishing our tasks at work. Some of us gravitate toward independence and jobs or tasks we can accomplish alone. Others prefer team or project work, bringing us into touch with different personalities. Still others seek a mix of these environments. Some prioritize getting the job done as efficiently as possible, whereas others value the journey of working on the project with others and the shared experiences it brings. There is no right or wrong style, but it benefits any worker to know his or her preferences and something about the work personalities of colleagues. When in the office, the point for any of us individually is to appreciate what motivates our greatest success and happiness on the job.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Personality Test

Imagine you are a department director with twenty-five employees reporting directly to you. Two of them are experts in their fields: You like and respect them individually, as do the others in your department, but they simply cannot get along with each other and so never work together.

How do you resolve this personality clash? You cannot simply insist that the two colleagues cooperate, because personalities do not change. Still, you have to do your best to establish an atmosphere in which they can least collaborate civilly. Even though managers

have no power to change human nature or the personality conflicts that inevitably occur, part of their responsibility is to establish a harmonious working environment, and others will judge you on the harmony you cultivate in your department.

Critical Thinking

Working relationships are extremely important to an employee's job satisfaction. What options would you use to foster a cooperative working relationship in your department?

Reducing Workplace Violence

As recent incidents have shown—for example, the April 2018 shooting at YouTube headquarters in San Bruno, California²¹—workplace violence is a reality, and all employees play a role in helping make work a safe, as well as harmonious place. Employees, in fact, have a legal and ethical duty not to be violent at work, and managers have a duty to prevent or stop violence. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health reports that violence at work usually fits into one of four categories: traditional criminal intent, violence by one worker against another, violence stemming from a personal relationship, and violence by a customer.²²

In violence based on traditional criminal intent, the perpetrator has no legitimate relationship to the business or its employees, and often the violence is part of a crime such as robbery or shoplifting. Violence between coworkers occurs when a current or former employee attacks another employee in the workplace. Worker-on-worker deaths account for approximately 15 percent of all workplace homicides. All companies are at risk for this type of violence, and contributing factors include failure to conduct a criminal background check as part of the hiring process.

When the violence arises from problems in a personal relationship, the perpetrator often has a direct relationship not with the business but with the victim, who is an employee. This category of violence accounts for slightly less than 10 percent of all workplace homicides. Women are at higher risk of being victims of this type of violence than men. In the fourth scenario, the violent person has a legitimate relationship with the business, perhaps as a customer or patient, and becomes violent while on the premises. A large portion of customer incidents occur in the nightclub, restaurant, and health care industries. In 2014, about one-fifth of all workplace homicides resulted from this type of violence.²³

Codes of Conduct

Companies have a right to insist that their employees, including managers, engage in ethical decision-making. To help achieve this goal, most businesses provide a written code of ethics or code of conduct for all employees to follow. These cover a wide variety of topics, from workplace romance and sexual harassment to hiring and termination policies, client and customer entertainment, bribery and gifts, personal trading of company shares in any way that hints of acting on insider knowledge of the company's fortunes, outside employment, and dozens of others. A typical code of conduct, regardless of the company or the industry, will also contain a variety of standard clauses, often blending legal compliance and ethical considerations (Table 7.1).

Sample Code of Conduct

Compliance with all laws	Employees must comply with all laws, including bribery, fraud, securities, environmental, safety, and employment laws.
Corruption and fraud	Employees must not accept certain types of gifts and hospitality from clients, vendors, or partners. Bribery is prohibited in all circumstances.
Conflict of interest	Employees must disclose and/or avoid any personal, financial, or other interests that might influence their ability to perform their job duties.
Company property	Employees must treat the company's property with respect and care, not misuse it, and protect company facilities and other material property.

Cybersecurity and digital devices policy	Employees must not use company computer equipment to transfer illegal, offensive, or pirated material, or to visit potentially dangerous websites that might compromise the safety of the company network or servers; employees must respect their duty of confidentiality in all Internet interactions.
Social media policy	Employees may [or may not] access personal social media accounts at work but are expected to act responsibly, follow company policies, and maintain productivity.
Sexual harassment	Employees must not engage in unwelcome or unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Behaviors such as conditioning promotions, awards, training, or other job benefits upon acceptance of unwelcome actions of a sexual nature are always wrong. ²⁴
Workplace respect	Employees must show respect for their colleagues at every level. Neither inappropriate nor illegal behavior will be tolerated.

Table 7.1

link to learning

Exxon Mobil's Code of Conduct is typical of that of most large companies. Read [Exxon Mobil's code of conduct](#) on their website, and note that it demands ethical conduct at every level of the organization. Exxon expects its leadership team to model appropriate behavior for all employees. Decide whether, if you were an Exxon employee, you would find the code understandable and clear regarding what is allowed and what is not. Still thinking as an employee, identify the section of the code you think is most important for you, and explain why.

Two areas that deserve special mention are cybersecurity and harassment. Recent news stories have highlighted the hacking of electronic tools such as computers and databases, and employees and managers can indirectly contribute to such data breaches through unauthorized web surfing, sloppy e-mail usage, and other careless actions. Large companies such as Equifax, LinkedIn, Sony, Facebook, and JP Morgan Chase have suffered the theft of customer information, leading to loss of consumer confidence; sometimes large fines have been levied on companies. Employees play a part in preventing such breaches by strictly following company guidelines about data privacy and confidentiality, the use and storage of passwords, and other safeguards that limit access to only authorized users.

link to learning

For more on recent data breaches, watch a couple of videos. Watch this [video about how J.P. Morgan Chase's \\$13 billion fine was the largest in history from CBS Evening News](#). Also watch this [video about how the Sony PlayStation was hacked and data was stolen from 77 million users from CBS Early](#).

We are also witnessing an increased level of public awareness about harassment in the workplace, particularly because of the #MeToo movement that followed revelations in 2017 and 2018 of years of sexual predation by powerful men in Hollywood and Washington, DC, as well as across workplaces of all kinds, including in sports and the arts. A victim of sexual harassment can be a man or a woman, and/or the same sex as the harasser. The harasser can be a supervisor, coworker, other employee, officer/director, intern, consultant, or nonemployee. Whatever the situation, harassing and threatening behavior is wrong (and sometimes criminal) and should always be reported.

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