Problem Solving at Your Coop Placement

Conflict in the workplace can be one of the hardest things to deal with. Controlling your anger can be difficult to hide. If you release it, the results will be destructive. If it stays buried inside you, it will also be destructive. How you handle problems and criticism at your placement determines your level of professionalism. Will you react gracefully and maturely after thinking things through or will you react prematurely? Resolving disagreements in the workplace is about sitting down and talking instead of standing up and confronting. The following are some workplace issues that coop students should be aware of and understand.

Constructive Criticism

When criticism is presented in a manner that can help you improve and grow, it is called constructive criticism. A reasonable and mature employee accepts this type of criticism in attempts to learn more. Constructive criticism can come up in casual conversation throughout the day or as part of a performance review. Unfortunately, some students perceive constructive criticism as negative and a personal attack.

A typical strategy in delivering constructive criticism is to offer positive comments with the suggestion for improvement. An employee is more likely to accept the criticism knowing the supervisor shows regards for the feelings of others. Not all supervisors are tactful though and you may need to remind yourself as to how the advice will help you grow as an employee. It is easier to handle criticism knowing it is potentially helpful.

What Makes Criticism Constructive?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Constructive Criticism | Less Constructive Criticism |
| Addresses behaviour | Addresses attitude |
| Is specific | Is general |
| Is offered immediately | Is not offered immediately |
| Makes some mention of positive points | Focuses exclusively on negative points |
| Offers specific actions to solve the problem(s) | Offers no solution to the problem(s) |
| Is often given in private | Is often announced in public |

Students who put up an emotional guard against criticism become defensive. A defensive person does not listen well or grow as an individual. The following four steps can help you respond effectively to criticism:

1. Listen to criticism.
2. Make sure you clearly understand the criticism/problem.
3. Identify a solution to the problem.
4. Take action to resolve the problem

Handling Gossip

People enjoy talking about others and people tend to like hearing about other people’s business. This type of idle talk which consists mostly of rumours is called gossip. The problem with gossip is it spreads information that is often untrue and often hurtful to individuals. In the end, gossip generally hurts the gossiper the most. Coworkers will confide less with a gossiper knowing they are someone who cannot be trusted.

Workplace gossip creates the following costs to a business:

* Lower morale
* Lack of trust
* Increased anxiety among workers
* Lasting damage to feelings, reputations and relationships
* Individuals who gossip are viewed as unprofessional, thus jeopardizing chances for advancement
* Good employees leave due to an unhealthy work atmosphere
* Lost productivity
* Damage to organization’s reputation
* Possible legal issues

You are best not to participate in gossip. If conversation flows toward something you feel is a rumor, redirect the discussion. If this doesn’t work, let the person or group know directly that you will not participate in this type of conversation and excuse yourself from the conversation. This sends a message to a gossiper that what they are doing is not acceptable. You will feel good at possibly taking away the audience and possibly preventing harm.

**Nobody’s Friend**

My name is Gossip.
 I have no respect for justice.
 I maim without killing.
 I break hearts and ruin lives.
 I am cunning and malicious and gather strength with age.
 The more I am quoted the more I am believed.
 My victims are helpless. They cannot protect themselves against me because I have no name and no face.
 To track me down is impossible. The harder you try, the more elusive I become.
 I am nobody’s friend.
 Once I tarnish a reputation, it is never the same.
 I topple governments and wreck marriages.
 I ruin careers and cause sleepless nights, heartaches and indigestion. I make innocent people cry in their pillows.
 Even my name hisses. I am called Gossip.
 I make headlines and headaches.
 Before you repeat a story, ask yourself:
    Is it true?
    Is it harmless?
    Is it necessary?
    If it isn’t, don’t repeat it.

~ Author Unknown

Controlling Anger

Frustration at a coop placement or any job is expected. As you work towards developing new skills at your coop placement, things will not always go well. You must avoid letting frustration turn to anger. Anger is an emotion that leads you to act before you think.

The following are tips for handling anger and frustrations at your coop placement.

* Count to ten. It gives you time to calm down and not saying something you may regret later.
* Consider what you are really angry about.
* Channel your energy into problem solving.

A professional approach in your workplace is easily obtained by working with these positive work attitudes:

* Accept challenges as opportunities.
* Learn to analyze a situation from all angles, even if those viewpoints differ from your own.
* Always show respect and consideration for others, even if you disagree.
* Take responsibility for your actions.
* Do not take on more responsibility than you can handle if you cannot get the job done properly.
* Avoid negative talk about work, both in and out of the workplace. A focus should be on positive attitudes as they are contagious.

Resolving Problems

A five step problem solving model should be used to manage difficult situations at work.

Step #1 Define the problem

* What is the problem and what do you know about the problem.

Step # 2 Decide on possible solutions

* Think of some possible ideas for solving the problem.
* You could seek advice from a parent, coop teacher or a friend.
* Determine if you can handle the problem or if it needs to be reported to higher authorities. Bullying, harassment or discrimination should be documented and reported to someone in authority.

Step # 3 Evaluate the solutions

* Narrow your options by weighing the advantages and disadvantages.

Step # 4 Make a decision and take action

* You will need to have a conversation with the other person and that will require the use of “I” statements. “I” statements describe your feelings and show ownership. This gives the other person less room to feel attacked.

Step # 5 Reflect on the outcome

* Ask yourself if your decision worked the way you expected it to. Should you try another approach? Were the other people involved satisfied with the solution?

Confidentiality

All workplaces have information about employees, customers and clients that should be kept confidential. Employees and customers in all workplaces expect that their personal information will remain protected. As students in the workplace, you may have access to files, documents, client/patient information and telephone conversations. These various items are private property and confidential. It is important that you do not let anyone know about private information you come across. This information is only shared at the workplace where appropriate. Companies are required to protect personal information of employees. The *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* is legislation that supports an individual’s right to privacy. Many companies have their employees sign privacy agreements. As a coop student, you will be expected to have your confidentiality agreement signed and submitted before starting at your placement. Breaching confidentially may result in removal from the placement, thereby placing credits in jeopardy.