

Some Simple Ways to Create a Healthier Workplace

BY PAMELA COSTAKIS

Do you spend all of your time trying to find and hire that perfect staff person, just to have them leave after a few months? Its probably not the pay, and it's probably not lack of opportunity for advancement. Studies show that some of the top reasons for leaving organizations include feeling undervalued and trying to work within a [poor company culture](#).

Leaders can take action to develop supportive work environments, leading to happier employees and decreased turnover.

Here are a few simple ideas that cost nothing and might make a difference in staff retention.

CREATE A CULTURE OF RECOGNITION AND FEEDBACK

Do your teachers know how they positively affect the children in their care? Point it out to them every day. Catch them being difference-makers. When you visit the classrooms, make note of the small, seemingly insignificant things they do that make a difference. These might include a smile when a child wakes up from a nap or a gentle touch on the back to calm a child to sleep. Even if your staff member has areas they need to work on, starting conversations with what they are doing right will set the tone for any discussion. You might see that if you do this, others will catch each other making a difference, and it will spread throughout your program. How you recognize this is up to you: a small note, a mention in a group setting, or in a one-on-one meeting, as long as you recognize it.

Another way of creating a healthy workplace is giving all staff a time and place to reflect. Sometimes, we call it [Reflective Supervision](#), other times it's called [One-on-Ones](#), but regardless of the terminology, we all need someone to reflect with and discuss what is going well and what is not. A healthy workplace will build in time for each staff person, including the support staff and even the kitchen and maintenance staff, to have regular, weekly, protected time with their supervisor. If this doesn't happen, as human beings, we will turn to our co-workers. This is where unproductive negativity can start. Reflecting with someone who has the power to make changes or who can go to those who do is healthy. Reflecting with our coworkers leads to negativity and complaining, and it rarely creates positive change.

CREATE A POSITIVE WORK CULTURE- DO NOT TOLERATE GOSSIP, NEGATIVITY, OR CLIQUES

We have all worked at a place where negativity was allowed or even promoted. As a program leader, you can squelch non-productive negative talk. You are responsible for creating the culture of your team, and your positive-thinking staff will appreciate this, so choose positivity as your new norm. This can mean that if staff have complaints of any kind, they can be directed to

express them only to those who have the power to make the changes, most likely a supervisor. Making complaints, rather than suggestions, in a meeting or other group setting or to one another will set the tone for your team's culture in a negative way. This will likely make newer staff uncomfortable and cause them to wonder if they made the right decision. There is no upside to allowing negative talk or complaints to flow freely. Let it be known that if someone needs to vent, it should be to their immediate supervisor one-on-one.

Create a Gossip-Free Environment

Gossip has been around since human existence in some way or another. We all have experienced it. As a leader, you can prohibit it in your center. You have every right to make your environment gossip-free. First, check yourself and make sure that you are refraining from using it. You will probably need to define "gossip" so everyone understands what you mean. You will also want this to apply to parents and families. To truly create a gossip-free zone, it should apply to everyone who enters your center. You might find that everyone or nearly everyone will appreciate this. As a group, you can devise strategies to use, such as just excusing yourself when someone starts to gossip. They will get the hint, and it will soon be part of the culture of your center. You might see that this also helps to eliminate cliques. People want to work in a place that makes them feel welcome, supported, and appreciated. Fairness and positivity are essential requirements for this to happen.

Create a Clique-Free Environment

We all have had feelings of being on the outside of something. We have seen that there are favorite people in an organization. Sometimes, it might be us; other times, it might not. Since the opportunity for advancement is one aspect of staff retention, forming cliques works against this idea for many people. As a leader in an organization, know that fairness to all is noticed if it happens and is noticed if it is not the case. One example I recall in my past experiences was staff birthdays. How do we recognize them? There was no policy for this, so if someone was well-known and well-liked, a group of their friends would bring a cake, get a card and balloons, and have a little celebration at lunchtime. For less known or popular staff, the birthdays were passed by with little or no recognition. One of the first changes I made was to work as a group to develop a policy that would apply to all staff birthdays. It ended up being a sign-up to bring a cake to celebrate all the staff who had birthdays that month--nothing less, nothing more, all equal.

As a leader, check yourself for the appearance of "favorite employees." Ensure that you treat all staff equally, even if you have a personal relationship with some and not others. All staff must feel equal in your eyes, or retaining good employees will be difficult. Staff must feel that there

will be no bias when it comes to promotions and that promotions will be based on performance and skill, not favoritism.

CREATE GROUP NORMS

The culture within an organization is crucial, and a healthy environment plays a major role in morale and commitment to an organization. The organizational culture can drive the norms of meetings. Group norms are a great way to create a healthy environment. As a group, develop norms that fit your organization. Here are some I have used in the past:

- Use “I” statements, remembering that you speak only for yourself, not for a group.
- Refrain from interrupting, dominating the conversation, and side conversations.
- Everyone has a voice, and everyone is encouraged to contribute in meetings.
- We will be mindful of each other’s time, so we will start and end meetings on time.
- Refrain from gossip and cliques. No one is to be excluded; everyone is included.

Throughout all of our differences lies a universal hope for a positive workplace. No one starts a job hoping it will end. We all want to like our place of employment, and as leaders, we set the tone for our work culture. Introducing recognition of positivity will promote positivity, and setting norms will keep negativity at bay. Your workplace can be a vicious circle of negativity, or it can be a virtuous circle of positivity; it’s up to you!

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