
COMMENTARY - INTERPERSONAL BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS.

WE NEED TO TALK!

By Luigino Bruni

Published in *Avvenire* on June 16, 2013



Employed workers suffer from general anxiety due to the high rates of unemployment. In Southern Europe employees are increasingly unsatisfied (Ipsos, TNS-sofres). 68% of French workers state that the quality of their working life decreased between 2008 to 2012; among those who are 35 to 49 years old, 75% express their discontent. Middle-aged workers, usually half way through their career, suffer from chronic dissatisfaction.

The motivations to work vary through time. During the first years of a new career people are excited and enthusiastic. After twenty years in the same office of an organization, the enthusiasm dies out. Without new and more compelling motivations, workers become weary and cynical. The above mentioned survey indicates that average public sector employees are the least enthusiastic about their work.

Workplaces are filled with discontent middle age workers. Much of the research done in this area reveals a U-shaped graph correlating happiness and age. The point of minimum happiness hits around 45 years of age. From this age, workers' happiness increases if they have good health and social relationships.

Labor regulations have ignored the different stages of human life. The 20 year old Mary was a different worker from the one she is now in her 60's. Businesses don't follow people's natural aging process. Thus, when one has "journeyed half of our life's way" [Dante], one is trapped in both a professional and private mid-life crisis - labor is life.

Enterprises don't invest enough in relationships. In private or state-owned companies, workers are often regarded as selfish and untrustworthy, and bosses believe they have to control and reward employees to make them productive. This environment produces unhappiness - when will countries take quality of working life indicators seriously? Therefore, workers seek happiness outside their workplaces, spending heaps of money on wellness centers and spas. Is this a wise and sustainable solution? Wouldn't it be wiser to develop healthy relationships within workplaces and thereby increase workers' well-being?

It is not by chance that religious orders have built the longest lasting institutions in the Western world - an average Benedictine abbey is 5 centuries old. Their old age and smooth operations flow from good governance. Business decision-makers should implement a few of their regulations; religious orders' rules contain management teachings that are people-centered and universal.

For example, the members of a religious order periodically meet with their superior in private. This practice promotes healthy relationships within the community. Regrettably, employees of numerous enterprises reach retirement having never talked privately to their bosses. In those few enterprises and cooperatives where such private meetings take place, they are few and irregular.

Today, more than ever, private talks between supervisors and workers - and not only the widespread practice of coaching - are vital. Regular private meetings (twice a year for example) would benefit workers and organizations in many ways.

Employees and bosses should be able to privately express their complaints, hardships, misunderstandings and woes. Taking this action can help avoid gossip, rumors and grudge that end up having a destructive impact on corporate life. Since biblical

times people have spread rumors, not only gossipmongers and defamers. However, protests, critics and complaints can be constructive if institutions use such information wisely. In the same way, gratitude is essential in every community and most effective when properly expressed.

Saying “thank you!”, “good job!” or even “sorry” to an employee in the corridors or on the phone isn't enough. These words are precious ones that should not be used lightly..

Furthermore, one-on-one talks promote brotherhood rather than hierarchy; they increase philia among workers - those who partake in these conversations both listen and speak, give and receive. Executives will raise their game if they accept critiques from their subordinates and commit themselves to changing. Their biggest mistake in personal meetings is avoiding complaints by cutting off the employees (“you miss the point...”, “you don't see the full picture...”, “let me explain...”).

In private conversations one should not have to justify oneself, but listen and welcome criticism and hardships - we are so undeveloped in the art of listening!

A supervisor should listen, register and process critiques and not criticize in return. The employee has the right to complain, and the manager the duty to listen. Companies need to provide proper places and a schedule for private meetings. Workers and managers should also undertake ethical training to better take part in these. It isn't easy to hold one-on-one meetings; businesses should work hard on this and learn from prior mistakes - if they do, the fruits will be abundant.

Employees' first and last private talks with their bosses are very important. Welcome interviews should include a presentation on the enterprise's traditions, history, goals and mission. Newly hired workers will have a chance to share their aspirations, passions and introduce themselves to the working community; everyone should celebrate their arrival. The farewell meeting is equally important. Many times it concludes the best period of someone's life. It is a life changing event. One may say “thank you” or “sorry” and make this critical encounter spiritually fulfilling and meaningful. Therefore, let us seek inspiration from the religious charisms; their teachings can increase the quality of relationships within our organizations. We are in dire need of better relationships in our businesses!

Translated by Cristian Sebok