

Avoiding Drama

by **Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

I participated in an interesting discussion in an online class on teamwork recently. The students were lamenting that drama in the workplace is common and very disruptive to good teamwork. While drama is just part of the human condition, I am sure you have experienced unwanted drama and wished there were ways to reduce it.

First, one precaution; There are various different kinds of drama and many different symptoms and sources. In this article, I am discussing the most common kind of drama in the workplace. This is where a person acts out his or her daily frustrations in ways that create chaos and loss of focus that hurt the productivity, effectiveness, and teamwork of the group. I am not addressing the serious drama caused by mental illness or tragic events.

Let's take a look at the seeds of this problem to identify some mitigating strategies. Drama is a result of people who feel they are not being heard. If an individual believes his or her opinions are valued and considered in the decision process, then there is less need for drama. If the culture is real, and people are not playing games with each other, then the distractions of drama will be significantly reduced.

It is a function of leaders to establish a culture where people see little need for drama in order to be a vital part of the real action. Here are some tips that leaders can use to reduce drama in their organization:

1. **Improve the level of trust.** High trust groups respect people, so there is a feeling of inclusiveness that does not require high profile actions to get attention.

2. **Anticipate needs.** Be proactive at sensing when people need to be heard and provide the opportunity before they become frustrated.
3. **Respect outliers.** When someone's view is contrary to the majority, there may be valid points to consider. Do not ignore the valuable insights of all people.
4. **Hear people out and consider their input seriously.** Positive body language is essential to show respect for all people.
5. **Work on your own humility.** Climbing down off your pedestal means that you are more willing to be on an equal footing with others.
6. **Admit mistakes.** You gain respect when you are honest about the blunders that you make. People will feel less like acting out in response to your foibles if they see you willing to be vulnerable.
7. **Reinforce people well.** Providing sincere praise is one way to show respect. This reduces people's tendency to say "Hey don't forget about me over here."

We must also realize that some people are world class at creating drama. For these people it is a kind of sport. They do it to gain inappropriate attention or just to be disruptive. These people need coaching to let them know their antics are not really helping drive the goals of the organization. The leader needs to provide feedback about the issue and set the expectation of improvement. If the drama continues and is disruptive, then the person may be better off in some other organization doing a different function.

Drama is all around us on a daily basis, but good leadership can mitigate the negative impact and keep bad habits from becoming an organizational albatross.



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