

Fact-File 18: Respect-Building... Why it matters for workplaces



Extracts from our Guide on Working Better Together - Connecting & Respecting

The Relevance of Respect

Respect, or rather the lack of it, seems to be an ongoing concern in many workplaces. Along with trust, it's one of the twin currencies of leadership and it's always been, and continues to be, an ever-present factor in all human interactions. *But how hard is it for leaders to cultivate it and keep it alive in workplaces?*

- We all crave it. When we're respected we're more open, energised, amenable. We follow leaders we respect with commitment and grudgingly comply or rebel those we don't.
- Workplace surveys constantly reveal one of the top reasons people leave jobs is that their supervisor doesn't treat them with respect.
- It's often the missing ingredient in getting along well with each other. Most teams name 'respect' among their top 10 values and lack of it as one their main bugbears.

Respect often seems like *sand in the hand* - hard to grasp, hard to retain and it all too easily slips through our fingers. Yet ephemeral and slippery as it may be, respect is still critical for constructive relationships, productive teamwork and inspirational leadership.



Is respect on the demise?

Workplaces worldwide seem to be suffering a pandemic of caustic behaviour that's ruining relationships, corroding connectivity, turning teams toxic and killing-off respect. Sometimes, it's right out there: angry outbursts, abuse, public reprimands, personal attacks. Other times, it's more subtle: sarcasm, innuendo, cynical contempt, disapproving looks, 'polite' put-downs or veiled criticisms.

Codes of conduct implore people to treat others respectfully – but do we? Most fall short. They fail to define what respect means. Even if they do, that's no guarantee people will even know how to behave that way.

Lack of respect spells havoc at work. It translates into debilitating costs you may not see on any balance sheet. Apart from fuelling resentments, resignations and absenteeism, it poisons people's experience of work, robs them of vitality and feelings of self-worth and resilience and drains their purpose and productivity.

Unwrapping Respect

"R-E-S-P-E-C-T find

out what it means to me." It's how the old Aretha Franklin song goes! She's right. We all have very different ideas about what respect is and what respectful behaviour looks like.



To work better together, we all need to be on the same page about what respectful behaviour is. We use the word constantly, often cosmetically, without delving deeper into what it really means. It's got a lot to do with the way we talk to each other and how we come across....

- Saying "good morning" and meaning it.
- Remembering your "please-and-thank you's" – sounds like school, but things like this are disappearing fast in workplaces.
- Watching your language – being sensitive to how others may feel offended by some things you say or the tone you say it in.

Absence of outward signs like these is often the first indicator of creeping disrespect. *So, what's respect?* Ask 10 people and you'll get just as many different answers.

We often talk about basic respect – respecting privacy, physical space, the right to feel safe in a 'bully-and-abuse-free' workplace. These are the outer trappings of respect. Yet respect is more than just common courtesy, being nice, polite or good workplace manners, though it's a start. We think respect is feeling we're being treated with 'unconditional positive regard'. In fact, *regard* is a word that appears in most definitions. Here's a string of other respect-defining ideas:

- Respect is consideration and care for others - thinking about the emotional impact of what I say or do has on other people.
- It's feeling free from harsh, unfair judgement, abusive behaviour and accepting differences.
- Respect is associated with other conditions like feeling trusted or trusting and safety – I can express a viewpoint or make a mistake without feeling condemned or disapproved of.
- It's a suite of learned behaviours, stemming from our emotional and thought patterns. It's

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an attitude, a predisposition, a state of mind – that translates into a set of behaviours you can learn, which don't always come naturally.

Just like trust and compassion, the real test of respect is when we're tempted to take it back. When we're feeling pressured, overworked, fatigued, cranky, edgy, ill-at-ease or frustrated.

Spot-Fires of Disrespect

Discussions revolving around respect turn quickly to focus on disrespect since we mostly tend to notice its absence more than its presence.

