



UNIT-18

Creating a Positive Work Environment

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Recognize what a positive workplace looks like
- ✓ Know and understand the key elements necessary to create and maintain a positive work environment
- ✓ Understand as an employee what you can do personally to create and maintain a positive work environment
- ✓ Understand as a leader the responsibility you have to create and maintain a positive work environment
- ✓ Discover what type of team player you are and how that relates to your functioning in the team
- ✓ Know the importance of effective workplace relationships in creating and maintaining a positive work environment
- ✓ Know and understand the importance of working as a team and guidelines to good teamwork

Characteristics of a Positive Work Environment

Here are a few common characteristics of a positive work environment:

Transparent and Open Communication

In any organization communication is the most important single factor for success. This is also essential in creating a positive work environment. Open communication begins by letting everyone in the company know how the company is doing - good or bad! If things are going well it can be a great motivator to continue the great things that are happening. If things are not going so well, the employees can rally and put that extra effort in knowing their efforts will make a difference.

There are a number of things that can be done to ensure good communications. They include:

Be honest and direct

- ensure leadership is approachable

Respect others

- be culturally sensitive
- be open to other viewpoints
- value honest feedback from all employees
- get to know them

Listen carefully to what others are saying and take an interest

- be willing to compromise

Spend time to understand the question then respond

- don't make assumptions
- ask good questions to clarify others' ideas and emotions

Avoid defensiveness

Be careful of your body language and speaking style

- be courteous

Be sure you have something interesting to say

- be consistent and clear in your communications
- include only important information
- express feelings in an open but non-threatening way

Use precise language (especially if you or the receiver is not using their first language)

Create opportunities for discussion about the organization's philosophy, mission and values

Work-Life Balance

Just as what happens at work can affect your personal life what happens at home can affect your work. It is important to try to create a positive work-life balance. The balance will allow employees to be more productive and happy at work knowing that their family, friends and spiritual life are all in order.

We all know 'workaholics' and while it may seem that the huge number of hours they are putting into work are great for the company but the neglect of other aspects of their life will catch up and can be devastating for them and the company. Here are some things companies can do to promote work-life balance:

- Provide education sessions on work-life balance
- Have managers model the behavior
- Reward employees who maintain work-life balance
- Offer flexible work schedule - especially during less busy times
- Create job share and part-time opportunities
- Allow people to turn off their smart phones
- Offer unpaid leave of absence
- Allow employees to work from home for part of their week or when they would otherwise need to take a day off (e.g. child sick or school cancellation)
- Have company events that include employees and their families

Training and Development-Focused

Companies that provide growth opportunities for employees are creating better employees. Professional development opportunities can ensure that an employee keeps up on the latest technology, learns to be a better supervisor, understands the new data management system, understands the legal requirements for Occupational Health and Safety and so many other essential work skills.

Personal development is sometimes ignored and considered to be something that an employee should do on their own time because it is just for them. This can be short sighted - something that allows an employee to develop personally will definitely improve their work. When a company is looking to balance work and life it is important to consider these personal development opportunities. Here is a list of some personal development courses that will create a better employee:

- Managing emotions
- Living ethically
- Stress, nutrition and diet
- Building confidence
- Public speaking

Recognition

Recognition is an important motivator and can go a long way to creating a great work environment. The rewards do not have to be monetary - in fact money is usually fairly low on the list of rewards when employees are surveyed. It can be as simple as an acknowledgement from a senior manager that you are doing a good job.

Company as Team

Humans began working in teams some 15,000 years ago and it is one of the main reasons that the species has survived to present day. Our organization is essentially one big team. We work best in teams but only if everyone is working toward a common goal. There are a number of things that can help to ensure that the team is working effectively. These include:

Engaged people

- It is important that everyone is there for the good of the team.

Collaboration

- Working together and understanding each other's point of view is essential in teams.

Clear goals

- Employees want to know what the end goals are and that they can be part of getting there.

Tolerance and acceptance

- Teams need to be made up of a diverse group of people to ensure all angles and possibilities are considered. It is important that team members embrace this.

