Dealing with Workplace Negativity

Troubled Workplaces

It's hard to enjoy your job if coworkers constantly complain or are openly hostile to each other. Negativity and infighting drain workplace energy and can lead to employer discipline. Productivity suffers and the downward spiral can increase the risk of violence and financial loss. You don't have to be a victim of negativity. You can intervene.

Possible Sources of Unrest

What causes workplace negativity? Is it rumors and misinformation, or just bad communication? Is it a lack of local leadership, or is it too much work for not enough money? Worry about layoffs, contract negotiations, retirement, a lack of challenge, or other turmoil can all contribute to negativity. However, sometimes negativity can be caused by one or two employees who decide to engage in conflict at work. Sort through the sources of discontent and explore options.

What You Can Do

If troublesome rumors persist, ask a Company manager or Union committeeperson to clarify the issues. If coworkers are talking about possible layoffs or a station closing for weeks, find out if it is true. Get the issues out on the table and give the company and the union the opportunity to hear and clarify rumors or possible misperceptions. Explain that these rumors are circulating through the workplace.

Work to Worker

Sometimes the problem is between coworkers. Employees can bring personal conflicts developed outside of work or related to their jobs inside the workplace arena. They may ask coworkers to hear them out and take sides. If coworkers attempt to draw you into their problems, redirect their anger. Suggest an end to the problem and diffuse the situation. "You've been complaining about Jack taking long smoke breaks for two months now. Why don't you either talk with Jack about the issue or just let it go."
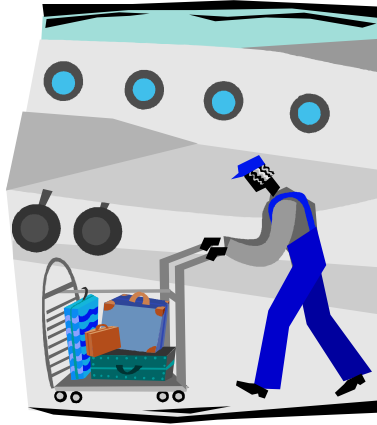
Rules for Workplace Meetings

These ground rules can help prevent negativity.

1.   Be polite and professional. Don't lose credibility with angry, emotional outbursts.

2.   Repeat issues for clarification. "What I hear you say is the Company is considering some restructuring. What form will that take and when?"

3.   Focus on issues, not personalities. Say, "We have Company policy about smoking and yet it doesn't seem to be applied consistently within this department" rather than targeting one person in front of coworkers. Deal with that privately.

Finding Resolution

When you find yourself embroiled in an unpleasant environment at work, you may be tempted to throw in the towel and transfer to another work area, change your shift, or even quit. However, chances are, you may just run into this problem again wherever you go. Bringing coworkers together to find solutions is possible, and it brings everyone closer. Take responsibility for creating a positive work environment that fosters camaraderie and job satisfaction by developing negotiation skills and use those skills in all aspects of your life.

What the EAP Can Do

If you tend to be an optimistic employee, workplace negativity can still affect you in ways that you may not like. Negativity is contagious. And long-term exposure to it can take a toll on anyone's positive attitude. If you reciprocate workplace negativity with others, gossip, or exchange negative comments about your employer or union with coworkers, it's may be time to call the EAP. The EAP can help you stop the downward slide in your and your coworker's morale. To find a local IAM District 141 EAP coordinator to talk with confidentially about these or any other issues, call (703) 331-0818, or visit the district web site EAP page at
 http://www.iam141.org/eap/staff.html.