Diversity Gazette

January 2020

Managing workplace hurdles. It can be done.

by *Alecia Matthews*

Welcome to a new decade, readers!

We wish to thank you for your continued support of the Diversity Gazette as we attempt to learn and grow together. With each edition, we make every effort to discuss interesting and relevant issues that help you consider ways to work with all types of people in our diverse world. The Diversity Gazette has explored several areas of difference based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and learning differences. Our writers always attempt to explore their topics in a positive, caring, and nurturing manner. Ultimately, we hope you can use these techniques in the work environment and beyond.

Interestingly, one dimension of diversity we have not explicitly explored yet is working with difficult people. People may be considered difficult to work with based on their work style, communication style, or even their conflict resolution style. Regardless of the reason, working with difficult people can cause many workplace stresses.

Recently, I read a study by Overton & Lowry (2013) which highlighted the negative outcomes associated with working with difficult people. In the study, the authors found outcomes that included: dysfunctional teamwork, reduced productivity, decreased client satisfaction, and even increased employee turnover. These outcomes have not only proven bad for the individual, but also the collective workplace.

While the study showed workplace conflict can be normal, that conflict can become problematic when workers exhibit "toxic personalities." Overton and Lowry define toxic personalities as ones where people "exhibit a pattern of counterproductive work behaviors that debilitate individuals, teams, and even organizations over the long term" (p.259). Yikes.

As I kept reading the piece, I wondered how skilled professionals and work environments manage these toxic workmates. A few takeaways struck me:

a.) The results are likely to better with engagement rather than avoidance.
b.) People must be motivated to address the conflict or issue.
c.) Behavioral, cognitive, and emotional skills can be acquired.
d.) The environment must be neutral and feel safe.

While the individuals involved need to be committed to addressing the conflict or issue in the workplace, the organization must support resolving it as well. The evidence from the study demonstrated that by making a commitment to managing conflict, organizations were able to address toxic personalities and improve productivity.

We are fortunate, in that, UNC offers multiple resources for these types of issues. For SOG employees, feel free to reach out to any of our HR liaisons. Chenise Crump, for example, specializes in this space. She can be reached at: chenise_crump@unc.edu or at (919) 537-3411.

Reference:
Overton, A. and Lowery, A. (2013). Conflict Management: Difficulty Conversations with Difficult People. *Clinics in Colon and Rectal Surgery*. Vol (26) 4: 259-264.