Disclosures that can wreck office relations

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Employees decrease relationship quality with those of superior status upon hearing negative information. PHOTO | FOTOSEARCH

Wafula trudged into the office one morning over an hour late and tried to sneak over to his desk. Over the previous 24 hours, he had not slept. His uncle tragically got hit by a matatu (public service vehicle) and was clinging to life in an Eldoret hospital. The family waited tensely all night hoping and believing that the uncle would make it through surgery and intensive care and enjoy a full recovery.

When Wafula’s boss Amina strode over to his office, she immediately inquired about his tardy arrival. There and then, Wafula struggled with a typical employee dilemma felt the world over centering on how much to disclose to one’s supervisor.
Organisational behaviourists analyse employee willingness to disclose personal information to their managers as a key predictor of whether staff trust their superiors and, in turn, will perform better in their jobs.

In sub-Saharan Africa, research conducted on the amount of disclosure in interpersonal relationships found native South Africans less willing to disclose than European immigrants. Also, different research on microfinance loan officer disclosure to superiors done by this author show that sub-Saharan African citizens desire to disclose less personal information to superiors than their North American, European, and Asian counterparts. The lower overall trust environment in much of sub-Saharan Africa translates into less interpersonal information sharing in the workplace.

Interesting new research released last month by social scientists Kerry Gibson, Dana Harari, and Jennifer Marr sheds light on the effects of disclosure at the global level. The researchers found an interesting effect. When peers or coworkers shared personal negative information about themselves, no negative impact occurred on the quality of the work relationship. Coworkers did not mentally penalise each other for negative realisations.

However, when a higher status employee in a position of seniority or power over the employee would disclose personal negative information, the worker would significantly reduce their perceptions of the work relationship quality between the two. So, employees do not decrease relationship quality with those of equal status and only reduce relationship quality with those of superior status upon hearing negative information from the other individual. Another study found that a gender bias double standard exists in that subordinate staff judge senior status women more harshly than men upon disclosing something negative.

Why does such a loss happen for higher status individuals and not equal-level colleagues? As a social species, the human brain holds elevated regard for higher status people. So, when a figurative big person appears vulnerable to us, the vulnerability we see disgusts us and we lower our opinion immediately.

Some places in the world hold higher regard for high status individuals than others in what the GLOBE Framework calls power distance. In sub-Saharan Africa, we hold higher power distance than in northern Europe, as an example. We tolerate misbehaviour of leaders here more, but still feel let down and disappointed by negative disclosures that reduce our perceptions of them. So in Africa, leaders have further to fall in our minds than in our western or eastern counterparts.

In summary, managers should note not to become too friendly with their employees. Disclosure of personal information can build emotional bonds of equal rank coworkers, but can destroy relationships between senior and junior employees.

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