
Introduction

I am not young enough to know everything.

—OSCAR WILDE

ONE DECEMBER EVENING I was sitting in my car with my three-year-old daughter Abee, waiting to get out of a McDonald's drive-through. I had picked her up from daycare, I had Christmas shopping to do, she was hungry and my husband was working late.

So as soon as I'd picked up our food, I headed up the exit lane. At the end of that lane was a large and prominent "right turn only" sign. And of course, right in front of me was a van with its left turn signal flashing.

"Okay," I thought, "no big deal; it will take only a minute." I myself have been known to disobey the occasional traffic indicator. As Abee chattered away, I focused on the steady stream of traffic preventing the woman ahead of me from making her illegal left turn.

A minute turned into two, then three. I honked repeatedly, but to no avail. I was getting madder by the minute.

“Read the sign,” I muttered. “What is the matter with you? Come on, lady, I have a life here!” I honked and finally shouted, “Oh, for crying out loud, you stupid woman, read the sign! Just turn right and let me out of here!”

A little voice from the back asked, “What’s the matter, Mommy?”

“The stupid woman ahead is trying to turn left when it says she can only turn right, honey. That’s why we’re stuck.”

“Mommy, it’s not nice to call someone stupid. It hurts their feelings.”

Okay, I’m in the business of promoting respectful relationships in the workplace and I certainly wanted to model respectful behaviour to my small daughter. So I said, “Well, you are right, sweetie, but it doesn’t matter. She can’t hear me.” I honked again.

“Mommy,” Abee pressed, “I heard you call that lady stupid. It would hurt my feelings if you called me stupid. Maybe she heard you, too, and you hurt her feelings. You need to apologize to her.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake!” I muttered. “What next?” Trying to project calm, I said, “Abee, you’re right. I shouldn’t have called her stupid, but I’m sure she didn’t hear me and she won’t hear me if I apologize now.”

“No, Mommy. You have to say you’re sorry.”

At that moment, a break in traffic allowed the van to pull out. “Hurry, Mommy, hurry!” Abee piped up. “Apologize right now before it’s too late!”

What could I do? “Okay, sweetie.” Feeling like a complete idiot, I rolled down my window and shouted, “Lady in the van: I am very sorry I called you stupid.”

As we finally pulled out, Abee said, “That was good, Mommy. I feel much better now that you said you were sorry.”

For Abee, the matter was crystal clear. You don’t call people names because it hurts their feelings. And if you do call them names, you have to apologize. There was no way out – no way to rationalize, justify or defend my bad and hurtful behaviour.

Fast forward a few years: I was driving Abee (now eight years old) and her friend to gymnastics. They were in the back seat discussing a girl in their class in a gossipy manner. And hey, I am in the business of promoting respectful behaviour.

“Sorry for interrupting you, girls, but what I’m hearing from you sounds like gossip, which as you know can be a kind of bullying.”

The back seat occupants went silent. Then came, “It’s not really gossip... She’s not here... She won’t know...”

“Sorry, girls, none of that makes any difference to me. I’m uncomfortable listening to gossip about your friend and I don’t want to want to hear it anymore.”

Another moment of silence, then Abee said, “Okay, you’re right, Mom. We won’t talk about her anymore.”

As I dropped them off, I wondered what had happened to the three-year-old girl who had been so clear about the wrong in saying hurtful things. Then I reminded myself of all the influences she’d encountered since age three, and how my job was merely to do what I could to raise an assertive, empathic and respectful child. To that end, I needed to correct her, as I’d just done, as well as model the proper behaviour, as I’d done at her urging five years earlier. All so that Abee and her friend would know what behaviour was expected of them in my car.

I have been consulting for over ten years. Clients call me when there is a problem. Sometimes someone has filed a complaint; sometimes the complaint has been dealt with and the court settlement demanded that they bring in training. In some cases, companies call me to resolve issues that have been festering for many years.

I do what I can, but too often it feels like I’m placing a Band-Aid on a gangrenous wound. I have worked with employers on issues ranging from discrimination and bullying to interpersonal conflict. I write Respectful Workplace policies and provide training. I am very good at what I do, but I can achieve long-lasting success only when I can persuade the firm to examine and re-structure its core culture.

Problem workplace behaviour does not occur in a vacuum. Like

bacteria, it needs the right conditions to grow. It grows best in an unhealthy organizational culture.

The world around us has changed dramatically in the last fifty years. So has the workplace. The way we work, the type of people we work with and the laws that apply to the workplace are in a constant state of flux. Change is happening so quickly that it is hard to keep up. But one thing has not changed: the employer still holds ultimate power in the workplace.

This fact is recognized in law, and to a large extent, that is why I have such a busy consulting practice. If employers actually used their power to comply with the intention of the law, I would be far less busy.

