



How personal interactions and emotions impact the workplace

By Mia Katz

"The quality of relationships in individuals' lives impacts their physical health even more than other factors such as diet, exercise, weight or smoking/non-smoking."

– **Kim Rosenberg, M.S., aCHT, certified imago therapist and licensed psychologist in Lancaster, Pa.**

You woke to the sights and sounds of a pink cat coughing out your favorite pearl strand while your children play "Extreme Pet Makeover" with a box of dye and their father's cologne.

It's 7:00 a.m. Do you know where your sanity is?

Most of us have experienced an occasional bad morning. But how much can negative experiences, and the emotions they trigger, affect our everyday workdays and work lives?

My Car Just Broke Down and Now I Don't Trust You

In one study reported at Knowledge@Wharton, the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania's online business journal ("Looking to Make a Sale or Get Promoted? Emotions Will Help Determine the Outcome," July 2005), emotions that resulted from prior positive or negative thoughts or encounters (such as getting a speeding ticket on the way to work) can positively or adversely influence how we later judge or trust someone in an unrelated business or social situation. Participants who were asked to ponder happy events were more trusting than participants who were asked to ponder a gloomy topic. Least trusting were those participants who were asked to write about an incident that made them angry. Despite our best beliefs about our own rationality in decision making, the study reminds us of the influence

of irrelevant events and emotion in the formulation of judgment. The good news: The study found those aware of the trigger for their emotions were less likely to misattribute them.

Paying the High Price of Stress

It is perhaps when the weight of our cache of negative experiences causes an imbalance emotionally or physically when we may actually risk endangering not only our livelihoods, but our lives. According to "Work and Family Stress and Well-Being: An Examination of Person-Environment Fit in the Work and Family Domains," (Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes Vol. 77, No. 2, February, 1999) we can pay for our stress at the highest of costs: The price of our health. The report estimates the cost of stress to contribute to as much as 90 percent of medical disorders.

In fact, it may come as little surprise that significant stress from our personal lives can seriously impact the workplace.

"I recently read a fascinating quote (from www.terryreal.com) that claimed the fallout of family stress costs companies approximately 168 hours of productivity per year totaling approximately \$300 billion a year nationally," says Women at Work Express Network member **Kim Rosenberg, M.S., aCHT**. Kim, who is a certified imago therapist and licensed psychologist in Lancaster, Pa., says

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Kim Rosenberg

that when working with clients who are business owners, managers and supervisors, she finds it essential that they are aware of how their business life impacts their personal life, and vice-versa.

“We know that the quality of relationships in individuals’ lives impacts their physical health even more than other factors such as diet, exercise, weight or smoking/non-smoking,” she explains. Kim says that it is the wise business owner/manager who is aware of the impact of his/her private life on her business life, as well as that of her employees.

“Attention to employees’ needs for adequate time and flexibility to meet personal and family needs and for resources like outpatient counseling and therapy pays off in the end – it affects the bottom line. We are, after all, whole beings and can’t cut off parts of ourselves – not without harmful consequences.

“Ways to improve mood that I suggest to clients are meditation, meditation, meditation,” Kim continues. “I recommend staying healthy by exercising and maintaining good nutritional habits. And I recommend focusing on the present moment. We too often tend to ruminate on what is not happening right now.”

But whatever serious matters might be impacting an employee, questions remain as to just how involved corporations should be in addressing



Leslie A. Cintron

these issues and what employees should or should not reveal about such matters on the job.*

For some new perspectives on the answers to such questions, a random sampling of ABWA members were asked for their thoughts on how to address emotions in the workplace.

Emotions at Work

“I’ve noticed that when our employees fail to follow protocol, complete a job fully or have negative attitudes toward co-workers or clients, it is because their personal life is out of order,” says Tu’Ya Chapter member **Leslie A. Cintron**, Director of Corporate Operations for the National Security Group LLC in Oklahoma City, Okla. Leslie says that under such circumstances, when she asks some of her employees about their home lives, “They immediately respond by saying they did not get any sleep the night before or they are having issues with their children’s other parent (if they are separated, etc.)” Leslie adds that, conversely, she has also noticed that when her office staff appear happier and outspoken, it is usually the result of them having peace at home.

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agree that employers and colleagues should step in and take action.

“All workers should be attuned to when behavior or action is out of the ordinary,” says Express to Success Express Network member **Cynthia Borcena**, a graphic designer/owner for See 360 Studios (www.see360studios.com) in Pleasant Hill, Calif. “Changes in behavior may suggest a problem. Unless it is a work-related issue, a company leader does not need to know what it is. However, any problem that affects the work and the workplace must be addressed.”

Leslie advises that managers and supervisors examine a situation when the employee’s performance directly affects business operations. “Then it is the manager’s responsibility to assess (in a non-threatening way) the employee and their behavior to hopefully provide a possible suggestion to change work atmosphere to a productive environment,” she says. Leslie adds that she has shared personal experiences with her own previous supervisors. “In my opinion, it’s important to gain the support from a co-worker or supervisor because they are a big part of our lives and can influence our lives in a big way,” she says.

Greater Rochester Express Network member **Chelsee Ferik** agrees with Leslie that it is essential to maintain open communication in the workplace. Chelsee, who is an office management/



Chelsee Ferik

manager for Rockwood Retaining Walls, Inc. in Rochester, Minn., says she can speak from experience that company leaders should be aware of the personal issues that may affect their employees.

“It is no secret that I have battled alcohol and drug addiction and through pure love and support I have been sober for nearly two years,” she continues. “My alcoholism took its lowest point while I was trying to manage a career at Rockwood Retaining Walls (and) it was no surprise to the managers and owners of the company.”

In fact, Chelsee credits the company’s leaders for turning her life around and giving her the opportunity for a viable and healthy future. “I thank them for noticing my struggles and seeing the potential underneath and encouraging me to get sober and stay sober,” she says. “Now, two years later here I am sober, confident, dedicated to my work and personal well-being – all thanks to people taking notice and the support of my co-workers, employer, family, friends and myself.”

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* What Employers Shouldn't Discuss

There may be situations when discussing certain personal issues with employees becomes relevant and/or necessary. During the job interview process, however, asking applicants personal questions may be considered "off limits" to employers either because doing so would be a poor business practice – or it may even be unlawful.

"There are laws that govern what an employer should or should not ask applicants during a selection process," explains Michele Ballard Miller, an employment law attorney and founder of the Miller Law Group, a woman-owned law firm in the San Francisco Bay Area. Michele, who has also been an adjunct professor at the University of San Francisco School of Law, has more than two decades experience in employment law. "Depending upon your jurisdiction, certain questions might be prohibited, whereas others should be avoided because they are not job-related."

Among the topics to avoid because they are not business-relevant:

- **Gender:** Any question that might reveal gender.
- **Name:** A question about a "maiden" name.
- **Marital Status:** Any question regarding current or previous marital status or plans to marry, including spouse's name or occupation.
- **Age:** Age, including date of high school graduation or birth date.
- **Race:** Inquiries into race.
- **National Origin:** Birthplace, nationality or ancestry, applicant's native language.
- **Religion:** Religious beliefs, holidays, etc.
- **Disability:** Anything that might lead to information regarding health, such as previous illnesses, or sick leave used (prior to an offer of employment, you may not ask disability questions or require medical exams - even if they are related to the job.)
- **Criminal History:** Whether charged or arrested.
- **Medical:** Previous illnesses or prior workers' compensation claims.

This should not be construed as legal advice or a legal opinion on any specific facts or situations.