



Beware of the invisible agreement

IN 2009, I wrote an article for BizTimes Milwaukee about “invisible agreements.” Thirteen years later, I have decided to expand on this conversation and invite a greater awareness about “invisible agreements” in the workplace.

WHAT IS AN INVISIBLE AGREEMENT?

An invisible agreement occurs when a behavior is repeated three or more times without conversation or negotiation. Consider something as seemingly insignificant as where employees sit in the lunchroom. If two or three employees sit at the same table for three to four days in a row, others will avoid that table and may even say, “Oh, that’s John and Andy’s lunch table.”

Another example, which I shared in the 2009 article, is a scenario that is more common than not. Tom, a manager in an architectural firm, decides to arrive at the office a half an hour before the agreed upon official start of the workday. He arrives early to enjoy a cup of coffee, reflect on the previous day and prepare for the day ahead. Tom’s boss gets wind of his early presence in the office and calls to make a request. Tom responds. This behavior is repeated with other leaders who make requests of Tom during his intended preparation time. Tom complies.

Both Tom and these leaders have now created an invisible agreement: Tom will arrive early and he will respond to the leader requests prior to the official start of the day.

On the surface, this may not seem like a big deal. Some would suggest that this dynamic does not appear to create a negative impact in the workplace. Yet, if Tom needs time to settle in to do his best work, there are negative implications. Further, over time, Tom is likely to become resentful that his time is not being respected by his leaders, which will certainly impact the climate in the workplace.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES OF INVISIBLE AGREEMENTS

- » Arriving late and/or unprepared for a meeting.
- » Blaming others for mistakes.
- » Candid feedback is not encouraged or supported.
- » Conducting personal business at work is tolerated.
- » Gender or racial bias is accepted in the workplace.

HOW TO ADDRESS DESTRUCTIVE INVISIBLE AGREEMENTS

Invisible agreements in the workplace can be changed through courageous conversation and leadership clarity. The process includes:

1. Identifying the invisible agreement.
2. Providing the case for its cost to the business (for example, low morale, reduced trust, etc.).
3. Communicating what the expectation is instead.
4. Providing the business case for the expected change.
5. Determining consequences if the change is not made.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND MUTUAL AGREEMENT

Whether a leader is expecting a change to an invisible agreement or any expected behavior change, we have learned that it is helpful for the leader to ask the employee this question:

“In the event that you are not meeting the expectation, how would you like me to hold you accountable?” Inviting that question engages the employee in yet another level of responsibility and accountability.

POSITIVE INVISIBLE AGREEMENTS

There are invisible agreements that evolve over time and are working. The agreement is not destructive to the people or the business and perhaps even support a healthy culture.

Here are some examples:

- » A college president sends handwritten notes, expressing gratitude.
- » A partner in a CPA firm consistently offers support to employees and clients who experience illness or loss.
- » The president of an NFL team answers his own telephone.

WHAT ARE THE INVISIBLE AGREEMENTS WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION?

- » Are they positive or destructive invisible agreements?
- » What preparation do you need to address the invisible agreements that no longer support the best in your organization?
- » Who are the people you need to invite into the conversation?
- » What do you want as an outcome?
- » What will accountability look like?

We have many opportunities and a responsibility to reflect on how we do business. Identifying invisible agreements will help to identify what supports the best in our work, or not. Enjoy the exploration. ■



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