

Do You Want Your Staff to Die Young?

Combatting nastiness in the workplace
is a leader's role –
it is almost all about friendliness.

What it is, what it means, which effects result.

OP-ED: Jenny Simanowitz

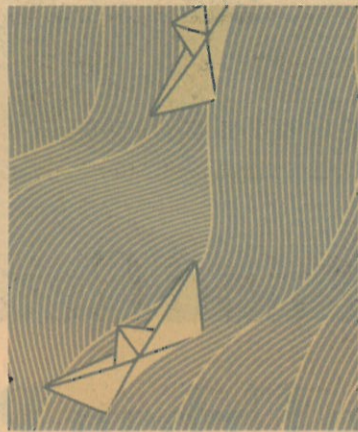
If we are lucky, we find ourselves in a happy team, led by a strong and amiable boss, and then may not experience aggression at all, or very seldom. However, if the opposite is true, and we happen to land in a workplace fraught with stress, competition and a weak or authoritarian boss, then our working lives – representing a huge portion of our lifespans – can become as miserable as hell.

Not only that, but we may even die sooner because of it. Recently there have been various studies showing the effects of the work environment on health. One example is an extensive longitudinal study on the effects of the work environment on burnout (published in 2008 and led by Arie Shirom at Tel Aviv University). The study reveals the powerful impact of the work environment on longevity. The first thing the researchers discovered is that office conditions matter. In particular, having less friendly colleagues was associated with a higher risk of dying. Participants with such colleagues were 2.4 times more likely to die during the study.

Ok, so unfriendliness affects our health. That much is clear. But what exactly is unfriendliness? And can friendliness be defined as simply the absence of unfriendliness?

Let's tackle unfriendliness first. Off the cuff I would define unfriendliness as any behaviour – be it verbal, non-verbal or para-verbal (voice) – that makes the person you are communicating with feel "bad". Every communication includes an emotional element, and our emotional reactions are qualitative, as well as quantitative. So

if, for example, somebody screams at us we may experience a strong emotion of fear or rage. But if someone is a bit gruff, or fails to look at us while speaking, or has an impatient tone of voice we also have a negative emotional reaction, only this time it's not quite as definable: disappointment? resignation? irritation? This feeling may be so slight that we are not even aware of it ourselves. But these minimal negative exchanges stick, often in our subconscious.



And it is often these "slights" which cause the most stress, because we usually don't or can't retaliate or even respond. Every "he doesn't like me" or "I am not important enough for her to listen" or "I must have done something wrong" increases cortisol and other biological stress responses in our bodies, which aside from their health impacts, also lead to unhappiness. We protect ourselves by closing off communication with the "offending" person(s); anticipating their unfriendliness and becoming defen-

sive; or if possible, avoiding them altogether. If this disagreeable situation continues for any length of time, eventually the body rebels and we become ill. What we all have to recognize – and especially those in leadership roles – is the damage that these incidental and undefined acts of unfriendliness can cause.

So what about friendliness? I think most would agree that friendliness makes us feel good, and that at work (and everywhere else) friendly people are more popular than unfriendly people. However, the measure of friendliness considered "normal" varies between cultures. In some cultures too much friendliness is viewed with suspicion, as being "false" or a sign of weakness. Unfortunately many Austrians, especially the older generations, seem to share this view, which leads to a communication style that on a friendliness scale rates rather low! Unfriendliness is even sometimes perceived as raising one's status, as with traditional Viennese coffee house waiters who seem to have been schooled to treat their customers as if they had just crawled in from the gutter. In fairness, this has changed radically for the better over the last 20 years. Coming from a culture (South Africa) where friendliness and cheerfulness are norms, even among people who because of their living situations would have every reason to be unfriendly, I have to admit that I experienced an enormous culture shock when I first started working in Vienna. Not only was I often bemused and hurt by what I experienced as the unfriendliness of this town, but I also felt that my own friendliness was seen as a minus point when it came to judging my professionalism. This was, however, many years back, and I have to say that there have been great improvements since! I have also realized that if I don't get put off, and persevere in being cheerful and courteous, people usually appreciate it and respond positively. With a few stubborn exceptions I have found, simply, that when I am nice to people, they too are nice to me.

This brings me to the crux of the matter, where I shall very modestly dare to contradict the great Stephen Hawking. Aggression may be innate (and no doubt is), but friendliness and unfriendliness are in fact roles which one learns to play, and as such one can learn to change.

According to Jacob Moreno, the founding father of Psychodrama, roles form the basis of all our actions. The roles that we have learned to play are in fact embedded and sustained in our neurons. He also defines creativity as the "ability to question, modify and change our learned roles in order to have a better life". This means that friendliness is not just an "add-on". It is a basic role which we can choose to play. And as leaders, we can also demand that our staff play this role, and furthermore, train and encourage them to do so. The kind of communication – friendly or unfriendly – experienced at work clearly impacts our emotional life and, inevitably, our health. Hence it would seem that an essential duty of anyone working in a team, and especially for those in management or leadership roles, is to take very seriously the need to develop and foster a culture where people actively appreciate and show their liking for each other.

