



This section is set up to provide a ready-made Brown Bag Session for you to use with employees and/or managers. Use as is, or adapt this information for a general employee group. You may reproduce as many copies as needed.

# Listen to Aretha, it's all about R-E-S-P-E-C-T

*Editor's note: Pop music star Aretha Franklin sang about getting some R-E-S-P-E-C-T in a 1960s megahit. It turns out that respect is vital in the workplace, too.*

**By Susan Dutton**

Lately there's been a theme to what I'm hearing in my EQ work: *people aren't feeling respected in the workplace*. Respect is something we all long to receive, and the issue is a moving target, as individuals experience daily shifts in energy, stress levels, and life circumstances.

But there is a lot of truth in the old saying "familiarity breeds contempt." We often use a great deal more etiquette with a stranger than with family, friends, or co-workers.

Often when I begin to contemplate an issue like respect, I go first to the dictionary to examine the definition. There are four given for respect, and I'll look at the issue in the workplace in light of each of the following:

- To *admire* (someone or something) deeply, as a result of their abilities, qualities, or achievements.
- To have *true regard* for the feelings, wishes, rights, or traditions of (someone or something).
- To avoid *harming* or *interfering* with (someone or something).
- To *recognize* and *abide by* (a legal requirement).

The longing to be admired or recognized for achievement is fundamental to the psyche of any employee, from the most senior to the day one newbie. Misunderstandings in this arena are often related to differing expectations:

- How often do *you* expect to be praised for what you do?
- How often do *you* need encouragement to remain motivated and enthusiastic?

**Editor's note:** *Exercise – Jot down some important thoughts in the space below.*

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It's important to clearly define your own expectations in this regard because when reality doesn't live up to your expectations, that's when you experience disappointment. When you are clear about your own expectations, you can begin to consider whether it's your expectations or your reality that needs to be adjusted.

In other words, do you need to stop looking for so much validation outside of yourself, and start trying to build it from within? Or do you need a shift in your environment, such as a conversation with your [business] leaders or even a new job?

❖ **Respect needs to be earned.** Respect in this first sense must be earned with co-workers. Sometimes it's through time and performance on the job. And sometimes it's through setting better boundaries, and not allowing yourself to be taken for granted or taken advantage of.

❖ **Establishing boundaries is also important.** Boundaries are also an issue in the second definition of respect. If your feelings and wishes are being ignored, the first question to ask yourself is, "How am I allowing them to be ignored?" Are you refraining from speaking up because you dislike conflict, lack self-confidence, or believe that being a good person means allowing others to behave badly? This is a question that requires introspection. Do you need to improve your ability to assert yourself? If so, it will feel scary at first. Start with small things, and work up to bigger issues.

**Editor's note:** *Exercise – Because this question requires introspection, take some time to do just that in the space provided on the next page.*

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❖ The third and fourth definitions of respect cross into *legal territory*. You are guaranteed a workplace under the law that is safe from harassment and intimidation. If that's not the case, you have the right to not only report the issue, but to be protected from retribution under Whistleblower policy. The same is true of illegal practices.

### Is it Disrespect? Or is it Something Else?

But my experience is that most people complaining about disrespect are not encountering anything as dramatic as that. What they are [actually] experiencing is daily disappointment and irritation in the form of:

- *Interruptions;*
- *Lack of etiquette;*
- *Unreasonable performance expectations; and generally*
- *Self-absorbed behavior from colleagues.*

In those cases, the first thing to be aware of is that you teach others how they can treat you by your reaction to them. If they aren't treating you the way you wish, first try teaching them what you expect, in a kind but firm way. Then enforce those expectations with your behavior.

Here is a simple formula to use that can help set expectations.

❖ **Observation:** (E.g., I've noticed that whenever you have a question or need something you walk into my cubicle and start talking.)

❖ **Expectation:** (E.g., Respect my right not to be interrupted, and find out first whether I have time for you.)