Creative environment

- A fun, energetic environment can boost creativity and team effectiveness.

What Can I Do?

In this session, you will learn what you could do as an employee and as a leader to create and maintain a positive work environment.

As an Employee

A positive work environment is important for the productivity of a company but it is also important to us personally. Our emotional and physical health can be improved by working in a positive work environment. We should wake up each morning wanting to go to work - not trying to think of excuses to not go. We want to be proud of where we work and enjoy telling others about where we work.

What can we do on a personal level to help create or maintain a positive work environment? Here are a few ideas:

- Be kind, optimistic and approachable- build a level of mutual trust and respect with colleagues
- Always be on time, ready and willing to work - actively contributing
- Be organized (including your personal work space) and use your time wisely
- Regularly seek constructive feedback from supervisors, coworkers, customers and act on it
- Be a team player- actively communicating with co-workers, fulfilling work requirements, completing assignments, ready to take on tasks, supporting co-workers, giving credit to co-workers
- Understand and promote diversity - be open to learning about co-workers, listen to the point of view of others especially those with different experiences and background
- Seek to improve your skills by additional training

Fill out the table below thinking of yourself and your own workplace.

What things have happened in my workplace that have helped create/maintain a positive workplace?	
What things have happened in my workplace that have hindered the creation/maintenance of a positive workplace?	
What can you do to manage the issue I can control to help create/maintain a positive workplace?	
What can you do to manage the issue I cannot control to help create/maintain a positive workplace?	

As a Leader

As a leader within a company you have a responsibility to create and maintain a positive work environment. Even if this is not a companywide reality you can seek to provide this type of environment for your Department/ Division or those within your sphere of influence. Here are some things that can help you in that effort:

Respect and trust

- Show employees they are valued
- Allow employees to use their strengths most of the time rather than burden them with things they are not good at
- Allow employees to do what you hired them to do - don't micromanage

Effective Workplace Relationships

Effective workplace relationships create a positive work environment. This includes teams, working cooperatively, and managing conflict, preventing problems, dealing with problems and meeting management. Included in this was a self-assessment to look at how you deal with conflicts in the workplace.

In this two-part session, you will investigate effective workplace relationships.

Teams

In a workplace the actions of each individual affect the whole company. This is why it is very important to be a good team member.

To be effective team members there are a number of guidelines that should be followed.

Listen and share information: Contribute your ideas and solutions, don't sit waiting for someone to come up with the idea- they may not

Recognize and respect differences in others: Diversity should be welcome. If everyone thought exactly the same you could just assign one person to do the task and they would do it exactly the same as everyone else. This doesn't work. The team needs to hear from everyone and the ideas and contributions of everyone should be valued

Ask questions: Unless you understand what's going on you can't contribute effectively. Realize that if you don't understand something there are probably more on the team that don't either.

Utilize constructive feedback: Give and receive suggestions for improvement in a positive environment.

Do your work: If you have been given a task within the team do it. You are responsible for your tasks just as other team members are responsible for theirs.

Have fun: Everything is done better if you want to do it.

Motivating Your Team

While many think that money, fear and pain are the most effective motivators for success in team research proves otherwise. The seven triggers for motivation are:

- Acceptance - simply having ideas listened to
- Security - not job security as much as secure in the fact that they can do the task
- Power - decision-making authority
- Sense of belonging - ideas are not just listened to but seriously considered and perhaps implemented
- Structure - everyone likes to know where they fit in
- Sense of accomplishment - from coworkers and supervisors
- Recognition - from outside of the team and organization

Working Cooperatively

Working cooperatively is an important aspect in successful companies. Cooperativity can increase energy, creativity and efficiency by allowing individuals to use their complete range of skills and knowledge in their everyday work. Additionally, cooperative work gives everyone in the company a sense of shared purpose and results in higher levels of morale, job satisfaction, commitment to the company, trust and performance and lower levels of absenteeism, and tardiness.

And the best thing about cooperativity is that it can be learned - you don't have to be born with the skill!

