

Working alone preferred by many employees: Survey

Are collaboration, teamwork always the best approaches?

BY LIZ BERNIER

THERE are all kinds of woes that come up when employees work together in tight quarters, under tight deadlines. At the same time, HR espouses the value of teamwork and collaboration.

But what if employees don't want to play nice?

A majority of employees — 80 per cent — would prefer to work alone because of unhelpful, negative or hostile work environments, according to a North American survey of 2,000 people.

Yet, personality issues or hostility in the work environment often flies under the radar, according to Neale Harrison, CEO of Talent Matters in Toronto.

“Where you've got organizations pulling together various human capital with different capabilities, sometimes there's not enough attention paid to: What are the personality types, the personal dynamics that one needs to be cognizant of as you build teams? Because that does come into play,” he said.

“Some leaders may not be as sensitive to the human dynamic. We are all emotional beings and we look at

life different ways and we bring our experiences and our baggage sometimes into these experiences. And effective leaders and effective organizations pay attention to this and take some proactive steps.”

Collaboration and teamwork are critical because organizations do their best work when people collaborate and work as a team, said Janet Salopek, partner and senior consultant at Salopek & Associates in Calgary.

“The more diverse an organization is, the better work they do.”

In hostile work environments, collaboration is stifled.

“Basically, it comes down to trust.

In order to have good collaboration and good teamwork, you've got to have a great foundation of trust. And when you've got a hostile work environment, you have no trust. It completely destroys it,” said Salopek.

“When you've got a hostile work environment, you've got fear. So people won't come together, people won't want to come together, people will be afraid to open up and be honest — they'll be afraid to ask questions. And all of those things are

really, really important when you collaborate.”

A hostile work environment is also going to stifle creativity because employees are not going to be forthcoming, she said.

People also lose sight of their individual goals and mandates, said Harrison — and that can have huge impacts on the organization as a whole.

“If organizations allow or ignore dysfunction or fiefdom building... it really affects not only the efficiency, the motivation and engagement of teams but, ultimately, it drives a lack of profitability,” he said.

“People's energy and focus tends to be on building fiefdoms, on who's winning, who's losing, building camps and allies versus ‘What's the task at hand? What are we all supposed to be focusing on and rallying behind?’ So it's shifting energy and effort to something that's counterproductive.”

Diffusing tension

Managers and leaders can help minimize friction by building teams that are compatible, said Harrison, adding there are plenty of psychometric

assessment tools designed to do just that.

“Some organizations look to these types of tools to help them look at the composite of a team, or as they have put together a team with different capabilities, different experience, different expertise, that those dynamics, those preferences are made transparent to the team so that sometimes you can head off any potentially emotional exchanges — or at least, people have an appreciation for those (differences) as they step into decision-making, as they step into interactive environments,” he said.

Leaders might also hold educational sessions around team dynamics or team profiles so employees can develop knowledge and awareness, said Harrison.

“And with that knowledge, hopefully people have an appreciation for that and embrace diversity versus having no transparency and thinking, ‘I just don't like Fred’ or ‘Jane doesn't like me,’ when it could be nothing more than a lack of understanding,” he said.

“Once there's an awareness that

people process and interact differently — and it may be different from my approach — that can diffuse, or at least bring sensitivity, to that dynamic.”

But there’s another challenge at play, which is determine when the conflict crosses the line.

Personality conflict or outright bullying?

It can be difficult — especially for managers who have remote teams or don’t work closely with employees — is determining whether a conflict is a personality clash or actual bullying.

“Personality differences are ‘We agree to disagree’ versus ‘Now I am trying to impose my approach, my feelings, on others,’” said Harrison.

“Where I personally think it

crosses the line is: How are those interactions happening? Are there outbursts? Are individuals’ credibility being challenged? Are there issues of respect?”

There are certain behaviours to watch for that will allow you to differentiate, said Salopek, such as passive aggressive leadership, narcissism — when people talk a lot about themselves and don’t give credit to their team — destructive gossip and office politics.

The biggest issue is when there’s no recognition of the harassment or bullying, said Glen Grant, senior consultant and principal at HRfx Consulting in Langley, B.C.

“People just get up and leave. So you’ve got that turnover issue that exists — there’s no discussion, there’s no reason (given), and someone

comes in and replaces that person, and likely the harassment or hostile workplace just continues,” he said.

“The other aspect would be the person who is being harassed may feel obviously threatened and uncomfortable, so their performance is not going to be very (effective) when you’re trying to get the team to work together and perform — absenteeism, low performance, avoiding others, avoiding their harasser, that sort of thing.

“If you’ve got a culture that is actually a respectful culture, then you’re not going to have this harassing behaviour. So I think that allowing harassment issues in the workplace can often be a reflection of the culture.”

As long as there’s no bullying involved, it is possible for conflicting

ideas and personalities to benefit the organization — and not become a liability, said Harrison.

“If others are empowered by the environment to challenge — respectfully — inappropriate behaviour and call it out, there’s a lot (of positives) for a team dynamic and organizational culture,” he said.

“There’s a safe forum for truly sharing and encouraging people to share their opinions — because people are paid for their knowledge. People are paid for their experience. And the organization is supposedly deriving benefit from that experience and knowledge and expertise... and if you shut that down or you have individuals who shut that down because they’re trying to manage their own mandate, the organization won’t win.”