RESPECT WORKS™

RESPECT WORKS PLAYBOOK

SECTION ONE: WHAT IS A RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE?

WHAT IS A RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

A respectful workplace is one in which all employees feel safe, valued, and are treated with dignity. Respectful workplaces are characterized by psychological safety, civility and professionalism, a welcoming work environment, and fairness for all. In a respectful workplace, inappropriate communication, rude behavior, discrimination, harassment, and bullying are not tolerated and policies and procedures for reporting incidences of disrespectful and harmful behaviors are enforced and well understood by all employees.

Respectful workplace culture has repeatedly been shown to improve employee engagement, behavior, and overall well-being[1,2]. When employees work in a toxic culture, they experience higher rates of stress, depression, and various other adverse physical and psychological outcomes[3,4]. These issues also translate into organizational challenges, including lower economic viability, higher rates of turnover, lower retention, and lost revenue due to inefficiency[5,6]. Understanding the elements of positive workplace culture and how to effectively implement strategies for maintaining respect in the workplace has benefits for both employees and employers[7,8,9].

These issues are particularly salient for the construction industry. Construction workers experience some of the highest rates of psychological stress, substance abuse, and suicide[10], while workplace bullying is a prevalent feature of construction culture[11]. These conditions are not only detrimental to worker health and well-being but should concern any construction company seeking to recruit and retain employees, strengthen market position, and improve productivity and profitability[12]. Hiring and retention are persistent challenges in the industry, with 88% of construction firms reporting difficulty[13]. Ensuring a positive and inclusive workplace environment is one of the most effective and cost-efficient ways to reduce turnover and improve recruitment and retention[14,15]. In fact, toxic company culture has been shown to be ten times more likely to predict turnover than compensation levels[16,17], and turnover resulting from toxic work culture costs US employers an estimated $50 billion annually[18].

RESPECTFUL WORKPLACES ARE SAFE WORKPLACES

Building respectful workplace culture in the construction industry serves not only to attract and retain workers: it can also advance workplace safety by reducing accidents and injuries and improving work quality[19,20]. High turnover in the construction industry can lead to dangerous mistakes due to a lack of familiarity with safety protocols, strain on existing teams, and disruption of the culture. This can result in injuries, legal risks, and increased insurance premiums[21].

Occupational safety and health professionals increasingly recognize that the organizational and interpersonal aspects of work can be just as hazardous as the physical environment. When workers are exposed to "psycho-social" hazards on the jobsite due to poor management or inappropriate behavior by supervisors or co-workers, they can easily become frustrated, distracted or distraught. As a result, they are less able to concentrate and more likely to make mistakes, inadvertently putting themselves and their team members at risk[22]. Respectful workplace practices address these behavioral issues that contribute to high turnover, helping to create a safer and more productive workplace for all.

CORE ELEMENTS OF A RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE

Workplace culture is dynamic and multifaceted, involving many interrelated elements that contribute to whether it is inclusive and empowering or toxic and exclusionary. Research shows that organizations across different sectors with respectful workplace cultures exhibit three key qualities: (1) trust between people, (2) an environment free from harassment, discrimination, and racism, and (3) an active prioritization of inclusion[23]. Our research has found that an inclusive work environment often also involves fairness, justice, and courteous interpersonal interactions. Based on these findings, we have built our framework around four Core Elements of a Respectful Workplace that align with these positive workplace characteristics: Psychological Safety, Civility and Professionalism, Welcoming Workplace, and Fairness for All. This framework has been tailored to fit the specific needs and characteristics of the construction industry, addressing both organizational culture and jobsite culture to reduce psychological harms. Let's start with some general definitions of the Four Core Elements:

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety is fundamental to a respectful workplace, and research has shown it to be integral to team success. It refers to the shared belief that the workplace is safe for interpersonal risk-taking[24]. Psychological safety means individuals feel comfortable being themselves, expressing concerns, admitting mistakes, making suggestions for improvement, and engaging in difficult conversations without fear of retaliation or negative consequences to their image, status, or career[25]. This sense of safety is shaped and reinforced by organizational culture, policies, and leadership practices.

When a work environment is psychologically safe, workers are much more likely to engage fully, offer up their best ideas, and give their all[26]. Accordingly, psychological safety is a key component of high functioning teams. Research shows that psychologically safe work environments foster continuous learning and employee engagement; on average, they exhibit more innovation and higher quality workmanship than fear-based work environments. Without psychological safety, construction workers may not speak up about safety hazards, inefficient processes, or troubling behavior for fear of retaliation or punishment[27,28,29,30]. Unattended, these issues can result in serious financial and reputational damage for employers[31].

