

# BUILDING RESPECTFUL WORKPLACES

**“R-E-S-P-E-C-T – find out what it means to me.”** That’s how the old Aretha Franklin song goes! She’s right. We all have very different ideas about what respectful behaviour looks like. It’s the currency of leadership, we’re told, but how hard is it to harvest in workplaces?

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## 1. The Relevance of Respect



Respect, or rather the lack of it, seems to be on the rise in many workplaces. Rumbblings about disrespect reverberate repeatedly around many I work in.

- Along with trust, it’s one of the twin currencies of leadership we’re told.
- We follow leaders we respect with commitment and grudgingly comply or secretly rebel against those we don’t.
- Workplace surveys constantly reveal one of the top reasons people leave jobs is their supervisor doesn’t treat them with respect.
- We all crave it. It’s always been, and continues to be, an ever-present factor in all human interactions. Going back in time, respect was critical to survival. It’s a badge of membership in any group.

Think of a small tribe roaming the desert. Then think of someone shunned/not respected. You die. You have no worth, no value to the group. This is the foundation of our primal psychological drive to feel respected.



- Back from the desert to the workplace – though for some there’s probably not all that much difference – most teams name ‘respect’ among their top 10 values and lack of it as one their main bugbears. It’s often the missing ingredient in getting along well with each other.
- Speaking of deserts, 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 as it may be, respect is still critical for constructive relationships. productive teamwork and inspirational leadership.

Respect is absolutely critical for good relationships and great teamwork. It’s the missing ingredient in getting along well with each other. When we’re respected we’re more open, energised, amenable. But how hard is it for leaders to cultivate respect and keep it alive in workplaces?



*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. Any way you look at it, lack of respect spells havoc at work. It translates into debilitating costs you may not see on any balance sheet.

Apart from fueling 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. That’s why respect is so relevant for workplaces....but the next question is *what is it really?*

## 2. Unwrapping Respect



“R-E-S-P-E-C-T” — that’s how the old Aretha Franklin song goes! It’s a pretty useful jingle for those who have spelling difficulties! Come to think of it, the 2nd line of Aretha’s song’s pretty relevant too: “*Find out what it means to me!*” She’s right. Respect is not about what YOU think it is. It’s finding out from others what *THEY* think respect is and trying to act that way! This is the first big obstacle to respect-building. Without wanting to play Captain Obvious – we all have very different ideas about what respect is and what respectful behaviour looks like.

- ❑ We use the word constantly, often cosmetically, without delving deeper into what it really means.
- ❑ Workplace codes of conduct consistently implore us to treat each other respectfully – but do we? Most fall short. They fail to define what they really mean by respect – and I’m talking specific behaviours here – not broad injunctions and Thou shalt not commandments!
- ❑ Even if your code of conduct is quite explicit – that’s still no guarantee people will even know how to behave that way. We assume a lot about the ability of people to reverse long-established patterns of learned emotional responses and behaviours!

To work better together, leaders and teams need to be on the same page about what respectful behaviour is. So let’s unwrap it. **What is respect?** Ask 10 people and you’ll get just as many different answers. Yet respect is more than just common courtesy, being nice, polite or having good workplace manners – though that’s a start.

- ❑ Saying “*Good morning*” as if you mean it rather than sounding like they just forced you to wake up on your day off and come to work!
- ❑ Remembering your ‘*please-and-thankyou’s*’. Sounds like school – but little things like this are disappearing fast in workplaces overwhelmed with ‘busy-ness’.
- ❑ Watching your language and thinking how other people might feel offended by some of the things you say or the tone you say it in.
- ❑ Taking time out to genuinely ask after someone else’s well-being or follow up on something that really matters to them in their work or home-life.

The absence of outward signs like these is often the first indicator of creeping disrespect – that someone may be disrespecting us.