We've all witnessed disrespect at work and wondered how come people act like that? Here's a checklist of some of the spot-fires of disrespect. *Which ones do you see most in your workplace?*

- People being overly-directive, domineering, demanding, intimidating or commanding
- Taking out bad moods, set-backs, frustrations on others
- Constant put-downs, complaints or criticising others behind their backs
- Sarcastic joking at someone else's expense or being dismissive, insensitive or uncaring
- Showing up late for meetings or not at all or acting like your priorities are the only ones
- Condescending, speaking down, patronising, ignoring what others have to say or talking over the top of them
- Not pulling your weight, doing what you say you'd do or blaming someone else when you know you really contributed too
- Abusing, yelling, name-calling and insults

This list can go on and on but you get the general idea. Of course many signs of disrespect are more subtle. It also manifests itself in *what we forget to do*. For instance:

- Neglecting to give praise, recognition or compliments consistently
- Forgetting to focus on what's best in people, not what's worst
- Valuing suggestions instead of pointing out what's wrong with them
- Giving information freely – not working on the 'need-to-know' principle

- Exploring other people's thinking – being curious not critical
- Paying attention to what people have to say and listening

RESPECT-O-PHOBIA...

'Respect-o-phobia': *the constant state or fear that people don't pay you enough respect.* Many people demand or crave



respect so much they've become hyper-sensitive to the slightest things others say or do that might be interpreted as disrespect. Their disrespect triggers are so touchy you can hardly say anything to them - no matter how carefully you say it without them growing defensive and accusing you of being disrespectful. Behind respect-o-phobia is often low self esteem, lack of confidence or competence, intense approval-seeking or a need to look to others to confirm our sense of self-significance or self-identity. Respect-o-phobics are so fearful you're going to disrespect them that they'll twist your praise into implied criticisms, your feedback into personal attack and your attempt to discuss with them how to correct poor performance into bullying and harassment. Ironically, respect-o-phobics are sometimes highly critical and judgmental of others and can tend to treat people around them harshly - and you guessed it - disrespectfully!" Harvard Business School Article 4/8/2002

Disrespect as a Side-Effect

Disrespect is often a side-effect. Believe it or not, most people usually don't set out to just show you how disrespectful they can be toward you.

The saddest part of lack of respect is many of us don't mean to be, but we just don't see how we're being disrespectful. The impact on others is something we don't even think of (*"I didn't mean to be disrespectful, I was just being....?"*)

- You think you're being direct, frank and honest (even if it is brutal) – others see you as abrasive, blunt, overbearing or just plain rude. The idea that you're being like that isn't really on your radar.
- People aren't deliberately trying to hurt your feelings or act rudely towards you. The trouble is they're not even seeing themselves and they're not considering you at all.
- They have other things on their mind – like



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defending their rights, protecting themselves, not letting people walk all over them.

Ever thought one reason we resort to argument and other disrespectful behaviour is we don't feel safe? When people feel threatened or unsafe, defensiveness follows. It's the biggest obstacle to respectful behaviour.

Defensive routines are often triggered by fear of feeling humiliated, foolish, incompetent, losing control, insignificant, unnoticed, unappreciated or unfairly treated.

A leader's job is to find out what makes people behave this way and coach them – if you can curb your own urge to grow indignant, judgemental or disrespectful in retaliation.

Respect – The EI Connection

Many people would be more respectful – or less disrespectful – if they only knew how or were more aware of how they come across to other people. That takes *Emotional Intelligence* (EI). In talking about respect, moods and feelings are never far behind. In fact, they're at the heart of respect – or lack of it! Here's how it works:



- We 'feel' respected or disrespected before we even think it. We act disrespectfully *because* of the way we feel.
- Our emotional radar picks up subtle signals from others like genuine appreciation, judgement or disapproval.
- The emotional centre in our brain acts on this often before our rational brain even gets a chance to think about it.
- If we respect someone, we're more likely to want to connect with them. Lack of respect, on the other hand, leads to disconnection.

And that's an 'emotional hijack'. When people act disrespectfully, we can be sure they're under the influence of strongly charged feelings – electro-chemical impulses and strong drugs released by the brain. There's no two ways about it. When we're disrespectful and we talk-down to people, adopt an aggressive tone, take offence at how someone's said something or let go and really let them have it – we're emotionally hijacked!

The thing about disrespect is feelings that lead us to behave this way are catchy. When you blame, people are likely to blame back. When you criticise someone, don't be surprised if they start criticising you too. When you attack, expect a counter-attack or slow revenge. Learning how to manage emotions enables us to avert potential disrespect hijacks and be more resilient.

