

WorkZone: Dysfunctional workplaces aren't so uncommon

May 6, 2012 12:13 AM
By Mark Belko Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Nancy Slomowitz calls it work-zone madness, but please don't confuse it with the college basketball tournament that takes place in March every year.

Share with others:

0 0 1

Like Tweet g+1 in Share

Share

No, what Ms. Slomowitz is talking about is a dysfunctional workplace. You know, the office infested by gossip, turf battles and back stabbing, the one where you wonder whether the water cooler is for drinking or water-boarding.

Print Email Read Later

Or maybe it's one where management is so concerned with the bottom line that it hires cheap but underqualified employees and then gives them no training to do their jobs. The computers date back to the Reagan era, and the software is so old that you wonder whether it was plucked from the back of a pickup truck at a flea market.

While you might believe there's no other office as dysfunctional as yours, Ms. Slomowitz will tell you that they're more common than you think.

"It's really universal," she said. "It pretty much touches anyone in the workforce, employees and employers."

Ms. Slomowitz is author of "Work Zone Madness: Surviving and Rising Above Workplace Dysfunction." It's no ivory tower dissertation. The book is based on her own experience, not only as an employee and employer, but as a consultant who has helped to fix ailing companies.

And she has some tips for employees and employers in dealing with dysfunctional office environments.

For example, that office filled with back stabbing, gossip and dissension? Ms. Slomowitz offers her own version of Love Your Enemy: Don't give others ammunition against you. Be polite, even in the face of adversity. Don't respond to catty comments.

"Basically, lead by example," she said.

If you're not getting along with a co-worker, try putting yourself in his shoes and search for middle ground. "Try taking the perspective of the other person and try to work through some of the issues that way," she said.

Ms. Slomowitz also urges managers to separate battling employees, even if just on a trial basis. "You need to break the cycle," she said.

Sometimes, the tension may not be the result of personality clashes. It could be the type of work involved or maybe one of the employees is not suited for the job he is doing, she noted.

For employees who feel undervalued at work, Ms. Slomowitz recommends a self-assessment. Are you in the right job? Is your behavior, your dress, your appearance appropriate?

She also stressed the need to learn new skills to make yourself more valuable. "You want to be the last person thought of for a layoff," she said.

Ms. Slomowitz also urged employers to get training or help in understanding company financial statements. She said that too often she has found CEOs or company owners "are asleep at the wheel" when it comes to finances, often delegating the responsibility to others without understanding the numbers themselves.

In addition, she coaches employers to "do the right thing," whether that is providing proper compensation and equipment or hiring the most qualified people even if it is going to cost more.

"I'd rather have one really good person than two who are not quite up to standard," she said.

Ms. Slomowitz, CEO of Executive Management Associates Inc. -- a Washington, D.C., business consulting firm -- likes to practice what she preaches.

She said she believes in giving back to employees. She offers her workers transcendental meditation as a paid benefit. If there are increases in the cost of benefits, she tries to absorb them herself rather than pass them on.

In the long run, that kind of management pays off. "The loyalty I get back is tenfold," she said.

datelinepittsburgh
Mark Belko: mbelko@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1262. First Published May 6, 2012 12:00 AM

Sign up for free newsletters and get more of the Post-Gazette delivered to your inbox