

The Problem with a “Culture of Niceness”

December 1, 2015

by Beverly Flaxington

Beverly Flaxington is a practice management consultant. She answers questions from advisors facing human resource issues. To submit yours, email us [here](#).

Advisor Perspectives welcomes guest contributions. The views presented here do not necessarily represent those of Advisor Perspectives.



Dear Bev,

We all get along in our advisory firm, and that's the problem. There are issues that go unresolved because no one wants to rock the boat. People don't raise their concerns because our firm leader is the consummate "nice guy." He has only good things to say about people. I respect the approach, but sometimes I want to stand in the middle of the office and yell something just to make waves and get a response. I know that sounds childish, but keeping a lid on everything doesn't work for me. How do I bring issues up without being the bad guy?

Kip T.

Dear Kip,

Organizations can suffer from a condition I refer to as the “Culture of Niceness;” that’s where, on the surface, everyone gets along and seems happy to work together, but there are simmering issues that cannot be addressed because everyone is too nice! Being nice shouldn’t be perceived as a problem per se, but it is when people cannot speak their minds or address issues that concern them.

I often write about behavioral style and the implications of different styles. This is a classic example of behavior playing out and defining culture. Some people are strong on the people-oriented scale (in DISC speak we call this the “I” factor, the influencing scale). Those who are strong on that scale like to be liked, and they like harmony in their relationships. Their emotional state tends to be positive, so they will more often see the glass all the way full, not even just half full. They might think half full is a negative state.

The problem is that when you have a culture of these likability types, it becomes very hard to say anything that might be considered unkind. People who value harmony will see even constructive criticism as being too harsh.

If you are a person who enjoys getting things out in the open, dealing with issues and then moving on, you might find yourself alienated in this type of culture. You have to bite your tongue all of the time so as not to be considered, as you aptly put it, the “bad guy.”

Quite frankly, you are not going to change the culture and they will resist your approach to air things out and have people open up. So, what can you do? Try and propose a team meeting to your leader where you define success for the upcoming year for the team and for the firm. Then, discuss possible “obstacles to success” that might occur along the way. I’ve found that the word “obstacles” gives those overly nice people permission to open up. Obstacles can be overcome, so it’s not an entirely negative view and everyone has to admit that there are obstacles to success in all situations. If the leader knows there are simmering issues (and he/she most likely does realize but doesn’t want to open the proverbial can of worms), this approach might work and give an opening to raise some things in a positive setting and work on them together.

My last piece of advice to you is to make sure you are focusing on stress relief. Be it meditation in the morning before your day starts, going to the gym at lunch or riding your bicycle once you get home, you want to manage your own emotional reaction. It wouldn’t be a great career move to start yelling in the hallways, so do focus on releasing that tension in another, more productive way.

Dear Bev,

If you could give one piece of advice to new advisors so that they could be really successful, what would it be?

Erik K.

Dear Erik,

There could be a new book buried in your question – Keys to Success for Financial Advisors. However, since I don't have room to write a book, and assuming you have the required educational background and important credentials, I will focus on some of the executive presence issues that are important.

The single most important piece of advice would be to hone your communication skills. I call it Presenting with Confidence. It means knowing your audience, understanding why you are presenting whatever you are presenting, having a clear process and context for the information and being able to read your audience to adapt and enhance your message.

As a college professor, I know that being clear in communication – whether written or verbal – is a skill that takes continued focus and development. Your clients will trust you, prospects will want to work with you and colleagues will want to collaborate with you if you can clearly articulate what's most important.

There are many things you can do: business writing courses, presentation or public speaking courses, Toastmasters and other options. Find venues to work on these skills outside of your workplace so that you can receive objective and specific feedback on how to improve.

Beverly Flaxington co-founded The Collaborative, a consulting firm devoted to business building for the financial services industry in 1995. In 2008, she co-founded Advisors Trusted Advisor to offer dedicated practice management resources to advisors, planners and wealth managers. She is currently an adjunct professor at Suffolk University teaching undergraduate students Leadership & Social Responsibility. Beverly is a Certified Professional Behavioral Analyst (CPBA) and Certified Professional Values Analyst (CPVA).

=

She has spent over 25 years in the investment industry and has been featured in Selling Power Magazine and quoted in hundreds of media outlets, including the Wall Street Journal, MSNBC.com, Investment News and Solutions Magazine for the FPA. She speaks frequently at investment industry conferences and is a speaker for the CFA Institute.