❖ **Request:** (E.g., Please stand at the door of my cubicle and ask if I have a moment to speak with you.)

If I don't, I will offer a later time to address your question or concern. If that isn't soon enough for you, please find someone else to ask, or decide for yourself what to do.)

**Editor's note:** *Exercise – Team up with several colleagues and role play an actual workplace issue to identify several observation/expectation/request scenarios to problem solve in the space provided below.*

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### Reinforce Boundaries

Once this conversation has occurred, be prepared to reinforce your boundaries several times. You may need to put up a hand in the "stop" position when they forget, and interrupt to say this is not a good time, or tell them you have time but you noticed they didn't follow the agreement.

The human brain needs some repetition to form new neural pathways, so try not to feel offended if you have to enforce your boundaries half a dozen times before you see a shift in behavior. With consistent feedback from you, it shouldn't take too long before they adjust to your new boundaries.

This formula works in all kinds of relationships where respect is an issue. Whether it's at home, with friends, or in the workplace, respect is a boundary that needs to be enforced by *you*. Try doing so firmly but kindly as a first step in improving the quality of your relationships.

And as always, remember, SMART + CARING = SMART RELATIONSHIPS.

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## What about Stress?

Every employee gets stressed. However, stress, frustration, and negativity tend to go hand in hand and can lead to sour attitudes and other problems. The following are among three key sources of stress:

❖ **Interruptions.** As stated earlier, interruptions are far too common in today's busy workplaces. Examples



include unexpected visitors or phone calls when there's a deadline to meet, or something totally unrelated, and yet important enough to require your attention.

❖ **Inconveniences.** *People* usually cause interruptions, while inconveniences are usually the result of *things or circumstances*: the copy machine jams, your computer breaks down, or a slow motorist caused you to be 15 minutes late to work.

❖ **Irritations.** Examples of this source of stress include long delays (for whatever reason), an obnoxious client, etc.

Everyone has an occasional “bad hair day.” However, while one needn't try to resist negative feelings entirely, don't overreact or blow up either. Let the “little things” get to you, and the bigger issues are sure to cause even more stress, frustration, and negative feelings.

The key lies in putting stressful situations into their proper perspective. Is the broken fax machine *really* a big deal – or is it a minor setback? Is the crabby person in the next cubicle *that* difficult to deal with, or could how you *react to* this individual make a difference in your attitude?

## Performance Issues

There's another form of negativity that poses problems: managers who treat certain employees with kid gloves compared to their co-workers. This is a sure-fire way to breed negativity, ill feelings, *lack of respect*, or worse.

In many cases, this isn't a willful, discriminatory act. Rather, managers often allow performance issues to fester into bigger problems over time. Consider the following:

Perhaps you work with an assistant manager that is out with a “headache” every other (non-payday) Friday, or an office receptionist who gets along well with co-workers, but is sometimes surly with customers.

The point is: these people aren't terrible employees – they're just not doing what they should be doing. The manager doesn't feel there's a need to fire them – but if he/she doesn't do something, the performance issues are sure to escalate until these individuals become full-blown problem employees.

*This is a problem that many supervisors and managers face – problems that employee assistance professionals are trained to help them resolve.* These bosses are hesitant to deal with performance issues, so they send indirect messages or subtle signals, or they

simply avoid the situation, hoping it will go away. (Hint: It won't!) As a result, the business's top performers – and whose behavior is consistent with company values and who are generally *R-E-S-P-E-C-T-ful* – become increasingly resentful of co-workers who appear to be getting away with bad behavior or not doing their fair share of the work. The following are several tips to help boost the performance of substandard employees:

❖ **Don't let an employee's expertise or sales revenue translate into a “get-out-of-trouble-free card.”** Janice isn't necessarily doing a good job just because she brought in a big account, or she does a great job updating the company website. If she's rude, arrogant, *disrespectful*, or condescending with co-workers, make no mistake – she is slowly poisoning the workplace.

