



Help! Surrounded by Crazy People!

Does your workplace ever seem like a trip to the funny farm? Are people constantly complaining about what co-workers said and did? Research has found that incivility in the workplace such as rude, insensitive or disrespectful behavior cost organizations big money. Pearson and Porath (2005) surveyed over 2,400 workers in multiple organizations across the US and Canada and found these behaviors affected the workers' in terms of decreases in work effort, time on the job, performance and productivity! Employees also reported that these behaviors are getting worse. Ironically, organizations are unaware of the implications of these actions and therefore suffer the consequences.

People often have no idea how interaction with rude coworkers affects them emotionally. At a recent seminar, participants were asked to close their eyes and picture their difficult person walking down the hall toward them. They were asked to visualize their difficult person, and hear their voice. This 30 second activity resulted in participants experiencing feelings ranging from extreme anxiety to nausea and the difficult person was no where in sight! People's ability to think and project often allows the difficult person not only to reside at work, but constantly in the mind of the employee. Workers reported they sometimes take interactions with their difficult person work home causing problems in their interpersonal relationships. Likewise "difficult people" frequently are unaware of the adverse effect they have on their coworkers. In an effort to complete assignments the differences in the way individuals tackle the work and see the world often results in conflict.

Understanding is the key to working with others.

Many differences are resolved once people begin to recognize why individuals behave the way they do and appreciate how to use one another's strengths. Brinkman and Kirschner (1994) identified four intents which are the purpose or drive behind any given behavior. These intents include:

- Get it done
- Get it right
- Get along with people
- Get appreciation from people

We all work from these intents at different times, and as the intent changes so does the accompanying behavior. When people are driven from the same intent, trouble seldom occurs as they have the same focus. Problems, however, crop up when the intent a worker is focusing on does not match the intent driving the behavior of a coworker.



For example – Brinkman and Kirschner (1994) found people with:

- The get it done intent speed up to get the job done. Their communication is short and focused.
- The get it right intent slow down their work to make sure they do not make a mistake.
- The get along intent are less assertive and put another's needs before their own.
- The get appreciation intent have a higher level of assertiveness as getting appreciation is their number one priority.

Picture this scenario. Two people are assigned to work together and one person is functioning in the get it done intent and the other in the get along intent. The person operating in the get it done intent, keeps their communication short and to the point as their focus is on getting the job done. The person whose intent is to get along with people relies on friendly chit-chat to fulfill their intent, and they have a people focus. Imagine someone trying to make friendly chit-chat with someone focusing on getting the job done. Envision the difficulties that arise when people have different intents and do not understand what is driving the behavior of their coworkers.

To make matters worse, when a person's intent is not satisfied, they intensify their behavior in an effort to get fulfillment, and when this happens, conflict escalates. We then label people as difficult based on our experiences with them and this label influences how we filter all our communication with them in the future. Ironically, by having an understanding of how the intent influences behavior, we can work to meet the needs of our coworker and at the same time meet our own needs. It is a question of understanding and balance.

Relationships are like a dance in which we act and react to one another. Unless someone is willing to change their dance, the dysfunction of the dance continues. Sometimes it means putting your own needs aside for the moment so you can help your coworker to fulfill their intent. The strategy usually pays off as once a person's intent is fulfilled; they are more willing to focus on your intent.

Other issues make communication difficult. As humans, our ability to think can make our interaction with others even harder. Have you ever had an argument with someone in your head when they are not even present? Well "I said", then "he or she said", then "I said" and "he or she said." If they were to walk in the room after this mental tirade they would detect some emotion in the air, and this mental rehearsal would impact how we choose to interact with them!

Another misunderstood area of communication is the impact of a message. Much of the emotion impact of the message comes from the tone of voice and the nonverbal messages. Yet when we plan to speak to another individual, our usual focus is on what



to say, not how we are going to say it, which can cause a great many problems. If the words do not match the tone and nonverbal communication, the person does not believe the words, and this affects the trust in the relationship.

People want to know that they are heard and understood. But when two people both want to be heard and understood at the same time, an argument will probably occur. If individuals take the time to look at their own behavior and make adjustments, they actually empower themselves. Normally, however, we usually focus our attention on the other person wishing they would change their behavior. In an effort to understand other people, skills can be learned such as conflict resolution, negotiation, dealing with difficult people, stress management and listening which can help enhance day-to-day dealings with the people in our lives, and reduce the amount of time employees waste dealing with these interpersonal difficulties. As a communicator, you must have the correct skills to reach different individuals effectively as this will help to maintain trust and involvement in the workplace. When we make a sincere effort to listen to and communicate with our difficult people, understanding is achieved and people become less difficult and more cooperative thus affecting not only the morale of employees, but the productivity as well.

Brinkman, R. & Kirschner, R. (1994). *Dealing with difficult people – How to bring out the best in people at their worst*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.

Pearson, C.M. Andersson, L.M. & Wegner. (2005) When workers flout convention: A study of workplace incivility. *Human Relations*, 54, p. 1387-1419