Let’s play Shrek and peel back a couple more layers of the onion though. Here’s a string of other ideas on **what respect is** (or isn’t):

- ❑ Not being offending, insulting, degrading or demeaning. Respect isn’t just avoiding being disrespectful. It takes positive actions to build it.
- ❑ Respect is associated things like feeling trusting/trusted, safe, and appreciated.
- ❑ Respect is consideration, care, acceptance and tolerance for others – considering others in my decisions and actions and balancing their needs with mine – or even before mine.
- ❑ It’s feeling free from harsh, unfair judgement, abusive behaviour and accepting differences. Want a practice to try? Try going a whole day without making judgments, jumping to conclusions about other’s motives, criticising or judging other people. Good luck – it’s tough!
- ❑ Going deeper, respect is first and foremost an attitude, a predisposition, a state of mind – stemming from our emotional/thought patterns that

translate into a set of behaviours you can learn, which don't always come naturally to all of us. It has a lot to do with the way we talk to each other and how we come across to others – thinking about the emotional impact what I say or do might have on other people's feelings.

- ❑ At the top of the list, we think respect is being treated with '*unconditional positive regard*'. In fact, *regard* and holding people in *esteem* are words that appear in most definitions. This includes acknowledging them, listening to them, being truthful with them, and accepting their individuality and idiosyncrasies.

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.

### 3. Sources of Respect



So that's what respect is BUT **what leads us to respect each other?** What are the fields that feed respect? We think there's a number of prime feeders...

- ❑ The most obvious is *competence*. We respect people for their capabilities – their skills and achievements. By itself though, that's not nearly enough to get most of us over the line. There's lots of people who excel at what they do – but people still don't like or respect them.
- ❑ That's where more personal qualities come into play. Things like *courtesy* and *consideration*. We respect people we know *support us*, who have a *benevolent attitude* toward us and who *appreciate us* for who we are – whatever our flaws. And that's *acceptance*.
- ❑ We also respect people who bother to *connect with us* – *acknowledge us* and who *give us recognition* for what we do. They hold us in *esteem* and that increases our feelings of self-worth.
- ❑ In the final analysis of course, it's our *deeds and actions* that people respect or not.
- ❑ And then there's *position and power* of course – and not far behind it – *reputation*. While we are taught respect – for a uniform, authority, a position or an institution – people who rely on being respected solely for these things are often not.

For example, a manager can throw their weight around and expect to be respected on the basis of power and fear – but fear, threats and coercion are not a sound or ethical basis for respect – as Albert Camus once pointed out.

We can also respect people for the wrong motives – because they pander to us, agree with us or do as we say – and disrespect them for the opposite – they stand up for a principle we may not agree with, tell us their truth even if we don't like it or hold us accountable for things we'd rather let slide.

### 4. 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*. Whenever I talk to people in workplaces, respect always seems to be about what the other person is or isn't doing. It's never about us. They tell me lots of stories about disrespectful behaviours of others but – and none, at least that I can remember, about how they've been disrespectful. (Maybe this means I only get to meet the respectful ones – but somehow I doubt that.)

**Here's some typical things I imagine we all hear people say about respect:**

**What we think of Respect**

*"I only respect people who respect me"*

*"Respect is earned – you're respectful when they're respectful to you"*

*"If people treat me disrespectfully, then I give back as good as I get!"*

**Respect as a Commodity**

- We give it to others *conditionally*
- We expect others to give it .... *unconditionally*
- We see respect as a commodity to trade, award and all too easily take back.
- *"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."*
- We even feel justified treating others disrespectfully.
- *"You don't respect me so I'll disrespect you – and even abuse you. That'll show you what respect is."*

- "I only respect people who respect me"*
- "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 sounds as if respect is something we all expect others to owe us unconditionally and something we give to others conditionally – sometimes grudgingly – 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! As the old saying goes: Respect – *"You've got to give it to get it!"* Respect means being treated and treating others how you would like to be treated, even if they are not respectful.

## 5. Spot-Fires of Disrespect

Discussions around respect often 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 signs of disrespect.** These little signals are like spot-fires – left unattended, they can flare up into full scale ingrained patterns in your team or even your whole work culture. Which ones do you see most in your workplace?