How do you work cooperatively? First and foremost it means showing respect for the rights of coworkers in working toward a common productive objective.

How is it manifested? Some of the ways that cooperativity is seen is through:

- Voluntary engagement in open communication - listening carefully to what others say, respond appropriately to others.
- Exhibiting an awareness of others' feelings, beliefs and opinions.
- Encourage others to contribute and respond understandingly to contributions from others
- Keeping arguments and disagreements to a minimum
- Proactively trying to prevent problems before they occur
- Adapt what you say to suit different situations

Managing Conflict

Defining Conflict

Conflict is a very normal part of healthy relationships. It's not possible for everyone to agree about everything all the time, and to do so can squash creativity and innovation. What is important, then, is to learn how to manage disagreements so that they do not harm relationships. By learning skills to manage conflict, you can approach disagreements with confidence that keeps your personal and professional relationships strong.

Another way to look at dealing with people is to realize that we need to have conversations about accountability. If you consider that holding people accountable (i.e., they are taking responsibility for their actions and results) is a part of your role as a supervisor, or at home as a spouse or parent, then these conversations are a part of life. Holding people accountable may or may not become a confrontation, but it is necessary nonetheless. If we avoid these sometimes difficult conversations because we do not like them, consider for a moment whether or not you are valuing that person as a contributor at work or home. If you value them, you are more likely to have these conversations because of your respect for the other individual. We also have to have these conversations with people we do not like for the same reasons.

When you are dealing with difficult people whom you also do not like (we all have people who can rub us the wrong way!), we have an important tip for you before you enter that important conversation. Find something that you like about that person, and you will be able to frame the conversation positively. It doesn't matter what the positive attribute is: they offer good insight in meetings, they are always on time, they meet deadlines, they bring great lunches... just find SOMETHING that you can connect to positively. We guarantee that your conversation will be less likely to get off track and become difficult.

If you consider the conflicting need for safety versus the desire to challenge and take risks (a frequent conflict between young children and their parents), the conflict becomes readily apparent. The child wants to explore and so the need to move as quickly as possible on stairs becomes their focus. The parent is responsible for the child's safety, so they limit the child's access to the staircase. This limited access becomes the conflict, as the child wants to explore, and the parent wants to avoid bruises and broken bones.

Whether at home or in the workplace, we have to consider that both parties' needs play an important role in the success of the relationship. Each side deserves respect and consideration. A lack of understanding can contribute to arguments, low productivity, and continued disputes. This in turn can lead to the total breakdown of important relationships.

When you acknowledge the legitimacy of conflict and are willing to examine issues in a cooperative environment, you can open the door to creative problem solving, more cohesive teams, and improved relationships. Developing a method to cope and work through conflict empowers people to take control of the outcomes and to contribute strongly to effective teams.

What is a Conflict?

- A conflict is more than just a disagreement. A conflict comes with a threat, and whether the threat is real or not, it must be dealt with in order for the threatened party to be able to move beyond the situation.
- Conflicts become more serious when they are ignored. Since conflicts involve a perceived threat to our own well-being, they stay with us and stay with us and often become greater in magnitude until we resolve them.
- Perception colors our reactions and triggers emotions. This makes it difficult for us to remain objective, even when we look at the facts. Our perception is influenced by our life experiences, values, and beliefs.
- Conflicts trigger our emotional hot buttons. We aren't always at our best when working through conflict because our emotions can interfere with our ability to remain objective and manage things rationally. Learning how to manage conflict during emotionally stable periods helps us to manage conflict more effectively.
- Conflict brings growth. Although we aren't often able to acknowledge it in the heat of things, when we resolve conflict in our relationships, we are also building trust. In relationships with high levels of trust, we feel more secure, knowing that our relationship will survive, and ultimately get even stronger.

Self-Assessment

Complete the self-assessment below.

This assessment will help you to determine your preferences for involvement in dealing with difficult people, and taking on those challenging conversations. Answer each question with yes or no. Scoring directions follow the assessment.

