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# Relationships Under the Microscope

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## Just Common Sense

On “Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day,” I invited my 11-year-old to a presentation I gave on “Creating a Culture of Accountability.” To my surprise, she sat rapt as I took my audience through 2 hours of non-stop fun on the subject of how they could become personally responsible and accountable for their actions at work, their effect on others, and the results they produce.

The session was an invitation to everyone in the audience to stop the madness of finger-pointing and blaming when things go wrong and to start every day the easy way: with focus and a smile. You have probably heard a similar happy-but-hard-hitting motivational message before: We have to take a hard look at whether we can muster the courage and willingness to be accountable for behaving with common courtesy and civility in the workplace, especially during times of change and uncertainty.

As my daughter and I drove home afterward, she asked, “Mom, do you get paid for that?”

“Yes,” I answered, relishing the prospect of explaining how my business works.

She was quiet for a minute. I figured she was formulating her next question, and she was. But it was not the question I expected.

“Mom, how come you have to teach grown-ups what responsibility and accountability are? I mean, I think they liked your speech and all, but isn’t it kind of like common sense?”

Talk about “out of the mouths of babes.”

Alas, common sense, like common courtesy, is not always easy to find.

Are you finding that common courtesy is not so common? Do you practice it yourself?

Do you start the day by offering a genuine “hello” to coworkers, saying please and thank you, and checking your tone when you speak to or e-mail others?

Is this something you, as a grown-up, still need to learn?

Some people do not respond to unkindness, negative tones, or blaming—no matter what. They expertly stay focused on the results they are trying to achieve. They let you know they hear you when you bad-mouth others behind their backs, but they do not participate in unnecessary character assassinations or side comments about colleagues.

To tell you the truth, people like that can be exasperating. They consistently refuse to join the “I am superior to others” party no matter how hard you try to engage them in it.

Next time to you run into someone like that, pay close attention. You will learn what common courtesy looks like and even how to practice it. If you ask the person to explain how to do it, you will learn even more.

But you do not really need to ask, do you? You know how to be courteous and civil, and you know that when you are not those things, it is your choice.

Why not choose to be consistently courteous? It takes a bit of discipline, but you can set the example of professionalism all the time.

Sure, everyone gets angry and upset on occasion. But there are more appropriate outlets than the office gossip-go-round for your unproductive mood.

Someone who never talks behind the backs of others has made a conscious choice to be the kind of person who doesn’t detract from the work environment with a lack of courtesy or civility. The person will listen, but not to get the dirt on a colleague. This kind of person listens to learn what the real problem is—what result you are missing and blaming on someone else.

Then the person will ask you some questions. One of them is not “What happened?” That does not matter. The real questions are:

“What result do you want?”

“Can you come to an agreement with this person about that?”

“What support do you need to do it?”

Maybe you just want to vent and make someone wrong. But that is not what the workplace is for. It is a place to get done what you have agreed to do. How can you focus on that instead of on the person who has made you mad?

Here are a series of questions to ask yourself when you find yourself in that situation. The answers will help you stay on track:

What is the problem?

What am I doing—or not doing—about it? (Be honest when you answer this one. Are you blaming someone, talking about her behind her back, or avoiding her?)

What do I need to do differently in order to reach my goal?

What support will I need to take this action?

Writing out these answers will feel therapeutic. It puts you back in control of your own situation because you’re no longer blaming someone else for your circumstances. It also puts you in a position to bring a coherent set of thoughts to a non-judgmental third party for a little coaching. You can get some help in sorting out whether your actions are self-serving or will really solve the problem.

If I want common courtesy and civility in my workplace, it obviously has to start with me. If I want personal responsibility and accountability at the individual level, I have to be the first one to accept responsibility and accountability.

Yes, daughter dear, it is just common sense.

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