Sometimes, it's right out there:

**Spot-Fires of Disrespect**

- Abuse, yelling, name-calling, insults
- Domineering – demanding, over-directive or controlling
- Blaming, threatening or intimidating
- Constant put-downs, complaints, criticisms
- Public dressing-downs, reprimands
- Angry outbursts - taking out bad moods, set-backs & frustrations on others

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Other times, it's concealed in more subtle ways:

- Sarcastic, dismissive, uncaring
- Condescending or patronising
- Ignoring, excluding, interrupting
- Disagreeable and judgemental
- Seeing your priorities as the only really important ones
- Public teasing, cynical contempt,
- Disapproving looks, 'polite' put-downs or veiled criticisms.
- Blaming others when you know you really contributed too

- Being sarcastic or joking at someone else's expense
- Dismissive, uncaring, condescending or patronising
- Ignoring what others have to say, excluding or interrupting
- Public teasing, cynical contempt, disapproving looks, 'polite' put-downs or veiled criticisms.
- Being doggedly disagreeable and judgmental with particular people
- Acting like your job or priorities are the only important ones

Such lists can go on and on but you get the general idea. The trouble is that much of the time, we humans seem to have a tendency to be critical, judgemental and adversarial rather than supportive, connective and appreciative.



Of course many signs of disrespect manifest in **what we forget to do** too:

- 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

## 6. Are you Respect-o-Phobic?

We've been hammering away at one side of the disrespect dynamic – finding perpetrators. But there's a few other angles to grind on this one. One is what we have christened '**respect-o-phobia**': *the constant fear and resentment 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. Everyone walks around on egg-shells with touchy people like this!
- 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.

Behind *respect-o-phobia* is often low self-esteem, lack of confidence or competence, intense approval-seeking or the need to look to others to confirm our sense of self-significance or self-identity. Ironically, *respect-o-phobics* can be frequently highly critical and judgmental of others and can tend to treat people around them harshly – and you guessed it – disrespectfully!

**Self-respect is also a key to respecting others.** Respect for others starts with it. An old piece of wisdom says if you can't learn to love yourself, you won't be able to love anyone else either. The same goes for respect. "*When you are content to be simply yourself and don't compare or compete, everybody will respect you.*" Lao-Tzu

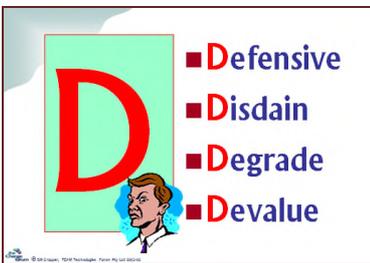
## 7. Disrespect as Side-Effect

A final angle we all really need to reflect on because we've all experienced it. **Disrespect is often a side effect.** I don't want to sound like Ripley, but **believe it or not**, most people usually don't set out in just to show you how disrespectful they can be toward you. Organisational psychopaths aside, most of us don't get up in the morning and make a hit-list of who we want to nail today.



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

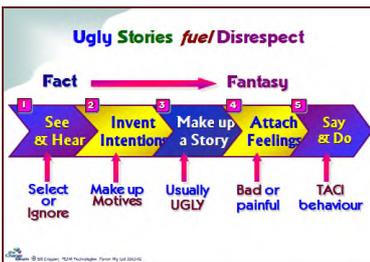
**8. Defensive Routines**



Ever thought one reason we resort to argument and other disrespectful behaviour is we don't feel safe? Safety has a lot to do with how much connection and rapport I think there is around me. If I think I'm supported, respected and well-thought of, I'll feel safe.

The reverse applies too. When people feel threatened or unsafe, defensiveness follows. It's one of the biggest obstacle to respectful behaviour.

