



THE IMPACTS OF CULTURE AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR IN THE WORKPLACE

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By Tara Carr, Small Business Development Director at UW-Green Bay

There are two very important factors to consider regarding communication in the workplace: human behavior and culture. It is vital for leaders to understand human psychology regarding how people think, behave and respond in situations. The more people are understood, the more effective communication will be successful. I am a firm believer in “say what you mean and mean what you say”. Unfortunately, many people have a difficult time with self-confidence and self-awareness. They either truly do not know how they feel or they do not have the skills, strength, or courage to communicate their thoughts and ideas. As a result, few truthfully say exactly what they mean. Fear of rejection, fear of conflict and the lack of self-awareness also play a role in why people struggle with communication. Many people avoid conflict at all costs by feeling they cannot say ‘no’ or have a fear of how their words, decisions or actions will disappoint others.

Compiling all these personality dynamics can create major communication issues within an organization. With people not saying exactly what they mean, it turns into the “Yes-but...” game. The person using the “yes, but...” game always finds a reason why something will not work or why they cannot do the task at hand. People play games in an effort to meet their personal needs, by having ulterior motives or acting out, by seeking attention. The attention seekers can find attention in negative ways, such as creating drama, “passing the buck”, or playing “the blame game”.

Culture also plays a significant role in workplace communication. Many companies have an internal culture and expectation that their employees must be accommodating and some even have a culture of not saying ‘no’. It is important to be transparent, hear the truth and be told ‘no’, than to be misled. Limiting ambiguity and increasing trust, by setting realistic expectations, is much more respected and appreciated by both employees and customers.

Regional culture adds to the cultural dynamics. The culture in the Midwest is often referred to as “Midwest Nice” or “Midwestern passive aggressive”. Midwesterners are more likely to avoid speaking to others in a perceived negative way, rather than deal with the issues directly. They respond by masking their feelings, discontent or frustrations. This passive aggressive behavior in the workplace can erupt in many ways: consistent negative attitude, being disruptive, blaming others for mistakes, making sarcastic comments, saying “yes”, but really wanting to say “no”, procrastination, insincere forgetfulness, and/or sabotage.



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The real feelings of the employee eventually will come out in their response (if you can read between the lines), which tends to be passive aggressive in nature. Sometimes these responses leave you wondering “Why?” and shaking your head in disbelief. An example of passive aggressive office communication: “Oh, you’re taking vacation during that time? You can take vacation if YOU want. I am too busy to take time off, but you can I guess”.

The communication barriers, the Midwestern culture can bring in the workplace, can be quite a challenge for the “outsider transplants”. East or west coast implants can face immediate cultural challenges and barriers on how they communicate and express themselves. Coworkers can be intimidated and put off by these passionate, persistent and extroverted implants. The personality characteristics that are needed to survive in the coastal border companies are shunned in the Midwest. For an outsider, being efficient by speaking your mind, in a direct way, is not appreciated or effective for the local culture. If unacknowledged and ignored, these communication cultural differences can create efficiency and effectiveness road-blocks within an organization.

The more leaders understand culture, human behavior and game playing, the more proactive they can be in effectively handling these situations. The first step in understanding game playing is education on the psychology behind game playing. Once the game playing, passive aggressive behavior or manipulation can be identified it becomes easier to resolve. Learning effective ways to respond to game playing is also an important tool. Typically when people are playing games it is because they are looking for a specific need to be fulfilled. The more the need is fulfilled, the more the individual will continue to play the game. The cycle continues until the need is no longer met. Leaders should be aware of this and make efforts to not fulfill these needs, but rather encourage the person to find solutions, or disengage. The benefits of having clear communication within the workplace can result in employees being satisfied in their jobs, feeling valued, increased morale, and high performing teams, all of which improves performance and operational effectiveness.

The Wisconsin Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at the University of Wisconsin Green Bay is part of a statewide network of SBDCs working with business owners and entrepreneurs to facilitate business growth and improvement, and to launch successful new companies. The Small Business Development Center offers a variety of services: no-cost business consulting, customized business solutions, financial management, growth & strategic planning, and professional development training.