

CIVILITY IN THE WORKPLACE CRUCIAL

After assisting more than 5,000 ACSA members in the last eight years, the six ACSA Professional Standards Advocates - Pat Souza, Bill Tschida, Sharon Dezutti, Rod Todd, Brad Lantz and Lloyd Wamhof, who work under the direction of Assistant Executive Director Joseph Jones - recently had a discussion with EdCal about the importance of civility in the workplace. The following article is a result of that discussion.

Question: Why is the topic of civility in the workplace so important to the ACSA PSAs?

Wamhof: This past school year, the professional standards advocates worked with 777 members who called for a variety of reasons, including demotion, termination, re-assignment, negative evaluations, complaint investigations, harassment issues, and some just wanting advice or guidance on contracts, career questions, etc. A portion of the work we do, at least, could be reduced just by colleagues treating each other with civility and respect.

It doesn't mean there won't be disagreements, re-assignments or terminations, but preserving the dignity of the employee in any of these actions is essential. It's how these actions are carried out that communicates to the entire staff how employees are valued in the organization. It's a reflection of leadership.

Question: Can you give us an example of a lack of workplace civility?

Todd: Yes, one example is an administrator shows up to work to find his or her key no longer works for the office and is escorted out of the building without an explanation. Just ask yourself, how humiliating that would be if you were the target? The action may be necessary on rare occasions. Many times, however, if a person has to be removed temporarily from his or her office, it can be done in a more civil manner.

Question: Do you have other examples?

Dezutti: Unfortunately, we have multiple examples of poor treatment, such as letters of reprimand issued out of the blue without the supervisor addressing concerns face-to-face; or suddenly excluding an administrator from the team meetings without any prior warning or explanation. Another example is a principal is re-assigned to a different job in the middle of the year, pending an investigation of wrongdoing, and then told to report to a remote building in the district to an office without phone service or a desk and without meaningful work.

Question: How would you distinguish between what is civil and uncivil?

Lantz: The answer is simple: How would you want to be treated under similar circumstances? Just following the "Golden Rule" – "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." Ask yourself, do our actions reflect proper personnel practices? Do we treat people with dignity and respect or do we sometimes

demonstrate vindictiveness? We're not just discussing the issues of personnel practices, however; it's about how people in the organization are treated in a variety of settings and circumstances.

Question: You're not suggesting there won't be times when an employee will require a reprimand or more severe discipline?

Tschida: Not at all. What we are saying is there are proper procedures, both legal and professional, to follow when it is necessary to reprimand or discipline an employee. We have an Education Code and subsequently, board policies and procedures to guide us for disciplinary action. It just isn't necessary to be hurtful or take unprofessional action against your colleagues. It's also not necessary to raise your voice while reprimanding or disciplining an employee.

Also we that sometimes administrators act hastily in placing fellow administrators on paid or unpaid leave for a variety of reasons. Placing an employee on leave is certainly appropriate at times. However, this action should only be taken after careful consultation with the district's legal support.

Question: Do you think the readers of this article will be shocked by some of the comments the advocates are making?

Souza: I suspect some will. The sad part is some will also recognize how they have been treated in the workplace and have additional examples. Look, how we treat our colleagues is a reflection on the type of organization we work in. No one is exempt from unfair or unnecessary treatment. I recently worked with a superintendent whose board spent a portion of its meeting berating the district leader in public. Unfortunately, they also treated other administrators in the district with the same lack of respect.

Question: What do you propose as a solution to the lack of civility in the workplace?

Wamhof: First, let's be clear the majority of our administrators understand the rules of discipline and treat their colleagues with the dignity they deserve. Ask yourself: Is this how I would want to be treated if the roles were reversed? If an investigation is necessary to dig deeper into a complaint, is the process fair and do we focus on the specific issue of the original complaint? Do we use due process as a guideline or do we find the individuals guilty and then force them to prove their innocence? How long is the discipline process? If discipline is necessary, is it fair or do we go far beyond the limits of reason. Finally, we should state we are extremely proud of the professionalism of our colleagues in the field. In our work, we sometimes deal with the exceptions and we wanted to share the importance of civility in the workplace.

If you have any questions, call the ACSA Professional Standards Department at 800-608-2272.

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