Canadian laws demand that employers create a Respectful Workplace, one free from discrimination and harassment. In Quebec, the law has gone even further to legislate a workplace free from psychological harassment, or what I refer to as workplace bullying.

Most of the time, employers respond to these laws reactively rather than proactively. They aren't concerned with compliance at all until someone raises a complaint, at which point they typically shrug it off as an isolated incident – rather than as the tip of an iceberg. The iceberg, bobbing unseen beneath the surface, is the workplace culture from which the complaint sprang.

Until recently, this reactive posture may have been enough. When there are more people than jobs, the employer is particularly powerful. Employees stay despite an unhealthy work environment. However, when there are more jobs than people, the power balance shifts. Employees no longer remain in a job that makes them feel excluded or disrespected.

Just last week, a former participant in one of my Respectful Workplace Training classes phoned to tell me he was feeling discouraged and disillusioned. His manager's disrespectful behaviour had not abated as the result of my course. "Confidentially," he said, "there are so many jobs out there that we are all looking around."

We are living in a multicultural, socio-political environment that is well informed about human rights. In fact, we are witnessing

a generation of workers both community minded and action oriented.

It is only logical that, given a choice, people will choose to work where they feel comfortable, appreciated and included. Most people will not choose a work environment where they feel disrespected or excluded, or witness ongoing conflicts and abusive behaviour. Study after study has shown that money is not the main factor keeping employees in a job. People stay because of workplace culture and relationships.

When employees need their jobs, they put up with a toxic culture because they have to. However, as Bob Dylan wrote so many years ago, “The times they are a-changing.” Organizations that want to survive and prosper in the new millennium need to recognize the dramatic effect their workplace culture has on their bottom line. Employers who want to be profitable in business have to make deliberate and strategic choices about their workplace culture.

As a consultant, I can write a Respectful Workplace policy – which often includes a very specific code of conduct. I can provide the training and tell people what they have to do to create a respectful workplace. However, I have absolutely no power to make that happen. Culture change results only when the employer (who, as we have already established, is legally in a position of power in the workplace) makes a decision to embark on a deliberate strategy to create a respectful workplace, and reinforces that strategy with a lead-by-example philosophy.

That day with Abee and her friend in the car, I realized I had to make a choice and take action. I was clear about my parenting goals and I had the power to make the rules. Had I not said anything at the time, it would become increasingly challenging to correct that behaviour. I had to be clear about what I expected and encourage open dialogue about the issue. I also had to ensure that I modelled the behaviour I expected to see from my daughter.

Modelling is the biggest challenge. I know I have been successful in raising an assertive, confident child every time my daughter accurately and respectfully points out my behavioural shortcomings.

Her feedback works because I value my relationship with her and don't want to lose her respect.

We have all heard that most employees spend more time at work than they do with their own families. People today come to the workplace with a host of differences in experience, outlook, temperament and behaviour. In a multicultural country like Canada, these differences can be sharply pronounced. Can any employer in the reality of today's marketplace afford to assume that everyone will work together productively?

In the workplace, I see the solution but lack the power to implement it. It's employers who decide what behaviours will contribute to a productive and thriving workplace, and manage accordingly. Employers have the power to create a profitable culture where employees feel safe, included and respected. Employers have the power to create a culture that empowers employees to take responsibility, resolve their conflicts and take action when they witness disrespectful behaviour.

It isn't enough to resolve one complaint, adopt a policy or provide training. It may be enough for minimum legal compliance, but it is not a win/win solution. The workplaces that achieve the latter commit to a respectful culture just as they tackle workplace safety.

Those are the clients who inspire and motivate me. Those are the workplaces where complaints of discrimination, harassment and bullying rarely occur because they are now at odds with the corporate culture. Conflicts are acknowledged and dealt with respectfully. These workplaces are cohesive, adaptive and inclusive. They celebrate the diversity of their employees and encourage ongoing discourse and dialogue about these differences. Individual employees feel valued, empowered and connected to the corporation. Employees love to work in such workplaces, and employers make the profits they desire.

I wrote this book to share my vision of respectful workplaces and provide proof that it is realistic and achievable. To this end, I have included the stories of some of the most successful businesses in Canada, businesses that are recognized as Employers of Choice

by their employees and the business community. These Employers of Choice understand the correlation between their respectful workplace culture and their business success.

My goal, in effect, is to put myself out of a job. Let's face it – if my vision is realized, why would anyone need to hire me?

I am passionate about promoting my vision. I hope, as you read this book, some of that passion rubs off on you. As the late Christopher Reeve said, “So many of our dreams at first seem impossible, then they seem improbable and then, when we summon the will, they soon become inevitable.”

What is your vision for your workplace? Summon your will and read on...