Six Tips for Responding Constructively to Disrespectful Treatment in the Workplace



If a co-worker says or does something to upset or anger you, it can be tempting to respond with an equal measure of nastiness. But Sharone Bar-David, an expert in taming workplace incivility, has some better suggestions for responding constructively to disrespectful treatment in the workplace.

If a co-worker says or does something that upsets or angers you, it can be tempting to zap him or her right back in an equally offensive, or even worse, manner. But if you are a person who strives to treat others with respect and kindness, the satisfaction of stooping to another person's level of nastiness will probably be short lived.

While you may soon regret your initial aggressive response, the hangover effect of a war of words can last for months or years, making further interactions uncomfortable at least and unbearable at worst.

Sharone Bar-David, president of Toronto-based Bar-David Consulting and author of Trust Your Canary: Every Leader's Guide to Taming Workplace Incivility, estimates that fewer than five percent of workers know how to respond constructively to a negative encounter with a co-worker or boss.

"Any one of us can recall examples where our response was less than productive. Sometimes things got worse," she says, adding that we may have been left with scars and been reluctant, anxious or fearful to deal with that person in the future.

And in extreme cases, bad blood between co-workers can escalate into workplace violence.

Here are six suggestions from Bar-David toward developing a constructive approach to dealing with uncivil or unwelcome behavior in the workplace:

1. Set a "no scorched earth" goal. Your objective should be to build the relationship rather than damage it. Shape your response accordingly.
2. Think "addressing," not "confronting." The way that we think about a situation has a profound effect on how we approach it. When you think that

you need to confront someone, your mind immediately categorizes the situation as adversarial and your whole being goes on battle alert. Rather than telling yourself that you need to confront the person, I recommend thinking in neutral terms such as addressing, discussing, dialoguing, exploring or dealing with.

3. Express your reaction in a measured way. Tone it down. Conveying your emotions in all their colorful potency will overwhelm the other person and reduce rational thinking. The same is true if you resort to sarcasm.
4. Choose your words prudently. Words can inadvertently turn a situation from constructive to destructive in a big hurry. The interaction will become charged and you won't even know why. One word to avoid is but, as in "I know you may have intended well, BUT…" It triggers defensiveness.
5. Control your body language. You can use the best-selected words, however, non-verbal communication that is laden with strong feelings such as anger, resentment, hurt and retaliation, will trump all else. Crossing your arms with a scowl on your face, sighing and rolling your eyes are examples of bad body language.
6. Only the facts please. Sharing the labels or conclusions you've attached to the other person's motives or personality, such as "You have zero respect for anyone else's opinion" will escalate the situation. Stick to the facts. What would a video camera capture without the help of a narrator? What would a fly on the wall have seen or heard when the problem occurred?

