A Taste of Harmony

Embracing cultural diversity at work

3. Positive Interpersonal Communications

Colleen and Petr are colleagues. They have very similar qualifications and experiences. Petr is new to the country and has been in the team for about three months. Simon has started noticing that when Petr is asked to give his view, Colleen will interrupt, dismiss or disagree with what he says.

At first Simon thinks that he is reading too much into it, but this pattern is becoming increasingly obvious in the team meeting. He has also become aware that other team members seem to be noticing this behaviour too. Petr is becoming more reserved and less confident in recommending operational improvements.

Simon has developed plans to support Colleen and Petr and the team overall.

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For Colleen, Simon has a preliminary meeting to discuss how she is feeling. He discovers she is concerned that Petr's appointment might reduce her likelihood of promotion. He also learns that she considers Petr's experience and expertise as inferior to hers or to equivalent Australian qualifications. He recommends a series of counselling sessions for her.

Simon is concerned that this is not reasonable and this may also be a concern held by other team members, so he introduces a series of sessions on unconscious bias and on lateral problem solving.

For Petr, Simon also has a preliminary meeting to discuss how he had settled into the role and if he feels there are any issues. Petr explains that he feels like he is being judged and watched to see if he will make a mistake or exercise poor judgement. Simon reiterates why Petr was successful on the application for the role and that he has his full support. He also recommends finding a mentor who can act as a sounding board.

For the team, apart from the training sessions, he changes the agenda for staff meetings to include reports from each of his senior managers, including Colleen and Petr. He also decides to facilitate discussion topics to ensure everyone attending has an opportunity to speak.

Why structure matters

It's important for teams to establish structures that guide how they engage with each other, when things are at their best as well as their worst, to ensure meaningful engagement and contribution occurs.

Establishing what we talk about and how we talk about it sets the norm for our conversations. There's a great deal of power in simple, consistent messages about how to work well together. Creating a clear structure to guide positive ways of working together makes it easier to have conversations across difference. You can reduce the chance of misunderstanding and conflict and increase the opportunity to embrace the differences in your team and create real value.

All team members have their part to play in better managing meetings and general work conversations. Everyone can support respectful and relevant discussion. Everyone can support the generation and recognition of contributions from all team members. Of most value are team leaders and the standard that they set. They should lead conversations well and manage the dynamics of conversations so that everyone shines.

Possible actions

If you are the team leader, a structure for working well together would include:

1. Building trust. Trust increases when people know each other, and work within an agreed set of protocols.

2. Focusing on common ground. Start with what you agree on before you discuss disagreement. Find out what motivates people and find common ground through shared experiences and motivations.

3. Take the time to listen to everyone's views. Validate the legitimacy of having different opinions. It's not necessary to agree with everything, but everyone needs to feel heard.

4. Minimise interrupting. If you are brainstorming, interrupting will be common, so consider including a no-interruption rule so everyone gets a chance to pitch their ideas.

5. Give permission to call out behaviour that isn't in keeping with the agreed protocols.

6. Make sure people are given credit for their ideas and achievements.

7. Identify how you will deal with conflict. This gives everyone permission to point out conflict earlier and act to mediate sooner.

Key messages

1. Interpersonal conflict can be common in the workplace, but its origins are normally complex.

2. All viewpoints need to be considered when resolving issues between team members.

3. Setting rules of engagement for the team will help reduce the number of interactions that turn into conflicts.

4. A prudent employer will also be attentive to the necessity for targeted interventions such as counselling, warnings or even dismissal as a last resort.