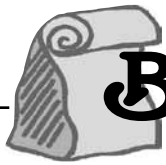
Is the money she's bringing in worth the disruption and resentment her behavior is causing among her co-workers? Probably not. The biggest challenge for managers is to take corrective action with an employee that is a top producer, but whose behavior is not consistent with company values and basic respectful behavior. However, if these standards are to have any real meaning, then *how* something gets done must be considered just as important as *what* gets done.

❖ **Don't delay. Raise performance issues while they're fresh.** Discussions needn't get ugly if the focus is on agreed-upon behaviors and performance targets. Communicate expectations in plain English to ALL employees. Workers must understand what is expected of them regardless of their title and job responsibilities.

## Summary

It can be difficult to determine what is causing disrespectful or other negative behavior in the workplace. However, rest assured that a decline in productivity and morale is probably a sign that *something* is going on. The EAP may need to dig deep to uncover the causes, but the effort will be worth it. ■

*Sources: Tom Terez, author of “22 Keys to Creating a Meaningful Workplace,” [www.betterworkplacenow.com](http://www.betterworkplacenow.com); and Jennifer Forgie, managing partner with OnPoint Consulting, <http://onpointconsultingllc.com>.*



## Learning to Love, not just Tolerate, Your Job

Some employees are constantly negative. They complain. They gossip. They're disrespectful... popping into your cubicle at all hours of the day even though they KNOW that big report is due at the end of the week. Other employees, meanwhile, are friendly, courteous and pleasant to be around. What's the difference? In many cases, it's one of attitude. You can do precious little about someone else's attitude, but you control *yours*! Stress is largely the result of how we react – or *don't react* – to something or someone. A lack of organization, setting priorities and being assertive also contributes to not liking one's job. The following are some ideas how to love, not just tolerate, your job:

❖ **Reclaim your day.** How much time would you say you spend accomplishing and completing productive projects, and how much time re-arranging stacks of paper? Make a list of projects you need to complete, and then place a ranking of importance by each task. Next, spend time focusing on finishing one task at a time. You'll like (even love) your job more when you have a feeling of accomplishment and control.

❖ **Stand up to that chatty co-worker.** Sure, you're annoyed how Jim stops by your cubicle EVERY DAY to talk about the latest game, and it's possible he is not aware how much he is interfering with your work. But do you DO anything about it? Try implementing the observation/expectation/request method explained in the main article in this month's *Brown Bagger*. You needn't be rude, but Jim MUST understand that you'd rather talk to him about the latest sports contest over lunch, not during valuable work time. As opposed

to simply stewing to another colleague about how Jim isn't letting you get anything done, you are reacting in an assertive, but positive manner to resolve the situation.

❖ **Have an honest conversation with your supervisor or manager.** It nearly always feels good to get a problem off one's chest. If Jim still doesn't listen, you have little recourse but to talk to your boss about him and get Jim to change. Or, let's say you don't feel appreciated or respected at work. Again, speak to your supervisor. Is it possible you don't fully understand the importance of your job? Once you recognize how your skills contribute to the company, you may quickly enjoy your work again.

❖ **Clean it up.** Disorganization is one of the biggest causes of dissatisfaction at work. Clutter makes you stressed. When you sit in a cluttered cubicle, you can feel defeated before you even start your day. Make it a priority to file or throw away the paper that stands between you and a more positive work experience.

❖ **Focus on the jobs you like the most and are the best at.** Delegate other tasks whenever possible. Utilize your strengths. Spend the majority of your workday doing what you love to do, and learn to delegate your weaknesses. If you work on a team, have open and honest conversations about how each of you can be most valuable to achieving overall objectives. ■

*Sources: "Workplace Diversity: Valuing Differences," by Terry Giles; and Allyson Lewis, author of "The Seven Minute Difference: Small Steps to Big Changes."*