

# Why feeling respected at a workplace matters

---

 [bloncampus.thehindubusinessline.com/people-at-work/why-feeling-respected-at-a-workplace-matters/article65997721.ece](https://bloncampus.thehindubusinessline.com/people-at-work/why-feeling-respected-at-a-workplace-matters/article65997721.ece)

October 12, 2022



A demonstration of disrespect and disdain from a position of authority can have a negative impact | Photo Credit: [Getty Images](#)

## **When a leader is attentive, demonstrates empathy, and cultivates a collegial atmosphere, it constitutes for ‘respect’**

---

Let us close this interview, just a waste of time.” My colleague, sitting a yard away from me, sent me this WhatsApp message within 10 minutes of our conversation with a prospective candidate whom we were interviewing for a role in our university. This was a few months ago. But I have heard this many times from different people over the past 40 years of my professional career.

My reply has always been the same. We will talk to the person for the entire scheduled time. It is the minimum courtesy that must be extended to anyone we have invited. The sad thing is that, in some organisations, this ability to ruthlessly decide within a few minutes that a person is unsuitable, is considered a sign of decisiveness; a virtue that shows we manage our time effectively. But at what cost?

A demonstration of disrespect and disdain from a position of authority? And yet the same organisations in their much-circulated “values that we cherish” will speak of respect for every individual as a cardinal virtue without realising that professing and practice are becoming poles apart.

## **Price of incivility**

---

If one attempted to describe in a few phrases how ‘respect’ should be practised in a work environment, these would be — being polite and attentive to everyone; behaving with courtesy and collegiality; demonstrating care and empathy, thereby being considerate of other people’s circumstances and feelings.

Correcting the kind of violation that occurred in the job interview is perhaps easier — realise the errors of our ways and ensure that arrogance or hubris are not demonstrated or tolerated. However, the greater challenge lies in the many confusing layers of what constitutes respect and disrespect. What may appear in this maze as essential practises of respect or as transgressions, may not actually be so.

As a result, many gentle, and collegial-minded people interpret the descriptors in a manner that prevents them from conveying what must be conveyed because of self-imposed shackles of 'oh, I cannot do that because it would be disrespectful'. While such people are present across all kinds of organisations, from experience, I can see these more in the social sector and academic circles. In such institutions, being a supervisor of people is seen as holding an unfair authority while being a mentor seems more democratic.

In this confused lexicon, mentoring is seen as enabling while supervising is seen as crossing the boundaries of respect. This binary view of an essential organisation structure, prevents one from seeing the role of 'supervisor' as one that can enable team members to do their best, learn, grow, and fulfil their potential.

Let me explain this with an example from the ever-problematic area of the annual performance appraisal discussions. In their confusion of what 'respect and disrespect' means, these supervisors, mistakenly provide feedback in a vague and unclear manner. But in doing so, by not stating clearly where things have not gone well or where effort or attitude has been below agreed expectations, the supervisor is in effect, disrespecting the colleague.

For if he/she were truly respectful, they would point out frankly which aspect of the work has not gone well, provide evidence for such an assessment and assure the colleague of support to improve and do better. By providing candid feedback, we also demonstrate respect for our colleague's ability to accept such inputs and suggestions. Being kind and gentle, polite, and collegial, are essential but inadequate.

## **Honesty, a form of respect**

---

Meeting the other person in the eye, levelling with the colleague, and conveying honestly are what completes the picture. If that colleague has expectations of promotion and that is not going to happen, how does the supervisor respectfully communicate that (a) this will take time or (b) the performance is not yet of a kind to merit such a move?

Answering such expectations, and conveying bad news gently but without evasiveness is a sign of respect for that individual.

All the above is easy to say, extremely difficult to do. Even the aspects that I had initially called out as simple, may turn out to be equally difficult. Cast your mind's eye over a day in the quotidian life of your organisation. Does one reply to the boss' email within a few minutes while letting some other mails go unanswered for longer? Does one respond differently to 'an emergency' depending on who raised it? If you see silos form in the organisation and turf staked out by departments, why are they doing so?

In a multi-disciplinary institution, where members pursue research and writing in different domains, how many of us even bother to browse through what another colleague has written? Where does self-absorption in one's own work cross the boundary to an

indifference to a colleague's work and research interests? Why is a good process developed by one department, not easily welcomed by another? The humbling realisation is that only with all our consciousness can we properly navigate this path of respect.

If all this seems esoteric, it might be useful to simply run our minds over our personal relationships — within the immediate family, our relatives, friends, and community. When it is so difficult to practice or observe this value even among our intimate groups, how difficult would it be in organisations? But perhaps counter-intuitively, it may be the professional environments of a workplace that enable such values to be articulated and lay out clear expectations for their adherence by every member.

*(The writer is with Azim Premji Foundation.)*