

■ Restoring Equality in the Workplace

by Tom Terez

No one wants to feel like a second-class citizen. Yet many workplaces have cultures and systems that do just that – they create a sense of inequality among employees. This is one big reason why communication and teamwork never take hold, and why some people check their hearts and minds at the door when they arrive for work.

What can be done to start turning things around?

1. The words people use can reveal a lot about their workplace. Conduct a language check for insights into how inequality has infiltrated the organization. Among the words to listen for: boss, oversee, “lower levels,” and “my people.”
2. Start editing those words. Try “with me” instead of “for me,” “facilitate” and “coach” instead of “supervise.” Consider using this new language in the policy manual, employee handbook, orientation guides, and any other printed items.
3. Titles can be a simmering source of inequality, especially when they’re flexed in the name of authority and control. If the organization hands you a big title, you don’t have to use it. Consider coming up with something more down to earth and descriptive of what you really do.
4. Scrap the old meeting model in which the boss sits at the head of the table and efficiently goes through the agenda. Put the chairs in a circle, have participants take turns facilitating, and open the conversation. If you’re in no position to make this

happen, exert influence by offering to help create the agenda, take notes, or facilitate.

5. End the unfair, unequal distributions of resources. This can involve stopping certain privileges (special parking) as well as opening restricted tools and resources to everyone (e-mail and data).

6. As a long-term replacement for hierarchy, organize around projects. In the short term, even in the midst of a heavily layered workplace, look for a project opportunity and get it started. If it calls for people from different functions and areas of the organization, all the better.

7. If your organization’s compensation system widens the divide between people, and you’re in a position to do something about it, start the renewal process by obsessively learning better approaches. Call in some outside experts, involve employees, and get clear what you want the new system to achieve.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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