CIVILITY & PROFESSIONALISM

Civility refers to respectful, courteous behavior characterized by politeness, regard for others, and adherence to workplace norms of respect[32,33]. It involves treating colleagues with dignity, actively listening, demonstrating empathy, and engaging in constructive communication[34]. Civility also includes the ability to express disagreement or navigate conflict, showing a sincere willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue and seek common ground[35]. Workplace civility has been shown to have positive outcomes on both job satisfaction and organizational outcomes[36].
The inverse of civility is incivility. Incivility can spiral throughout the workplace quickly and escalate from rude comments, to yelling or cursing at someone, to a violent outburst. This is especially true in high stress work environments such as construction that often fail to recognize the importance of civility[37]. Unaddressed, incivility is a risk factor for more severe forms of mistreatment.

Professionalism refers to a set of standards an individual is expected to adhere to in the workplace[38]. It typically encompasses conduct such as reliability and accountability, competence in one's job skills, integrity and ethics, communication and conflict management skills, attitudes and behaviors in the workplace, and situational awareness[39].

WELCOMING WORKPLACE

A welcoming workplace is an environment in which individuals from diverse backgrounds feel respected, valued, and empowered to contribute fully[40]. Inclusive workplaces have been shown to be positively correlated with employee health and mental well-being[41,42] and have positive impacts on organizational productivity[43]. It is both a relational and organizational construct, characterized by mutual respect, strong social connections, openness to learning, and collaborative decision-making[44]. Welcoming workplaces recognize and integrate diversity, support individual and collective efforts, and ensure that everyone has the voice, space, and resources to thrive and contribute meaningfully.

Today's workplace includes four different generations ranging from Baby Boomers to Gen Z, each with different life experiences, perspectives, and values. Workplaces today are vastly more diverse than they were in the past: in addition to generational diversity, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, education, and politics all come into play at the jobsite. A welcoming workplace makes sure everyone feels included regardless of where they are from and how they vary from one another.

Leaders in a welcoming workplace foster belonging by creating an environment that allows everyone to contribute meaningfully, which is an important step to creating psychological safety and physical well-being.

FAIRNESS FOR ALL

Fairness for all refers to employees' perceptions of how opportunities, resources, outcomes, and treatment are distributed in the workplace[45]. It involves the employer recognizing and valuing employees based on their skills and contributions, ensuring that processes are fair, transparent, and inclusive, and that individuals are treated with honesty and respect in both decisions and interactions[46]. Workplace fairness has also been found to be a crucial dimension in boosting performance and organizational citizenship behaviors in the workplace, and building an inclusive, welcoming workplace[47,48,4950].

Employees want fairness at work. They want an equal opportunity to contribute and grow[51]. Policies and procedures rooted in fairness, which are uniformly and consistently applied, allow employees to know what is expected and what is tolerated[52]. Employees who are treated fairly have higher trust in their employer and supervisors.[53] Lack of fairness is demotivating for workers and a key factor in turnover[54]. Lack of fairness may also be considered unethical depending on the circumstances and violate the psychological contract.

Fairness doesn't always mean treating everyone the same, however. Employees have different abilities, skills, and needs. An employer committed to fairness and equity will ensure that all employees have what they need to perform their best. For example, women on construction jobsites need personal protective equipment that fits their frames. This PPE will be different from what most men need. In this case, treating groups fairly means offering them different PPE.

RESPECT IN THE WORKPLACE IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS

Fostering a workplace culture that is psychologically safe, civil, professional, welcoming, and fair is vital for attracting and retaining workers in the construction industry. It also makes good business sense. A large and growing body of research in occupational safety and health demonstrates the relationship between respect in the workplace and improved performance. Respectful workplaces improve productivity, performance, and engagement. By contrast, workplaces with toxic culture characterized by lack of respect, exclusion, harassment and discrimination, and unethical behavior experience higher turnover, lower productivity and greater safety risks.

Turnover and Retention

- One-in-five workers have left a job because of toxic culture (SHRM, 2019)
- Feeling disrespected at work has the largest impact on how employees rate organizational culture of all workplace attributes (Sull, et. al., 2022)
- Employee turnover as a result of toxic work culture costs US employers an estimated $50 billion a year (SHRM, 2019)
- Turnover due to workplace culture over the past five years has cost companies $223 Billion (SHRM, 2019)
- Toxic company culture is 10 times more likely to predict turnover than compensation levels (Sull, et al., 2022)

Productivity and Safety

- Associated General Contractors estimates that construction companies lose on average $137,000 annually due to loss in productivity because of exclusive workplace behavior (AGC, 2026)
- Employees lose an average of 17.2 hours of paid time per incident of exclusionary behavior (Clayton, 2018)
- Nearly half of employees who experience incivility at work decrease their effort and time spent at work (Porath and Pearson, 2013)
- 65% of workers who experienced exclusionary behavior said they would leave or consider leaving if they found another job (Clayton, 2018)
- Employees who experience unjust workplaces are 35-55% more likely to suffer from a major disease, resulting in time away from work (Goh and Pfeffer, 2016)
- Inclusive teams with open communication and high levels of engagement experience 22% fewer safety incidents compared to less engaged teams. (Gallup.com, 2023)

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