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When you think about the word peace, what immediately comes to mind? Do you instantly think about world peace? Do you think of international relations and conflict resolution between nations? I'm guessing that for most people, the word peace primarily evokes thoughts around some aspect or other to do with global peace. What about peace as applied to you? What about how your personal peace is impacted at work? Everyone has at one time or another in their work life come across individuals or groups of people that they experience as difficult, unpleasant, or challenging to deal with. We can all relate to the experience of having our peace disrupted at work from interactions with certain individuals.

Sometimes we can roll with it and not let the situation get to us; at other times, perhaps not so much. And some are better than others at coping with distresses in the workplace. When we experience triggers that push our buttons at work, we may start to feel angry, resentful, fearful, demoralized, like a victim, etc. The situation may also impact our physical health. Perhaps to relieve our tension we find ourselves talking about a particular person/situation at practically every coffee and lunch break; and even after the workday has ended, we may find ourselves obsessing about who said what, who did what, playing it back repeatedly to ourselves and any willing audience. Been there, done that? That is your personal peace being disrupted at work. It's difficult isn't it to keep our balance when someone says or does something at work that offends us or that we think is unfair or uncalled for. In the face of work situations/people that ruffle our feathers, we don't consistently respond in an ideal way. Instead, we may find ourselves silently being wounded, stewing about it, or speaking out by reacting with a retort or putdown (however veiled), and then there's the practice of passive-aggressive behaviour as a way to feel some degree of control over our workday experience. Even when we tell ourselves not to let something/someone get to us, upset us, or put us in a bad mood for the rest of the day, for some reason, we often meet with limited success with our good intentions. Why is that?

Two factors are at play that keep us falling into the trap of reacting in ways that are unhelpful to our peace: ego and habit. The ego sees part of its job as protecting and defending against perceived threats such as feeling attacked, slighted, hurt pride, etc. Ever vigilant on the lookout for offenses directed its way, ego reacts instinctively, out of habit with one form or another of defence. The "I", the "Self", the thinking and feeling you is the ego. Ego is what gives us conscious awareness of ourselves and the world that is external to us.

The ego has a positive and negative side. When functioning in a positive way, ego gives us the ability to be self-aware, to grow and evolve, to aspire to achieve goals, to turn ideas into action, to be creative, to protect ourselves from danger and so forth. When we have an exaggerated sense of self-importance and a feeling of superiority to other people or when we feel inferior to others, that's when negative ego behaviours come into play. How it works is

that we let our sense of self-importance or insecurities become the lens through which we interpret everything said or done to us. From a place of our own self-importance or insecurity we tend to be quick to take offense, to take issue with whatever is said or done in our presence; we tend to interpret what others say and do as an intentional arrow or attack aimed at us. Consequently, we respond defensively or aggressively. Hence, we bring about conflict in our interactions with each other because we are reacting from our negative ego.

Conflict can for many of us develop into an addiction as we become more and more hooked on the struggle to gain power, to be right, to win, to assert ourselves and our individuality. When we don't win the argument or whatever it is we are seeking to gain the upper hand on, our ego feels defeated or diminished. And so goes the cycle of the negative or unhealthy ego from either feeling like the victor or the victim. We need to learn to count to ten so to speak before we react in order to consider that the manner in which another person interacts with us is more likely than not about who they are than it is a personal attack or a slight targeted specifically at us. Then can we stop the cycle of negative ego responses that create disharmony for ourselves and others.

Taming the classic internal voice of negative ego and re-educating it to make more neutral and fact-based observations on what people say and do begins with a reminder to the self that, "everything is not always about you"! In other words, a person's life experiences, upbringing, cultural background, and life skills are among the various dimensions that impact how we interact. When the manifestations of negative ego behaviours in the workplace are tamed then there is room for a positive environment to flourish.

