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PRICELESS

Discovering the people who call Williamsburg home

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WORKPLACE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

By Greg Lilly, Editor

“Successful workplace relationships begin with the basics,” Nancy Wiseman, a Licensed Professional Counselor, explains. “Have some type of mission statement and a plan of where your company is going,” she advises. That is the number one requirement.

Communicating the goal, the reason why everyone shows up for work, the rationale for being in business, keeps owners and employees focused on achieving that goal.

“This leads to detailing what you’re going to do and what you will need to do it,” Nancy adds. “What is it you really want to accomplish? Do you want to grow and expand? Do you want to maintain a business? Is your focus customer service?” This communicated overall plan helps everyone in the business work together.

She explains that it's imperative that a business owner and the management staff know the answer to a few basic questions: "What do you stand for? What is your market? What type of people do you want working for you? What type of training are you going to give them? What needs to happen?" Nancy has a background in training and employee development. Consistency and structure in the workplace help oil the wheels of success.

"Consistency," she stresses. "Employees need to know what is okay and what's not in terms of operations and customer interaction. This can eliminate a lot of problems and put people at ease. This helps with teamwork and promoting good staff relations."

Growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, Nancy was a lucky child as some might say. Her father was a trainer for the Cleveland Browns professional football team during the Browns' championship years. "From the time I was three years old, we went to the football games every Sunday. Football was part of the Cleveland lifestyle."

She saw the teamwork on the field and the fundamental need to have the players working toward a goal.

Nancy received her undergraduate degree in teaching. She taught school for a few years, but found that she enjoyed "people development" and began working with companies to enhance productivity with training and employee development programs.

Nancy met her husband, Larry, who was the chair of the Biology Department at William and Mary. "When my dad realized I was moving to Virginia, he wanted to make sure I knew some sports people, not just faculty," she adds with a smile. "He was friends with Jim Copeland, who had played for the Browns (and was the Athletic Director for William and Mary at that time)." Nancy and her husband became active at the college, with its sports programs and in the Williamsburg community.

Her interest in the development of people in their personal and professional lives led Nancy to enroll and graduate from the counseling program at William and Mary. She became the director for the New Horizons Family Counseling Center and then worked as a therapist at Riverside. Eventually, she went into private practice as a psychotherapist. "I've been so fortunate for the people who have mentored me."

Building respect and trust through activities like mentoring is the second requirement for good workplace relationships. From the business owner to the managers to the employees, each part of the company can learn from the other. For that matter, Nancy says that it can extend to customers and vendors, as well. "You hire and do business with people you trust. If there is a lack of trust or respect, this shows in interpersonal communications and may cause a sore spot that grows into conflict."

A place of mutual respect is an enjoyable place to be. Customers will take notice, vendors pick up the vibe and the staff wants the company to reach its goals.

Nancy's third requirement for good workplace relationships involves diversity of people and personalities. "Hiring? Find a good mix of people who want to work," she says. "Hiring a person just because you need a body in a spot tends to create more problems than it solves. Take your time to select people who fit into the goal of the organization as well as have something to contribute."

Each person has her own strengths and weaknesses. Nancy suggests taking the time to discover those and match them to the tasks needed in the business. Assessments like the Myers Briggs Type Indicator® personality inventory help employers and employees see what types of tasks are more appealing and natural for different people. In a restaurant, the chef requires a different type of personality than the hostess or server. For a hotel, a great concierge might not make a wonderful manager. A mix of people in the right positions takes advantage of what the people like to do and tasks in which they can excel.

A mix of people can also have a downside: personality conflicts. No one wants an argument between server and bartender, or between sales associate and operations manager, or the worst possible situation – a customer and employee. When two employees clash, Nancy suggests the manager pull the employees off the floor and get them to talk it out in private. “If it’s not possible to leave the floor, they need to remember they are in a business, in public, in front of customers and need to put it on the back burner until they can talk. Employees need to be professional while in the workplace.”

When the two sides begin to communicate, understanding develops. “Sometimes, it could be caused by being stressed and under pressure,” Nancy says. “For example in restaurants, the front of the house versus the back of the house. Different personalities shine in the kitchen than the ones that are great in the dining room. The stresses are different too. Again, the overall goals are still the same – to create a great meal for the customers.”

Some of Nancy’s communication tips can help working relationships. “Use the ‘I’ message not the ‘You’ messages. Say ‘I feel...’ not ‘You did...’” Stick to the facts, she stresses. Between two people, your fact is how you feel about something, not what you think is the motivation of the other person. Express how you feel about an action.” You can say, ‘I feel insecure and ignored.’ Which will be taken better than: ‘You don’t listen to my ideas.’”

Many people forget that blaming doesn’t help. “The other person feels attacked and will usually counter-attack. When a person feels attacked, his first reaction is to defend himself or shut down.”

Stay on topic, she advises. “One person talks at a time. That really helps by sticking with the topic and not adding unrelated grievances. People will lose sight of the original purpose.” Just as in family communications, business conflict resolutions need to stay focused and not dig up past disputes to add to the fire.

“Go back to the original mission of the work/business. What is the mission?” Nancy asks. “Conflicts can be settled easier when that number one requirement of good workplace relationships stays the focus. Is this relevant to the goal of the company? What’s in the best interest of the business?”

Like a professional football team driving toward the goal line, the people who make up a business work together best as a team with a clear purpose.

“A happy workplace is a productive workplace,” Nancy Wiseman says. “Keeping the business goal in the minds of the owner and employees sets a framework to guide decisions and help settle conflicts.” NDN