

Creating A Workplace Free of Fear

Workplace fear is like a cancer. On the surface the symptoms are not always indicative of the stress and turmoil taking place beneath the surface. This leads managers to attempt to correct the symptoms rather than the root cause of the symptoms. Imagine a surgeon working on a skin disorder when the real issue is a tumour somewhere inside the body!

Fear exists in almost every workplace. In every instance the fear is created by poor management behaviour. It is not caused by employee behaviour. The way employees behave as a result of fear is not the issue – the root cause is how managers behave towards their employees. To remove workplace fear, managers need to change the way they behave.

Let's take a simple quiz. Answer Yes or No to the following questions:

	Yes	No
When a staff member brings an issue to your attention, do you view this as an opportunity to develop people and their potential?		
When you see a staff member holding back in a meeting do you take steps to encourage and foster their contribution?		
When a staff member comes up with a good idea do you give them the credit?		
When you make a commitment to your staff do you follow up and provide timely feedback?		
When a staff member calls in sick do you immediately assume they are telling lies?		
When a staff member suggests a different way of doing things do you commit to looking at the possibility?		

Did you answer NO to any of the above questions? If you did answer no, ask yourself how you might change the way you behave so as to enable you to answer Yes. Do that much and already you will be on your way to eliminating fear in your workplace.



Fear is created by managers who distrust those they work with. Fear is created by managers who LINO's – Leaders In Name Only (*Brown, Insead*). Fear is created by managers that believe their title is what management is all about.

How might you change the way you behave as a manager. Remember the workplace is like a marriage; the little things are the big things. To those on your team it is important to them they be trusted, they be given credit for their work or their ideas, they be encouraged and coached and mentored and that you do the things you say you will do. This builds trust. Your staff will only follow you when they trust you.

The first step is to recognise a problem or issue for what it is, an opportunity to develop the potential and skills of your people, to improve your systems and processes. It is not about allocating blame. That is negative. If you take a negative approach your staff will simply avoid telling you about issues until they become unsolvable problems. Identify the root cause of the problem. Spend time asking lots of questions. Avoid asking why, instead ask what happened. When you ask Why it can become confrontational and look as though you are attempting to allocate blame. You need to find out what takes place and what needs to be done to avoid the issue repeating itself in the future.

Often the greatest threat to a manager is when a staff member suggests a different way of doing things. Remember the system is not yours, you are there to lead and manage in the best way possible. You want to hear what others have to say. Your staff work in the system every day, they know what works and what is a barrier to effectiveness. Their suggests are not a critique of your management, rather of the processes. Would you rather listen and improve processes or be criticised for being someone that doesn't care?

Finally encourage your people to speak up, to contribute. Discourage personal attacks by staff or workplace bullying. Bring people together to talk through issues, without judgment, rather than avoiding potential conflict. These issues become much more difficult to resolve if left till later. Often when people are enabled to discuss their perspectives then provided with space to reflect they will arrive at their own decisions.

This management tip has been brought to you compliments of John Coxon & Associates. We work with management teams and managers in the health sector and not for profit sector in Australia and New Zealand to help develop leadership capacity and management competencies. We achieve this through consulting, management coaching and professional development opportunities.

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