

The cure for bullying is kindness, says Dr. John-Tyler Binfet. One of the ways Binfet spreads kindness is through BARK (Building Academic Retention through K9s), a program that brings students and therapy dogs together in an effort to reduce stress.

Building respectful workplaces

By Marnie Douglas

It may seem like a simple thing, but kindness is key when it comes to tackling bullying and harassment in the workplace, says Dr. John-Tyler Binfet, associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus (UBCO).

There is a growing emphasis on kindness and mental well-being at work, to the point where anti-bullying initiatives are being replaced in favour of promoting more pro-social behaviour, he says. Binfet was one of several speakers at a recent Building Respectful Workplaces seminar at UBCO.

“Increasingly, there is less tolerance in the workplace for the office bully. There is evidence to suggest that workplace productivity is enhanced when employees feel socially and emotionally supported at work,” he explains. Co-workers simply being nice to each other and “being intentionally kind” goes a long way toward having a harmonious workplace, which in turn leads to greater job satisfaction for everyone involved.

And Binfet says, “Being kind isn’t just a nice gesture — there’s science behind it.”

A shift in mentality

His research shows that being kind has a number of positive benefits to both the individual receiving and the individual initiating the kindness, including a reduction in stress, positive interpersonal relationships, and even “the helper’s high.” And changing behaviour to the positive, rather than just combating the negative, can have better results. Traditional anti-bullying programs focus on the negative actions, but when people consciously change their thoughts and actions through kindness and compassion, it fosters the positive behaviour that’s expected and naturally rewarded with friendship.

The good feelings that we experience when being kind are produced by a rush of endorphins that create a lasting sense of pride, well-being, social connection, and trust. These feelings are contagious, encouraging kind behaviour by the giver and receiver.

“Acts of kindness help us form connections with others, an increase in which is a strong factor in increasing happiness,” he adds. “I would urge you to reconsider the role that being intentionally kind might play in your personal and professional life.”

**“We think we know each other’s intent, but we don’t.
That’s why respectful communication is so important.”**

—Karen Bowen, ManagerKnowHow Consulting Group

He notes that stress is also contagious so it’s important to create workplace conditions that are positive. Small acts, such as greeting people in the hallways, offering coffee to colleagues, or even an anonymous thank you card, can create behavioral change and show there is no place for bullying in a workplace grounded in kind words and kind acts.

“Intentional acts of kindness boost workplace cohesion,” he adds.

Bullying is a systemic problem

Trudi Rondou, Program Development and Services senior manager at WorkSafeBC, also spoke at the seminar, saying workplace bullying is more than simple interpersonal conflict — it’s a systemic problem that arises from a poor workplace culture. So creating and maintaining a positive workplace culture is key to preventing bullying in the first place.

How managers communicate issues in the workplace is also important. A manager discussing performance issues with a staff member may be uncomfortable, but it’s not harassment.

“Managing staff reasonably and appropriately, differences of opinion, constructive feedback — these are not issues of harassment,” says Rondou. “It is not our role at WorkSafeBC to get into workplace management, but rather we ensure that employers have policies in place and are following them,” she explains.

Keeping the lines of communication open

Karen Bowen, with ManagerKnowHow Consulting Group, agreed that healthy communication is integral to business. “Often at the heart of conflict is a lack of respectful communication,” she says. She notes that there are three components to face-to-face communication, including body language (55%), tone (38%), and words (7%). In other words, how you communicate is vastly more important than what you say.

“It is not what you say, but how you say it,” she says, offering an example of how asking a co-worker an incomplete question or a question without context or clarity can create fear and be perceived as bullying. On the other hand, good questions are a valuable tool and create cohesion and build relationships.

When communicating in the workplace, it’s important to remember that if our body language and tone convey anger or frustration, sarcasm, or distraction, it will influence how others hear what we say and how they interpret our message. A misinterpretation will muddle the message or lead to a massive misunderstanding. Misunderstandings in our workplace can then create a hostile work environment.

“We think we know each other’s intent, but we don’t. That’s why respectful communication is so important,” Bowen adds. ☺

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