

3. Ethical Leadership

Take Offense and Take the Offensive

Approximately 25 minutes

OVERVIEW

Ethical leaders have a fine sense of justice. They take offense when it deserves to be taken and then go on the offensive to ensure offensive actions are not repeated. This exercise uses real-world scenarios to stimulate discussion regarding those actions.

PURPOSE

- To heighten participants' awareness of inappropriate behavior.
- To caution against the use of certain negative-impact words.
- To stimulate thought regarding appropriate actions to be taken as a result of inappropriate behavior.

GROUP SIZE

Any size group. Participants will first work alone and then in pairs. The exercise concludes with a full-group discussion.

ROOM ARRANGEMENT

No special requirements.

MATERIALS

Handout 3.1, *"Your Reaction/Your Reply?"*

PROCEDURE

1. Distribute the handout and begin this exercise by pointing out that certain words are obviously offensive to various groups. Surprisingly, though, not every person within a given group finds a given word offensive. Some women, for example, don't mind being referred to as "girls"; others take immediate umbrage. Still, it's best to avoid those words and phrases that are well-recognized as insulting.
2. Point out that it's the leader's ethical responsibility to create a workplace environment that is free from prejudice of any kind. Employees have a right not to be disparaged, mocked, insulted, threatened, or offended.

3. Next, explain that sometimes we employ an expression without realizing that it might sound prejudicial or insulting. The handout will explore four actual incidents. Participants will respond to the four incidents and will then share their thoughts with a partner.
4. Transition next to references based on current events (President Bush's declaration of the war against terrorism as a "crusade," for example) or to examples elicited from participants regarding similar incidents.
5. Conclude the exercise by leading a discussion (and, ideally, recording the results) that explores things an organizational leader/manager can and should do to ensure employees are treated respectfully.

VARIATION

This exercise can be easily adapted for programs emphasizing cultural diversity, conflict in the workplace, leadership, and communication skills.

DISCUSSION

- What, specifically, can a leader do to ensure offensive remarks are kept out of the workplace?
- What is the downside of being too politically correct?
- Can you think of instances in which a national figure was criticized/chastised for making seemingly innocent remarks?
- If you had made such a remark, in all innocence, would you feel compelled to apologize for it?
- How do First Amendment rights impinge on remarks that might cause offense?

QUOTATION

"The best effect of fine persons is felt after we have left their presence."

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

POINTS OF INTEREST

In the case of *Dan Antoni vs. Employment Security Department of the State of Washington*, No. 15764-4-III, the court ruled that Bonnie Showalter, who had been fired for being rude to customers, was entitled to benefits denied her when she was terminated. The court agreed the behavior was inappropriate but that it did not constitute misconduct—even though her boss had been told he would lose his licensing subagency if such behavior continued. Ms. Showalter claimed a strict diet caused her to "veer out of control." This claim ran counter to the definition of misconduct: which means a "willful act."

Handout 3.1

Your Reaction/Your Reply?

Directions

Decide what, if anything, you would have said or done if you had been the person to whom the offensive, albeit innocently offensive, remark was directed. Be prepared to explain the rationale behind your decision to say/do something or nothing.

Situation #1

Jeannette Guzman was engaged in a discussion of multitasking consulting at the annual office party. She excused herself at one point and headed to the hors d'oeuvres table, where she was approached by another employee who "complimented" her with these words: *"Jeannette, I just have to tell you how much I enjoyed listening to you just now. You are so intelligent... for a Mexican."*

Situation #2

Donna Silverstein was having a birthday lunch with four co-workers, when one of them admired her handbag, asking where she had purchased it. Donna recalled that she had purchased it when she was in Morocco, at an outdoor casbah. "Oh," the other woman asked, clearly interested, *"did you have to Jew down the merchant to get it?"*

Situation #3

It's the first day on the job for Chynna Kim. One of her fellow workers, in an effort to welcome her, walks up, extends his hand, and jovially observes: *"I see they've hired another Chink."*

Situation #4

Linda Karolla (nee Giordano) has just transferred to a new department. The other secretaries took her to lunch to help orient her to the department. One of them cautions her: *"Mr. Martiello heads Accounting and he has very strict standards. He would never actually gyp anyone out of their money, but if anyone tries to gyp him, he just might call in the Mafia!"*