- ❑ Defensive routines are triggered by fear of feeling humiliated, foolish, incompetent, insignificant, unnoticed, unappreciated or unfairly treated, losing control and so on.
- ❑ They can often present as strong emotional lash-backs when I feel my beliefs or competence are questioned. When we feel criticised, judged and disapproved of, or attacked. We start to feel fearful and unsafe, and we go on the defensive.
- ❑ We either argue or avoid, we go to silence or violence. For some, this means a counter-attack. If they feel blamed, they blame-back. Name calling, labelling and open criticism (“*That's stupid, unrealistic, impractical etc*”). Others sulk, withdraw or sit through whatever's happening to them in simmering silence.



Many cases of disrespect are a spiral of false assumptions. This model explains a lot about those troublesome disrespectful moments. It goes like this...

- ❑ We hear someone say something that upsets us. We interpret this as an affront. We *assume* we know why they said this.
- ❑ We invent intentions and make up motives, which may have little to do with what's really going on for the other person – and we end up making up a story about them. More often than not an ugly one!
- ❑ We then feel justified in being disrespectful back. We indulge in what we call in our *Conversational Coaching Clinics* – **TACI** communication: We **T**hreaten, **A**ccuse, **C**riticise or **I**nsult.

So if you want to be more respectful, *control your stories!* See how they're subtly controlling the way you're talking to the other person... and affects what they're doing too!

What ugly stories do you tell yourself about the people you disrespect?

## 9. Disrespect – an Emotional Hijack!

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 you back. When you criticise someone else, don't be surprised if they start criticising you too. When you attack someone else or insult them, they counter-attack or will take slow revenge.

Learning how to manage emotions enables us to avert potential disrespect hijacks and be more resilient. If disrespect is an emotional hijack – then we need to learn how to control our moods and avoid the impulse to address other people in ways they find disrespectful.

## 10. Challenging – Respectfully

Respect is not about backing down, being submissive or putting what you want to say on the back-burner. Nor does it mean others should defer to us, agree with us all the time or act in a servile way that inflates our own sense of self-significance. There are times when you need to challenge another person's viewpoint, assumptions or conclusions – or the way they're treating you. But why not do it *respectfully*?

If you don't challenge respectfully, all you'll raise is defensiveness instead of the real issue and the less chance you have of getting others to take notice of what you want to say. Many mistake being assertive for being aggressive.

- You express your rights in emotionally forceful ways that deny, degrade, devalue or humiliate others – and prevent them from expressing their views or feelings. That's not respectful!
- Being aggressive, dominating, threatening or overly-forceful may make you feel in control, righteous or superior but you may regret it later. It usually results in others getting angry, defensive or vengeful and cause people to disrespect you.

Assertiveness is standing up for yourself in ways that don't violate rights of others to stand up for themselves too. It's a direct, honest and open expression of your feelings and opinions that can enhance your sense of self-confidence and personal authenticity not to mention respect for you! Here's a

**Asserting Yourself Positively**

- Specific & clear - *what you want, think, feel*
- Don't disagree – “I have a different view” not “You’re wrong”
- Don't inflame, blame or personalise – *keep it clean*
- Say “the way I see it...”
- 3-step recipe: “When... I hear a voice raised at me... I feel... What I'd like is...”

**formula to assert yourself respectfully in conversations:**

- ❑ First, start by delivering your message to the person – not everyone except them. It’s also good to start to explain exactly what your intentions are and are not in saying what you have to say (eg. ‘I want to...’ or ‘I don’t want you to...’).
- ❑ Don’t start by saying things like “I disagree” or “That’s not right!” Try saying: “I have a different view...” Suggesting someone is wrong or bad and should change will only foster resentment and resistance
- ❑ Use ‘I’ statements (eg. ‘The way I see it...’). Start mixing a three ingredient recipe: “When... I hear a voice raised at me, I feel... humiliated and what I'd like is that I... can discuss an issue with you without ending up feeling overpowered.”

The essence of good assertiveness is to state your case without arousing the defences of the other person.

- ❑ Be specific, precise and clear about what you want, think, and feel.
- ❑ The secret of success lies in saying how it is for you rather than what they should or shouldn't do.

