

How to prevent your office from becoming 'The Office'

Until recently, I had gotten out of the habit of watching any particular television program regularly. After catching some of the nightly news programs, if I watched any more TV at all, my usual routine was to watch several shows at once—a habit that drives my wife batty. I'd flick on the Discovery Channel, PBS, CNN or the History Channel and turn to another once a commercial came on, until my fingers tired or I wearied of the search for something to watch.

Recently, however, I've gotten into the habit of watching one particular program, after catching an episode of "The Office," a sitcom that airs Thursday nights on NBC.

For those of you unfamiliar with the program, now in its sixth season, it is set in the offices of Dunder Mifflin Inc. in Scranton, Pa. The Scranton branch of this fictional paper company is a collection of exceptionally quirky characters. They are led by branch manager Michael, who can be counted on in every episode to say or do something so odd or embarrassing that it is at the same time hysterical and painful to watch. He is the embodiment of the idiot boss. And with the exception of a few underlings who play the straight men on the show, Michael's staff is his equal in bizarre behavior.

One reason I think this show featuring a truly chaotic and dysfunctional workplace has had a relatively long lifespan is that it is a reflection, albeit an exaggerated one, of what we've all experienced at work. The behaviors exhibited by the Dunder Mifflin employees are different only in magnitude rather than in kind from what we have seen from time to time at work.

We have all had the dimwitted boss, the colleague with incurable foot-in-mouth disease, the office gossip who does nothing all day but gather and spread rumors, the griper who is never satisfied with anything or anyone, the slacker who avoids work at all costs and the clock watcher who never puts in a microsecond more time than is absolutely required, regardless of what needs to get done. Those of us who have worked in corporations for a



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while have also been repeatedly exposed to well-meaning but meaningless corporate mottos or value statements that seem to change every few years, and to poorly conceived and executed "team-building" exercises.

Speaking of team-building exercises gone wrong, a friend of mine told me that at a management retreat she had to hold her body rigid so her teammates could pick her up like a log and pass her over a barrier to people on the other side. Yikes!

The writers for "The Office" have obviously been there too, and they put on a show every Thursday that seems designed to help us laugh at ourselves to keep from crying. But before we laugh too hard at this hyperbolic reflection of our own professional lives, it's probably worthwhile to take a moment and reflect on how our behavior affects those around us.

No matter how thoughtful and conscientious we might be, we all have our moments and occasionally say the wrong things, get to work late, hurt others' feelings, forget to attend meetings or just plain screw up. So the business ethics question for each of us is this: Given all our flaws, what can we do to minimize the chances of our office being as dysfunctional as "The Office"? Here are some ideas you might consider:

■ Don't be an idiot boss. This may seem obvious, but the business world is so full of self-absorbed or abusive or inconsiderate managers that it must be said. To ensure that you're not one of them, master your craft, model exemplary behavior and, most importantly, think first about what you can do to improve the professional lives of your team before you think of yourself. People don't want to follow leaders who are in it only for themselves.

■ Put in a full day's work for a full day's pay. Think for a moment about how many people around you do just what is required to keep their jobs, rather than what they are really capable of. To avoid office dysfunction, make sure that at least you are not one of them.

■ Don't hire or tolerate jerks who abuse their colleagues or, worse yet, abuse people with lesser power or rank. You really have to pay attention to this. Even one jerk can destroy a team and cost your company dearly. It doesn't matter if "they always make their numbers." If you've got a real jerk on your staff, get rid of that person before your best people leave and flock to your competition.

■ Exercise fairness and compassion. It's important to hold people accountable for their actions, but cut them a little slack when they're trying hard to get it right. Nothing is more stifling than working in a "zero defects" environment. Set high performance standards, but also recognize that we all learn by making mistakes.

■ Look for opportunities to praise others for a job well done. A colleague once told me that if the ratio of positive to negative remarks falls below 5 to 1, employees begin to feel insecure, abused or both. Just take a moment to think about the last time you received a critical remark from your boss and the impact it had on your professional self-confidence, then reconsider how you interact with those who report to you.

This is hardly an exhaustive list of ways to avoid dysfunction and create and sustain a productive company culture. But hopefully it provides some food for thought about how to create an office that others will admire rather than laugh at.

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