Respect-Building Actions

Respect isn't just avoiding being disrespectful. It takes positive actions to build respect. Here's a few respect-building actions leaders can try.

➤ Personal Actions...

- Be an example* – model respectful behaviour
- Be genuine* – authentic, truthful, consistent.
- Be fair* – criticism and judgement-free.
- Consistently confront* disrespectful behaviour
- Connect* – show interest, check in with people
- Be appreciative* – it's feedback, recognition and respect all in one and be exact on what.
- Stop blame-gaming* – see how you contribute to the situation too and seek solutions!
- Spread credit* that comes your way to others.
- Be inclusive* – alienation's a disrespect factor
- Say when you're wrong* – don't cover up
- Value others' input* – involving builds respect
- Ask for other's ideas* – be less inclined to give advice and more inclined to seek it.
- Coach don't coerce* – build potential in others
- Think good of others* – identify redeeming quality in people who may get up your nose.
- Control your story* – don't invent intentions or make up bad motives about others
- Be even-minded* – don't spread rumours or criticism. Say it to their face not to their backs
- Be compassionate* – empathise, understand and connect with their feelings and viewpoint
- Persist with respect* – don't make it a flavour of the month people know you'll forget about
- Take firm action* – enforce consequences for disrespect or you fail the first test



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➤ Team Actions.....

- ❑ Run *Respect-Building* sessions to let people explore together what respectful behaviour looks like and what they expect of each other.
- ❑ Develop a *Team Charter* – ensure it includes respectful behaviour and have your team develop it with you. Don't do it alone
- ❑ Agree a process with the team for confronting disrespectful behaviour – don't let it slide
- ❑ Put respect on the balance sheet – include respect as a criteria in promotion, reward, recognition and performance systems
- ❑ Raise emotional self-awareness – training in emotional intelligence can get at the root of disrespectful behaviour and increase self-control, connectivity and resilience
- ❑ Conversational coaching in how to handle difficult discussions, give clean feedback and raise issues can enhance team interactions
- ❑ A *Respect-Points System* – corny but draws attention to examples of good behaviour
- ❑ Make everyone accountable – to monitor and reinforce respectful workplace behaviour
- ❑ Make respect a pillar of your culture – and eradicate the tacit assumptions, ingrained behaviour patterns and systemic sources of disrespect that are often deeply embedded

- ❑ “Respect is earned – you're respectful to others when they're respectful to you.”
- ❑ “If people treat me disrespectfully, I give back as good as I get!”

Funnily enough, it's something we expect others owe us unconditionally, yet something we give conditionally – and all too easily take back. It's all about what others owe us – and rarely about what I owe them!

- ❑ Respect is sometimes seen as a commodity we can trade or award (eg. *When you do something I think is good, or better still, exactly what I tell you to then I'll respect you. If you keep stuffing up, I withdraw respect.*)
- ❑ People often feel justified in treating others disrespectfully. (*You don't respect me so I will disrespect you – and even abuse you. That'll show you what respect is.*)

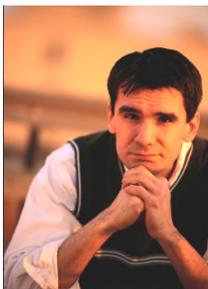
Attitudes like these perpetuate disrespect. Just as you can't bully someone else into 'not bullying' – you can't disrespect people into being respectful!

Don't wait for others to respect you first. Gandhi got it right: *Be the change you wish to see.* Someone has to stop this vicious cycle – and as a leader – it really has to be you!

Perspectives on Respect

The most fundamental barrier to more respectful workplace behaviour is differences in the way we think – what we call *tacit assumptions* or *mental models*. The trouble with mental models is they're invisible to us. We can't see them – we're not aware of them – even if they have a big influence on how we act and what we say.

When we talk to people in workplaces, respect always seems to be about the other person – never about me. They tell us lots of stories about disrespectful behaviours of others but few say how they've been disrespectful to others. They say things like:



- ❑ “I only respect people who respect me.”

The Change Forum runs a series of 10 team-building modules under the banner of **Working Better Together** that includes **Respect-Building, Emotional Intelligence and Talking in Teams**. For outlines or a full prospectus on our team building services contact us on

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