And another thing, before you challenge someone else, have you *listened* to them first? One of the most basic things you can do to respect someone else is *listen to them – carefully*. In most teams we see interact, real listening rarely gets a look in. What happens instead? Lots of things – but little of it constitutes real listening...

**Respect & the Lost Art of Listening**

1. Ignoring: *Don't talk to me. I don't want to/can't listen*
2. Pretend: *I want you to think I'm listening – but I'm not*
3. Blaming: *You're blaming me or I'm listening to blame you*
4. Judgemental: *I listen to prove you wrong – I'm right*
5. Interruptive: *I am right and I interrupt to let you know it*
6. Active: *I want you and me to believe I get what you say*
7. Reflective: *I process what you say against my beliefs*
8. Interactive: *I'm present for what you say, feel and see*

- ❑ People listen critically – only intent on picking up something they can blame the other person for or finding gaps in what they say...
- ❑ People listen judgementally – ready to point out where the other person’s story is faulty or wrong because it doesn’t coincide with ours...
- ❑ People listen interruptively – waiting impatiently for a chance to have their say or they simply talk over the top of the other person...

While listening like this may make you feel superior, cool or in-control, it’s low on empathy and understanding. When people don’t really feel heard, they don’t feel acknowledged. They quickly conclude you don’t respect them – after all, they think, if you did, you’d give what they’re saying the real attention it deserves!

**11. 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.** We’ve divided them into *personal* and *team*....

**Personal Actions:**

**Personal Leadership Actions...**

- Model respectful behaviour
- Genuine - authentic, truthful, consistent
- Fair - criticism and judgement-free.
- Consistently confront disrespect
- Connect - include, appreciative
- Say if you're wrong – don't cover up
- Value others' input – ask for other's ideas
- Coach don't coerce – build potential
- Persist with respect – take firm action

- ❑ Be an example – model respectful behaviour. Be genuine – authentic, truthful, consistent.
- ❑ Be fair – criticism and judgement-free. Think good of others: identify redeeming quality in people who may get up your nose.
- ❑ Consistently confront disrespectful behaviour. Take firm action – enforce consequences for disrespect or you fail the first test
- ❑ Connect – show interest, check in with people. Be appreciative – it’s feedback, recognition and respect all in one

- Stop blame-gaming – see how you contribute to the situation too. Say when you're wrong – don't cover up
- Be inclusive – alienation's a disrespect factor. Value others' input – involving builds respect – ask for other's ideas.
- Coach don't coerce – build potential in others
- Persist with respect – don't make it a flavour of the month people know you'll forget about



### 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.

### And in Closing...



We started with Aretha showing us how to spell "R-E-S-P-E-C-T". So let's see if we can use that to sum up some of the personal attributes of respect leaders need to cultivate....

**R** – *Rapport*: the ability to harmonise and want to get along well with others

**E** – *Empathy*: the ability to tune into what others are feeling

**S** – *Sincerity*: being genuine, authentic and truthful in dealings with others

**P** – *Patience*: putting aside your needs and giving time to support others

**E** – *Equality*: treating everyone with respect regardless of anything

**C** – *Consideration*: being aware of your impact on others and putting that first

**T** – *Tolerance*: Showing kindness and compassion towards others

The Change Forum runs a series of team-building modules that include *Respect-Building*, *Emotional Intelligence* and *Talking in Teams*. These can be delivered in-house as discrete programs or combined in various ways to focus on particular issues or directions.

Our next public leadership clinics coming up soon in BRISBANE are:



## Leadership Lounge #66: Building Respectful Workplaces?

- ❑ **EI at Work – 1-day seminar for staff** March 23
- ❑ **Difficult Discussions** March 24-25
- ❑ **Leading with Emotional Intelligence** March 28-29
- ❑ **Leading Culture Change** March 30-31
- ❑ **Learning to Lead** April 14-15

And we're offering a special 1-day public program on

- ❑ **Building Respectful Workplaces** in BRISBANE on May 9.

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