



## Helping employees reconcile cognitive dissonance

**A**lmost all religions provide an outlet for forgiveness or personal reconciliation. But when was the last time anyone went to confession saying, "Please forgive me for my refusal of federal student aid to a student because of his recent marijuana charges"?

Our own spiritual beliefs give us an outlet to relieve our guilt and internal conflicts, but a similar outlet is not readily available at work. In campus offices, personal beliefs and professional duties often collide.

We all create some *cognitive dissonance*—internal tension created by inconsistencies between our beliefs and actions. For example, consider the admissions counselor who denies entry to children of illegal immigrants, even though the counselor strongly believes they should have access to postsecondary education.

Employers have a vested interest in helping employees deal with cognitive dissonance. Without employer intervention, the results can be detrimental to an organization's overall effectiveness and success.

### When employees go it alone

Some employees may be tempted to align their actions with their attitudes. Take an employee who feels underpaid, for example. Internally there's dissonance between what he is paid and what he believes he is worth. Left to himself with that conflict, he may decide not to work so hard, or take extra breaks, or refuse to work extra

hours, or disengage even more.

According to Rodd Wagner, principal of the Gallup Organization and co-author of *12: The Elements of Great Managing*, employee turnover is almost exclusively attributed to job conditions. Organizations with disengaged employees suffer 31 percent more turnover, 51 percent more employee theft, and 62 percent more on-the-job accidents than organizations with engaged employees.

In short, it's never a good idea to let employee dissonance fester.

### Resolving dissonance

Instead of leaving employees to work it out on their own, managers should look for employee dissonance and work with employees to resolve conflicts. Matching tasks and responsibilities with an employee's strengths is "Management 1.0." Matching tasks and responsibilities with an employee's strengths **and** attitudes, ethos, and beliefs is "Management 2.0."

Periodic performance reviews should not only be used to assess an employee's productivity, but their levels of dissonance as well," says Wagner. On campus we might query how an employee feels about institutional policies or state and federal regulations. If you disagree with any, why?

Meanwhile, why wait for a scheduled review? "I keep my ears open," says Cheryl Storie, an associate vice president at the University of Maryland. "If you're in tune with your staff, you'll pick up that vibe that there's conflict in the air."

Storie believes that senior management and executives have a responsibility to train their managers to keep tabs on levels of dissonance in an office and to take care of them on-the-spot. "I've found that an open dialogue is best," says Storie. "I want staff members to feel comfortable expressing their concerns to me about implementing a policy they may not agree with."

### Aligning policies and employee attitudes

If an employee feels uncomfortable working on Sundays for religious reasons, a manager could work out a schedule that is amicable to both the employee and employer. When an

employer gives a little, most employees will give much more in return.

Employers would do well to involve employees in policy and strategy decision making, even when it's not convenient. "Staff will almost always have a better reaction if they have been part of the process that resulted in that policy," says Storie.

Obviously most policies cannot be changed because of the opinion of an individual employee. That is especially the case in regulated industries like higher education. But Wagner suggests that managers can still help employees resolve internal conflicts by sincerely allowing them to voice their concerns and talk it out.

"It's mistaken to tell an employee to 'just deal with it,' or 'that's just the way it is,'" Wagner explains. "The idea that an employee will simply salute and follow is contrary to human nature." Wagner argues that everyone looks for higher purposes in what they do. Those higher purposes can become the number one motivator for employee satisfaction and productivity.

An effective manager will note how employees are implementing policies. Are they doing their jobs begrudgingly, or are they accepting? Managers who simply dictate rules to employees generally make poor managers, according to Wagner.

"Younger staff members in particular often have difficulties implementing policies they don't believe are 'right' or 'fair' in an idealistic sense," says Storie. "It helps to discuss the particular issue to broaden their thinking and to help provide context about the policy."

Employees can work through dissonance, if they feel that their voices are being heard and considered. What results? Higher job satisfaction, lower attrition, and a more productive office. It may seem ironic, that the best way to help employees deal with their dissonance is to help them talk about it with a manager. ■



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