Tips for developing a culture of friendliness

■ Be a warm, appreciative and, yes, affectionate boss.

The atmosphere of a group, a corporation or a team is diffused downwards from the top. If you

diagnose cheerfulness and openness your staff will take their cue from you. According to various research, the best role a leader can play is that of "energizer". This doesn't mean being a social worker or a therapist, or that one is always the nice guy or gal who is afraid to criticize or get angry sometimes. It does mean being conscious of your behavior. If you decide to play a stern or authoritative role in certain situations then do this consciously, for a limited time and without hurting anybody.

■ Be aware (and beware!) of the role(s) you are playing and the effect they have on your staff.

Our whole life is role-playing, whether we are aware of it or not. We play "social roles", for example, as teacher, spouse, team-leader etc. We also play emotional roles – Peter the supporter, Mary the comedy queen, Richard the bad-tempered...

A good communicator – and a good leader – is a flexible role-player. Careful, this does NOT mean putting on a mask. It means being able to call up consciously different ways of behaving to suit what is needed in different situations. Above all it means knowing how much our non-verbal behavior – for example micro-gestures – contributes to the effectiveness of the roles we play.

The vitality and good vibrations of a boss – one who is free with smiles, humorous, and praises where praise is due – spreads to staff and makes them happier. And as we all know, happy people are nicer to each other.

A word on humour: Interestingly, it has been found that bosses who can laugh at themselves (without actually putting themselves down) have a positive effect on the working environment. Eric Markewitz from Seattle University studied bosses who were sometimes "self-deprecating" and found that this behavior not only raised their popularity, but led to the people around them feeling more at ease and relaxed.

■ Monitor the communication in your team.

In an article entitled "Burnout and lack of kindness" by Christine Stack (New York Times 11/2013) we read that "saying something hurtful to another person will change the person's heart forever." An article published in 2011 in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine came to the unexpected conclusion that some workplaces are so demoralizing that they are worse for a person's mental health than being unemployed. I have heard so many stories from employees who have experienced extreme hurt from their work mates, or find themselves in a conflict situation they are unable to solve. When I ask if they have talked to a superior about this, all too often the answer comes back that s/he is not interested, or is of the opinion that they should sort it out for themselves.

If a leader wants healthy, happy and productive staff, then s/he has

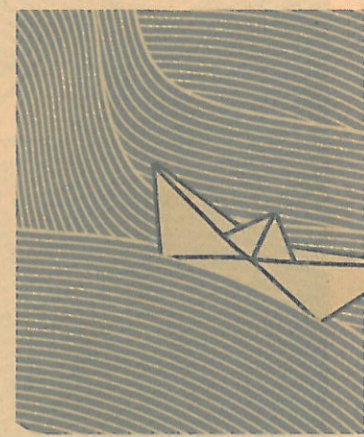


Illustration: Getty Images

to notice them. And I mean really notice them. Which means being sensitive to what is going on among them on a daily basis. Is there somebody who is being shut out of casual conversations? Does someone seem to be dominating the group in an aggressive kind of way? Which roles are being played out? Who is the ringleader and is s/he having a positive or negative effect on the morale?

Again, not all nastiness is verbal. Notice if one of your staff seems overly shy or nervous, or starts taking days off for slight illnesses. Watch out for non-verbal behaviour such as rolling eyes, contemptuous sniggers or arrogantly raised eyebrows. Nowadays many staff environments are multi-cultural and not everybody is able to interpret or cope easily with this. Watch out for signs of racism or sexism: for people being shut out of the workplace "community" because they are the wrong colour, the wrong sex or have a different mother tongue.

The staff you should reward and nurture for their behaviour are the

ones who are enthusiastic, warm, and optimistic. Encourage, praise and support the people who contribute to a friendly atmosphere and make it known that you are favouring them. With luck (and in their own self-interest), the others will likely follow suit.

■ Be a trendsetter in giving your staff concrete positive experiences throughout the day.

Organisations spend a lot of money and preparation time on activities meant to give staff a good time and motivate them to work well together: elaborate Christmas parties, team-building days or company excursions. While these "highly visible" activities may well contribute to improving the atmosphere among staff, the feelings of goodwill are often short-lived.

The human being is such that s/he has to be continually energized in order to feel good, and most people don't experience this sort of reinforcement during the workday. Even lunch breaks are often taken at the desk or used for shopping, making important phone calls, or (horror!) meetings!

Yet even a short energy break can work wonders on the stamina and mood, and it is up to the leader to initiate these. What exactly s/he does – whether it's a coffee break together, a short walk, an exercise in giving oneself or ones colleague positive feedback, depends on the preferences of the staff and the leader. The ideas are endless! And the beauty is it doesn't have to take long – 5 or 10 minutes is enough. The duration to effectiveness ratio is excellent!

JENNY SIMANOWITZ is a communication trainer, founder of Happy Business Institute in Vienna. She has written two books on the subject of communication: „100 Außergewöhnliche Stimmungs-macher“ (Ökotopia 2008) and „Performance Coaching – kreative Rollen- und Statusspiele im Job“ (Beltz 2016).



Jenny Simanowitz is in favour of friendliness.

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