

A Little Respect



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As anyone who's ridden in my car, visited my home, or asked me about my taste in music knows, I'm a huge fan of Channel 33 on SiriusXM. My "First Wave" station plays music from the 1980s—from upbeat dance tunes to the bizarre poetic musings of Morrissey.

One of my favorite songs on the Channel 33 playlist is "A Little Respect," by Erasure. I was reminded of that song this week while teaching a seminar on "HR Risk," and later while reading the Schumpeter column article, "[The Enemy Within](#)," in the July 25th issue of *The Economist*. The Schumpeter column (blog) explores business, finance and management topics and is named after the Austrian-American economist Joseph Schumpeter. "The Enemy Within," begins by reminding the reader that, "Employees are often said to be a company's biggest resource," as well as "its biggest liability."

The column continues by describing five types of "employees-turned enemies-or embarrassments:" the fraudster, the vandal, the high-flying trusted employee, the low-level employee who publishes embarrassing content on the Internet, and the insider who colludes with an outsider to embarrass or defraud his employer.

The column suggests "three precepts" for managing the risk of employees becoming your mission's worst nightmare. The first two precepts are costly, both in terms of dollars and workplace trust: "focus on the people who have the greatest capacity to do harm—those who control money and information" and "install software" or hire "forensic accountants to double check the accounts."

The third precept—*treat your employees with respect*—is not only the least expensive strategy, but it is the best way to prevent workplace ills ranging from fraud, to poor morale, to declining commitment and claims alleging unfair or illegal conduct. As Schumpeter wisely notes, too many organizations pay only lip service to the value of workplace respect. "They may embrace the rhetoric that nothing matters more than their people, but too many workers feel that nothing matters less."

Nonprofit employers aren't exempt from unkind treatment in the workplace. During interviews with staff at nonprofit clients, we too often hear about leaders who direct the lion's share of institutional compassion outward, saving only meager scraps of kindness for the people frequently labeled the nonprofit's "most valuable assets."

If respect isn't a core value in your workplace, or if leadership's compassion is externally facing, resolve to take

the following steps. We've used the title of another popular song—R-E-S-P-E-C-T—to help you remember these tips.

- **Remind supervisors** that how they treat employees at all levels of the organization should reflect the nonprofit's stated mission and values.
- **Empower staff** to address disrespectful behavior. Conduct small-group workshops or role-playing exercises to equip staff with the skills they need to speak out and speak up.
- **Stop unkind behavior before it escalates** by letting offenders know that their words and actions are unacceptable.
- **Punish-promptly and decisively**— staff members who treat their co-workers in a fashion that disrespects your values and mission.
- **Conduct a workplace survey** to learn whether employees believe your rhetoric about workplace respect. Ask every employee (or every employee and volunteer) to participate in a survey by responding to the following statements by indicating "Absolutely," "Sometimes, but not often," or "Rarely."
 - The organization puts the needs and welfare of employees first, above everything else.
 - I feel respected and valued by everyone from the executive team to the front line staff.
 - The values espoused by the organization are reflected by how I am treated each and every day by my supervisor and co-workers.
- **Track your results.** Repeat your workplace survey every three to six months to track your progress. Share the survey results with the entire staff as well as the board.

It isn't easy changing the culture of an organization from one that treats staff like interchangeable parts of a machine into one whose words and deeds reflect the value that people are the mission's greatest asset. What's easy is seeing that trust and respect are essential parts of the equation.

Melanie Herman is executive director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your questions and comments on any topic related to risk management. Melanie can be reached at 703.777.3504 or Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org.