

The impact of Attitude

On a blistering Sunday in July, my wife and I drove to Cincinnati to watch one of our grandchildren playing in a baseball tournament for 9-10 year olds. Even though the game was played late in the day – 4:00 PM – everyone in the stands sat under umbrellas to ward off sunstroke. On top of physical discomfort, the game did not go well. While our team scored two runs in the top of the first inning, the other team came back to score three in the second and kept piling runs on to a final 11-3 victory over our Anderson Township Little League All Stars. It would be a breathtaking understatement to say: the home team was discouraged. Most of the other team's runs came because of errant throws, dropped balls, bases left unguarded and pitches that even someone 6 foot 9 couldn't reach. It was a total meltdown on what was to be the final game of the season.

The discouragement on the field was palpable. One of the pitchers (there were several) pleaded with the coach (his father) to take him out of the game. The father stood his ground – as most in the stands thought he should – and insisted the boy work his way through to the end of the inning. When play was finished and the other team took the field, a dugout drama ensued. The young man threw his hat and glove, complaining loudly about the poor play of teammates and in general creating when the human resources people would refer to as a “hostile work environment.” This was not an isolated instance. The young man had been difficult to deal with all season long. When play resumed the young man refused to come out of the dugout despite the commands of other coaches and the entreaties of his father. He remained sulking in the dugout till the game was over.

What followed on the field during those remaining, agonizing innings was not surprising. The dramatics spread to other players as more and more of them acted out with deep sighs, whinny complaints and tears. In turn, this led to acceleration of the bobbled groundballs, missed tags and generally dismal play.

When we see the impact of one individual's bad attitude or actions played out with a bunch of 9-year olds, it's pretty easy to make glib judgments about young man's upbringing and fantasize what life is going to be like down the road when he becomes an adolescent or someone's college roommate. But this kind of drama is played out every day in offices and on factory floors, in hospital operating rooms and executive suites because someone didn't get his or her way. The person with the "bad attitude" is poisonous in any work setting. Their cynicism and smirky-attitude makes it difficult for others to get work done. Honest dialogue collapses and co-workers retreat into minding their own business. Teamwork ceases, energy ebbs and productivity plummets. Bad attitudes are the silent killers that stalk many a workplace and make commitment difficult to sustain

Writing in London's Guardian Weekly several years ago, a columnist for the Observer, David Mitchell, did an extended piece on the use of all those offensive words that get people fired if uttered in a public forum. He gleefully (repeatedly) included most of those offensive words in his article. His point was that "attitudes, not words, are the real offense." I couldn't agree more. If people aren't happy where they're working, find a way to set them free. Perhaps they can flourish in another setting. But even if they can't, do yourself a favor. Don't let them rain on your parade.

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