Considering Deviant Behaviour in the Workplace

Not all deviance is created equal and not all of it is bad. Although we generally associate 'deviance' with anti-social behaviour deviance there can actually be positive and useful deviance when it becomes 'pro-social' behaviour. Discouraging negative deviance and encouraging positive deviance can be an effective way to manage employee behaviours in the workplace.

Just what is deviance really? We are generally more familiar with negative deviance because it is something that we actively try to discourage, it is unpleasant and, in the workplace, an issue we often have to address. However, deviance can simply be defined as a departure from the social norm or an absence of conformity to social norms. For many people any deviance can make them uncomfortable but if we understand the benefits of some deviance we can use that deviance to our advantage.

Encouraging positive deviance can be important not only as an opportunity to bring different behaviours to a situation but as a way to counter or reduce negative deviance.

Deviant Behaviours in the Workplace

Negative Deviance: Two realms of negative deviant behaviours in the workplace are Organizational – Interpersonal and they range from minor to serious. Examples of the behaviours include:

Organizational Deviance includes

- **Performance Deviance** – leaving early, taking excessive breaks, wasting time and resources, making avoidable errors, working to slowly
- **Property or Equipment deviance** – Damaging or sabotaging equipment, taking bribes or kickbacks, falsifying records such as hours or invoices, stealing, misuse of equipment/work place property

Interpersonal Deviance includes

- **Civil Deviance** – Gossiping, playing favourites, blaming others, competing in a destructive way (stealing a co-workers work, clients), lack of cooperation, taking credit for others work,
- **Personal Deviance** – Harassment and bullying, verbal aggression, stealing from co-workers, including stealing from co-workers, creating an unsafe workplace

Positive Deviance: Positive deviance involves honourable, ethical and voluntary departures from social norms that can be insubstantial or substantial. Primary types of pro-social deviance in the workplace are:

- **Whistle blowing activities** — although some people consider whistle blowing as disloyal in fact it can be a useful way of addressing unethical or illegal activities in the workplace that are hidden or ignored
- **Organizational Citizenship** — stepping outside ones job to make contributions to the positive functioning in the workplace
- **Social responsibility** — departing from business norms to play a role in contributing to the community
- **Creativity and innovation** — departing from role or team norms to bringing new ideas to the organization

These positive deviant behaviours can sometimes have negative consequences as those who engage in 'Pro-social' behaviours may be judged as troublemakers, causing extra work, setting to high a standard, bucking the system and more. Failure to recognize the value and encourage pro-social behaviours can result in employees being less likely to take positive risks that can ultimately contribute to success of the organization.

Steps for Encouraging Pro-Social Behaviours

Both positive and negative workplace behaviours are tied to more than individual personal factors. A employee acting negatively in the workplace including serious behaviours such as theft and harassment may be influenced by the workplace itself. Toxic workplaces, lack of trust, lack of resources, and lack of support can contribute to anti-social behaviours. One of the biggest contributors to negative anti-social behaviours in the workplace is a lack of moral leadership from supervisors or management, in particular from the top leaders of the organization. In other words negative deviance begets more negative deviance. Similarly, however, the right atmosphere in the workplace can contribute to pro-social behaviours that can, in turn, benefit the organization culturally and financially.

Key words to consider when trying creating positive pro-social behaviours include:

Empowerment — Risk Taking — Openness — Example Setting

Among the key elements of encouraging pro-social behaviours is for employees to feel empowered to act. To feel empowered to act employees should be encouraged to participate in information gathering, contribute to decision-making and feel safe to take well considered risks.

Positive pro-social behaviour does require risk taking to step outside the social norms of the organization. However, if an atmosphere of trust is created and where employees are empowered with information they may be more likely to engage in both insubstantial and substantial pro-social risk taking. Small iterative steps of insubstantial pro-social behaviours can open the door for more substantial pro-social behaviours. When employees observe their leaders engaged in pro-social behaviours on any level this can encourage them to also engage in pro-social behaviours.

Anti-social behaviours are more likely to occur in larger organizations with more resources and some research has reported that anti-social workplace behaviour is more common among younger, less educated employees including males for a variety of reasons. Within the organization it may be beneficial to make additional efforts to

mentor and educate these new and younger employees on behavioural expectations and identify role models who can demonstrate for them pro-social workplace behaviours

Small, seemingly inconsequential behaviours that fall outside the norm can have an impact both positively and negatively on the organization. Tolerating small amounts of anti-social behaviour such as tardiness can lead to more significant anti-social behaviours. Similarly small, pro-social behaviours can set the stage for more risk taking to step outside the norms in positive ways. As an organization keeping an eye out for both small and big deviance can help you manage negative deviance and promote positive deviance can be beneficial. Research has found that organizations that encourage positive deviance have benefited both culturally and financially as a result of more employees becoming innovative and inspirational to others. Look for opportunities to model and encourage pro-social behaviours in your organization each day and see if this deviance can impact your bottom line tomorrow.

Article

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