Essentially, a positive work environment is one that amply demonstrates daily an organization's core values which generally revolve around respect, honesty, professionalism, and so forth. Some of the typical negative ego habits that need to be unlearned include: pride as a trigger of how one responds and deals with colleagues/subordinates, defensiveness, wanting to show-off one's skills/knowledge by belittling another, dealing with veiled put-downs and not so veiled put-downs by responding in-kind, fear of asking for help, seeking to exert power and control over others through tactics such as withholding information, inability to delegate in the belief that the job simply won't get done as well by another or that one would become dispensable.

Recognizing that you and those you work with are to varying degrees susceptible to the negative side of ego is the first step towards trying out a new response and different behaviour. Stepping back from an unpleasant exchange, a healthy way of handling it would be to ask yourself, "how can I contribute to shifting this exchange into a more positive one?" And so begins the process of breaking the cycle of the negative ego-response, which is all too familiar, and which has not been working. If it worked, there wouldn't be disharmony in the workplace which contributes to performance gaps within organizations.

Peace in action in the workplace is visible when managers, supervisors and an organization's leaders practice these steps on a daily basis: first, they make the utmost effort to not appear to have favorites; second, they help to model how an individual should conduct themselves in communicating with others and brokering resolution to differences; third, they don't turn a blind eye to situations were an individual or group is being ganged up on, discriminated against or bullied; fourth, they maintain objectivity in dealing with employees, finding out the facts of a situation before jumping to conclusions; fifth, they are way-showers by sharing their knowledge in order to inspire and motivate. In a word, when those in a position of authority remember that they are there to be helpers on a daily basis – coaching and mentoring and leading by example – then peace can find space in the workplace.

Currently there are many resources available that promote performance excellence in the workplace such as: skills-training for leaders, managers/supervisors, courses on emotional intelligence, effective communication, and the like. Drawing and building on these resources individuals and organizations can supplement them with the following types of actions that reinforce peace in the workplace:

- Self-study by reading about ego behaviour and more constructive responses.

- Seeking training on how to listen and respond to others without reacting impetuously from a place of one's personal triggers – i.e. responding without aggression, quick temperedness, or other non-peaceful ways to resolving issues/differences.

- Pursuing on-going annual professional development on ways to maintain/upgrade skills that support the practice of peace in the workplace.

- Beginning the workday by reaffirming your intention to conduct yourself in a way that contributes to peace in the workplace. One way to encourage this practice is to have a daily affirmation that you repeat to yourself at the start of the workday or that you bring to mind when in the midst of a stressful situation. For example, you might repeat to yourself something like, "I will listen and respond objectively", "I will seek clarification in each situation before I respond", "I will focus on communicating the behaviour I expect from others rather than lashing out", or "I will not get hooked into other people's negative behaviour".

- Practicing meditation with the intention to interact positively with others. Even if five or ten minutes of a lunch or coffee break are devoted to such a focussed meditation it will, over time re-educate the ego! For those seeking information on meditation but don't know where to start, begin by checking out the information available under the "Resources" tab of this website. You could also make a trip to a library or bookstore where you will find many books available on the topic. Another good place to get information on meditation is the internet where there are websites on the subject including videos that teach how to meditate. As well, if you are so inclined, search for a workshop on meditation in your community.

- Organizations can include in their annual employee performance evaluations feedback on how well the employee contributes to peace/a positive environment in the workplace.

- Organizations can identify a list of "elders" who demonstrate the desired behaviour and are willing to serve on a rotational basis as go-to mentors for guidance to employees who seek them out as an objective impartial ear to advise on how to handle a given situation. (By serving on a rotational basis for a defined period, the idea is to motivate others to conduct themselves in such a way that they may be selected to be a mentor in future.)

Conflict will continue for as long as we insist on taking other people's behaviour personally. Conflict will endure for as long as our ego chooses to feel that our sense of self-worth is at stake when the ideas, proposals, or recommendations we put forth are not adopted. Once we become self-aware of this reality, we can begin to consciously address the grip that negative ego often has on us through the practice of the multiple approaches suggested above.

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