Questionnaire

	Yes	No
Instead of getting into an argument, I put off certain discussions.		
When someone doesn't deliver on a promise, I judge them more quickly than I should.		
Sometimes I bring up difficult subjects in a way that makes people defensive.		
Let's be honest: there are people I deal with who simply cannot be motivated.		
When someone is struggling, I tend to offer advice, even though they may just want to have someone listen to their ideas.		
When discussing problems, I sometimes get sidetracked and miss the actual problem.		
There are some people I simply cannot work with.		
Sometimes it's not them being difficult, it's me.		
I prefer to just jump in and have the conversation, rather than spending a lot of time planning for it.		
I know that I have to have these conversations, but I do not have to like them.		

Scoring

Add up the number of times you answered “yes” and have a look at the explanations below.

- **7-10:** You avoid difficult conversations. Try out some of the methods for conflict management that we are going to discuss. Consider getting a mentor who you can work with to be more comfortable in managing conflict.
- **4-6:** You are not one to initiate those difficult conversations. You may want to use some of the methods for conflict management that we are going to discuss.
- **1-3:** You're managing well and likely successful in dealing with difficult people.
- **0:** You ought to be teaching this course! Hopefully you'll find a few helpful gems to enrich your relationship building.

Preventing Problems

The Importance of Empathy

We can do a lot to keep problems from happening in the first place. If you develop your empathizing skills, you can put yourself in the other person's shoes even though you do not have to agree with them. If you are practicing being empathetic (and we recommend that you do) you should avoid phrases like, "I agree" or, "Yes, that's true." Don't reinforce a concern, either. You can simply express your empathy by rephrasing the key topic of the person's statement.

Some phrases you might use include:

- "I hear..."
- "I understand..."
- "I think you're saying..."

The concept of rephrasing before answering gives you:

- A chance to empathize with the concerns
- An opportunity to show the person that you understand the concern
- A moment to think of an appropriate response

It's also important to check to be sure the individual is satisfied with your level of understanding or your explanation. Your ability to empathize will play an important role in your overall communication skills and your ability to foster a positive and productive environment.

Meeting Management

An all too common problem in organizations today is meeting paralysis! Have you ever gone to a meeting realizing that you have no progress on a task because you've just gone from meeting to meeting for three straight days? Unfortunately, you are not alone. But what can be done?

Here are a few things you can do to make meeting more productive and have them take up less of your day.

Limit the duration of your meeting

- Most meetings can be finished in 60 minutes or less (or your scope is too big!).
- Be sure to start and finish on time - people will get to know this and realize they won't be stuck in the meeting all morning or all day.

Invite decision-makers

- Many meetings invite too many people. If there are people who are just there to listen consider sending meeting minutes instead.

Remember Diversity

- If you want to have a great meeting you need to have people who can provide a variety of perspectives so that it doesn't just become a mutual admiration society.

Have a preset agenda and keep to it

- You've only got an hour but invariably someone will come up with a question that might set you off on a 45-minute tangent. Use a flipchart 'parking lot'. You can add these items to your next meeting or answer outside of the meeting.

Seek solutions

- Participants in the meeting should be aware that they are there to provide solutions not problems.
- They should do their research ahead of time and be ready for the meeting.
- If material was sent out previously they should have read and understood it. Before the meeting is the time for getting clarification- not during the meeting.

Create minutes that are action oriented

- Minutes should not regurgitate everything that was said during the meeting. It should report: Decisions, Responsibilities and Deadlines

Further Reading:

- ✓ Kjerulf Alexander, *Happy Hour is 9 to 5*, PineTribe, 2014.
- ✓ Kouzes James M. and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge 4th Ed.*, Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- ✓ Merson Len, *The Instant Productivity Toolkit*, Sourcebooks Inc., 2005
- ✓ Palmer Louise, *How to Manage Stress in the Workplace*, Louise Palmer, 2014.
- ✓ Stone Douglas, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations How to Discuss What Matters Most*, Penguin Books Ltd., 1999.