



LIBBY WAGNER
Professional Leadership Results, Inc.

Helping you align your people with your vision



“R-E-S-P-E-C-T... find out what it means to me!”

— 6 Ways to Impact the Respect-Factor at Work

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

Certainly, Aretha Franklin’s song is one of the most recognized in American pop culture. You can hardly resist singing along, no matter who you are. And, like the song, most people will tell you that they value respect, deserve respect, and hold respect as one of their top 5 most important values. Most organizations will list respect as one of their core values or principles, whether it’s used as a verb—as in “we respect diversity; we respect our customers”—or whether it’s used as a noun—as in “respect, honor, courage.”

Respect in the workplace is a key component of meeting organizational goals—typically related to customer service, retention, profits, productivity, innovation, morale, creativity, etc. I haven’t met anyone yet who’s suggested that working in a respect-free workplace is on their list of priorities for choosing a job. Everybody, I mean everybody, wants respect. And this isn’t just about being nice or wearing some politically correct t-shirt—we know that when a work environment has evidence of high levels of respect (along with the rest of the Four Core Dimensions—empathy, specificity and genuineness), chances are good that the environment will support high levels of productivity, trust and morale—all the good stuff we want our organizations to embody for success.

Isn’t respect something you have to earn? Shouldn’t you have to do something, exhibit consistent behaviors over time, in order to gain my respect? Isn’t respect something I choose to give you if I deem you worthy of it?

For the past 6 years, I have had the opportunity to work with hundreds of professionals in law enforcement and corrections. These folks have challenging jobs, not only because they often get to work with people no one else wants to work with, but also they often suffer from bad press and challenging public images. When they do an excellent job, for the most part, no one notices. They don’t show up in the news or headlines because they are fulfilling their missions—to protect and serve or to create safer communities—and so, we don’t hear about them—not nearly so exciting to talk about great cops, effective prison officers or life-changing community corrections professionals. And often, we don’t want to hear about them anyway because their tasks and jobs are often unpleasant, or at least related to unpleasantness. I have met so many inspiring people who take public servant on as an important commitment to citizens and communities—and most do this with a sense of honor and often a quirky sense of humor. (This probably has something to do with comic relief—sometimes I really have to reign in those stories!)

In my leadership development consulting, I work with business professionals to align their people—teams, companies, units or boards—with their visions. We work on creating strong relationships and strong foundations for influencing, and part of this very important work is not only the study of respect, but the practice of behaviors associated with giving high levels of respect. Setting aside the stereotypes of car chase cop shows and Shawshank Redemption, one of the things I really appreciate about these folks is that they know exactly the impact that demonstrating respect can have not only on a working environment but also on the ability to bring about change. When I stress to them that you can, in fact, demonstrate respect to someone you don’t like, someone whose behavior you find disturbing or even abhorrent, they get it. I never have to convince them of this as I often do in other types of organizations. They are asked to behave respectfully and professionally in very difficult situations, and for the most part, they do this, day after day, night after night. They also understand for them it’s not only about creating a better working environment, it is also about safety—it may be the

difference between a situation resolved calmly and one that escalates to people getting hurt and everyone showing up on the evening news.

Do you have difficult people at work? People you might not like or never imagine inviting out for lunch? Chances are you do. And perhaps you might find these relationships difficult, stressful and ineffective in your work life. Do you have to respect them in order to demonstrate respectful behaviors? No, you don't. You can choose to demonstrate respect as a part of your commitment to high levels of integrity.

What happens when someone demonstrates high levels of respect?

- 1. They don't talk down to you.** They are willing to listen, to confirm what they've heard and to demonstrate understanding. They may not agree with you, but they acknowledge that you are entitled to your opinion and thoughts about a situation.
- 2. They demonstrate sincere listening behaviors and positive non-verbals.** Generally, we believe that when someone respects us, they are willing to look us in the eye, shake hands, smile and listen attentively. They don't roll their eyes, sigh with exasperation or just simply wait for us to stop talking so that they can interrupt or interject.
- 3. They are willing to be honest with us.** There's a difference between respectful honesty and disrespectful honesty. You can be candid and specific without being rude or uncompassionate.

4. They don't withhold information. They are willing to provide enough specifics, enough detail, so that you feel some assurance that they are setting you up for success. Even if you cannot share confidential or personal information, you can be honest about what you can ethically share and what you cannot.

5. They demonstrate appropriate humility. They admit when they've made a mistake and they are willing to own their part in the remedy. They set high standards for themselves and others but they also realize that mistakes are part of learning and growth—their own and others.

6. They ask you for your opinion or input. They demonstrate sincere solicitation of information that might have an impact on a situation or decision. This doesn't mean that they can always do exactly what you want, but they are willing to consider all parts and angles that might be important.

Consistent demonstration of respectful behaviors can have a significant impact on everything related to the workplace—efficiency, safety, productivity, speed, and trust. In fact, when the opposite occurs—a lack of respect in the workplace—there are many expensive costs: turnover, loss of clients or customers, inefficient work practices, ineffective bureaucracies, toxic people and environments. If you have some difficult relationships at work, take a look at the respect-factor—are you demonstrating the highest levels you can that line up with your own values? Is someone not consistently demonstrating respect to you? Often, the way we get respect is to give respect. Ultimately, we are powerless over people because they always have the ability to choose how to respond, but consider the potential benefits of impacting your work life by increasing the respect-factor. Make R-E-S-P-E-C-T more than just a song or something etched on your organization's mission. ❖

RESPECT

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