

# ASPIRE

Input / Lifestyle / Personality



**Status Update Meetings. Team Building. Catcalls. Brand Management.  
Client Promotion.**

*Which of the above does not belong?*

*By Aly Payne*

**WORKPLACE BEHAVIOR IS** a hot-button issue in our nation right now, and yet the answer appears to be this simple. So, why have we watched distinguished public figures defend their reputation, apologize for a lapse in judgment, or, in the case of the entertainment industry, have years of complaints suddenly come to light? It seems that what we're struggling with is a clear definition of our boundaries in the work environment.

Not everyone views "the office" with matched esteem; in fact, in certain fields, a relaxed, peer-focused environment is revered or acknowledged as mere company culture. Sometimes, that same inclination toward what's comfortable can land us in the doghouse — or worse, Human Resources. That being said, a great initial rule of thumb is to **maintain a professional relationship with colleagues at all times during the workday.**

Maybe you work with a family member. Maybe your boss is your best friend. Regardless of rapport, it's best to wipe the slate clean and acknowledge that, during work hours, they are simply a colleague deserving of your respect. Discussing or commenting on anyone's gender, race, religion, family health history, retirement plans or appearance should be strictly off-limits. And if you still feel confident in your company culture, bear in mind that a complaint can come from anyone who witnesses your choice words or actions; even if all parties directly involved feel comfortable, you may not be in the clear with the office HR rep.

That's not to say you can no longer show kindness or offer up compliments; after all, you want a workspace to exude a certain level of comfort. You just don't want to get too cozy. So, perhaps our next nugget of wisdom would be to make sure you **keep your hands to yourself.**



That new, enviable, blunt-bob cut your colleague is sporting? Don't run your hands through it. After a stressful meeting, where presentations didn't go as planned? Refrain from going in for a consolation hug. Those words of praise from your boss don't need to be acknowledged with a grateful squeeze of their hand. For some, this may seem obvious, and you may even chuckle at the thought, but there are individuals who mean well and express positive feelings through touch. Unfortunately, you cannot assume that your colleagues share the same sentiment.

Our differences are what make us so unique, and they can often be used to our advantage. It may be a cliché, but keep this in mind as we address our last key piece of advice. When someone in your workplace doesn't "fit the mold," **it does not give you the right to make jokes at their expense.** While you may believe you're encouraging them to loosen up, they may feel personally victimized or harassed. There is a point where a joke is taken too far, and that boundary varies from person to person.

If the problem doesn't come down to your own personal conduct, but rather that of a fellow employee, the solution may take a little extra poise and grace. **Avoid gossiping** about the person or problem, and instead begin by gauging the situation's degree of severity. Are they aware you or others are uncomfortable? If not, it may be as simple as bringing it to their attention. On the other hand, they may be fully aware and choosing to ignore, or even take pleasure in, your distress. In this case, taking it to a superior or HR might be your best bet.

#### GO TO HR:

- If you're being harassed or discriminated against on the basis of sex, religion, race, disability, ethnicity, age.
- With questions regarding benefits or rights guaranteed to you by law.
- When you want to take advantage of a government protection.
- If you notice anything illegal in the workplace.

Once you've filed an official complaint with Human Resources, they are legally obligated to investigate the situation, and if your

complaint is valid they are required to act. Should you decide to file a formal complaint, ensure that it is just that-formal. In addition to verbally voicing your concern, make sure it's documented in written form or in an email which has been copied to your home email address for backup.

No one wants to gain firsthand experience of inappropriate behavior in their professional space, but avoiding the problem altogether can cause physical and psychological stress. In order to be productive, an employee needs to feel they're in a safe space, and if more time is spent worrying about looming discomfort, valuable time goes to waste and profitability can take a nosedive. Along the same lines, if employees no longer feel comfortable at work, job satisfaction takes a major hit. What does it cost to replace an unskilled or semiskilled employee? According to an AARP study from 2011, it can cost a company up to 50 percent of

the employee's first year salary. If you think that's high, keep in mind that the percentage only increases with the employee's skill level.

Perhaps the most important factor we should take into consideration is an individual's well-being. Being expected to maintain a career-driven attitude can be a crushing blow to our colleagues suffering in silence. If you're noticing decreased appetite, dramatic weight loss or depression in a coworker, this could be a sign of stress's psychological toll running its course. It's a serious issue that plagues our country on a daily basis, and the ramifications it has on physical and mental health are not to be taken lightly. Those persistent feelings of alienation, despair, bitterness and anger can contribute to increased risk of heart disease and high blood pressure.

When it comes to inappropriate work behavior, the truth is oftentimes gloomy, raw and unsympathetic, but let's look at this from a different perspective; let's examine the impact of an office environment that adheres to policy and thrives to create a place of employment fair to everyone in that shared space. In 2008 a meta-analysis covering the connection between health and leadership by Jana Kuoppala and Associates found that "good leadership was associated with a 27% reduction in sick leave and a 46% reduction in disability pensions." When you really pause to put those statistics

into perspective, it's telling how company leadership can significantly change overall productivity and employee health. But what do those leaders look like? How can you ensure you're providing employees with the necessary support?

One step in the right direction is familiarizing oneself with the federal and state employment laws regarding discrimination and harassment. Once you're equipped with the basic knowledge, you can begin to recognize signs of inappropriate behavior for a professional space, as well as proper ways to handle

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the situation. Requiring all employees to sign a written policy that prohibits this type of conduct helps to keep the issue at the forefront and can be used in any circumstance where the policy was neglected or not observed or obeyed. These are just initial steps that show employees you're on their side and that you hear their concerns. Outside of an official capacity, you can always communicate to employees that your door is open. Should they feel bothered, troubled, pressured or in any way out of sorts in the office, make it a point to let them know that you're willing to discuss how the environment and their fellow employees may be contributing to the change of heart. Simply knowing leadership won't turn their cheek is reassuring and empowering.

While current events may have you convinced that the lines are blurred regarding gender discrimination – women will no longer hide behind the arrogance of their male counterparts – if you narrow your focus, you'll be the next to slip on one of the proverbial



banana peels. Be very clear on what can and cannot be tolerated in a professional environment, because when it comes to respecting co-workers' boundaries, there's nothing blasé about it. **NDB**



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