



HUMAN RESOURCES

RAGING ATTITUDES

BY DIANE FAULKNER

"Once in awhile, out of sheer frustration, I'd just go to the ladies room and close the cubicle and cry."

I cannot seem to get these words out of my mind. They were spoken by Maggie Jennings, a 52-year-old former human resources executive from Long Island, N.Y., who, after 30 years of employment, jumped at early retirement to escape office tantrums and coworkers who just couldn't stop themselves from arguing.

Who hasn't witnessed an employee driven to frustration? I was shocked when I first joined the credit union movement as a vice president of human resources nearly six years ago, and was shown a pen-pocked wall between two of our executives, one of whom I had replaced.

I remember an executive and his supervisor moving one argument from just outside my door to nearly on top of my desk. Another time I was called out of a meeting to counsel an employee who had just been struck by that same supervisor for not learning something on the computer quickly enough.

We didn't have a name for what I was witnessing in my rookie year, but we do now: It's called desk rage—office rage, work rage and cubicle rage. Yelling, backbiting, slamming phones, angry faces flying down the hall—all are symptoms of this newest workplace menace that can escalate into serious physical attacks—even death. So, how do you know if your credit union is at risk and what can be done to prevent it from escalating?

STOP ...

... yourself long enough to honestly observe interactions between employees as peer groups and work groups, between management and staff, staff

Has your workplace hit the boiling point?

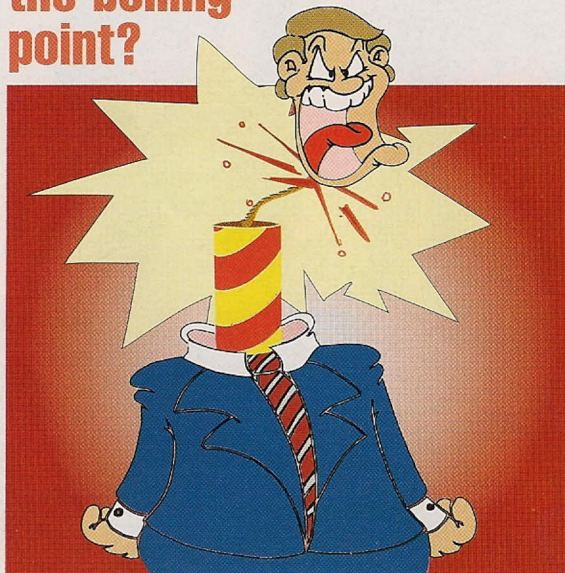


IMAGE BY JERI FREDRICKSEN

and members, executives and board. Listen not only to what is said, but how it's relayed. Is there rudeness? Sarcasm? Do relationships seem strained?

How is information being received? Are doors and phones being slammed? How about desk drawers? Do you hear foul language? Do you routinely see people go directly from a meeting to an extended lunch specifically to de-stress?

According to a study that is set to be published in the quarterly journal *Organizational Dynamics*, workers who are treated rudely have a variety of reactions that are decidedly bad for business. Of the 1,500 people studied, half said they lost work time worrying about rude behavior directed toward them. A third admitted to intentionally reducing commitment to their company. Nearly a quarter said they stopped doing their best work, and 12 percent quit their jobs. (Interestingly, one in four also admitted to retreating from

office stress by eating chocolate!)

In another study, commissioned by Integra Realty Services Inc., a New York-based real estate advisory and appraisal firm, and surveying more than 1,300 American workers, 42 percent said yelling and verbal abuse took place in their offices; 29 percent admitted to yelling at coworkers. What's worse, nearly one in 10 said they work where physical violence has occurred; 14 percent said machinery or equipment was damaged by angry workers.

LOOK ...

... at your employees. Do they seem to need more supervision; is production reduced or service inconsistent? Do you notice any behavioral changes, like hypersensitivity, irritability, fatigue or a lowered self-esteem? Do you see similarities within or between departments, positions or branches?

Look at absenteeism, again not just overall, but by position, department, branch and supervisor. People don't like confrontation and, oftentimes, it's easier to call in sick to avoid meeting with a certain someone than to confront the situation and work it through. It's a manager's job, however, to pick up on just such subtleties and help people work through their difficulties so you can avoid delayed projects, overtime, excessive sick time and possibly unnecessary termination.

Look at turnover, again by position, department, supervisor, lead worker. Compare rates and reasons for termination percentages alongside these numbers. Breaking numbers down this way gives you an indication of potential problems with particular managers, branches or training.

Where you see unusually high numbers, check employee counseling histories for current and former employees. If a manager is recorded as counseling several employees on the same issue, you have a problem with communication or training—a manager function.

Look at environment by position. Is there correlation between amount of space and privacy and number of incidents? The Integra survey found that limited physical space actually caused

anger and stress in the workplace in what's now being recognized as the "Dilbertization" of the workplace.

Call centers are often the worst, a virtual stress ball of staff, squeezed into small, identical cubicles, where there can be little privacy, let alone the quiet to think through confusing questions.

LISTEN ...

... to what employees are saying. Do they complain of fatigue, not sleeping through the night or waking unusually early?

These are all symptoms of the effects of being on both the giving and receiving end of desk rage. They're also symptoms of PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder. Once a diagnosis for war veterans, it's now being recognized as the result of abuse—physical, verbal and emotional.

Desk rage is a form of abuse. It may begin as a lack of manners and sarcastic sense of humor, but situations are made worse by technological isolation and a general coarsening of corporate culture—the breeding ground for true rage. Your only recourse is to set standards for behavior as well as production or service. Enforce standards equally and consistently, and make ramifications stiff.

COUNSEL

Loud talkers need to be counseled—and possibly trained—to be considerate of other workers' need to concentrate. "Tough" managers need to be counseled on how to effectively communi-

STRESSED?

Many factors can contribute to an employee's behavior. Here are some signs of stress that could lead to desk rage:

- sleep problems,
- nightmares,
- waking early,
- impaired memory,
- inability to concentrate,
- hyper-vigilance (feels like—but is not—paranoia),
- jumpiness and exaggerated startle response,
- fragility and hypersensitivity,
- irritability,
- violent outbursts,
- joint and muscle pains,
- panic attacks,
- fatigue,
- low self-esteem,
- exaggerated feelings of guilt, and
- feelings of nervousness/anxiety. ■

David Kinchin, The Invisible Injury, Success Unlimited, 1998

cate and delegate, rather than bully.

Bullying, after all, is behind all forms of prejudice, abuse, conflict and violence. Bullying with a focus becomes harassment. And, we all know how expensive bullies can be! ■

Diane Faulkner, a former credit union human resources executive, is now a free-lance editor, writer and speaker on HR organizational development issues.

WARNING SIGNS OF POTENTIAL VIOLENCE

Worried you may have a potentially dangerous employee? Look over these warning signs:

- excessive tardiness or absences,
- increased need for supervision,
- inconsistency,
- inability to concentrate,
- changes in health or hygiene,
- fascination with weapons,
- stress,
- reduced productivity,
- strained work relationships,
- violation of safety procedures,
- unusual behavior,
- substance abuse,
- excuses and blaming, and
- depression. ■

HR News, Vol. 20, No. 2, Feb. 2001.



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