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HR CONSULTING

Respectful workplaces and free speech

Liz Willett

Director

Liz@khrconsulting.co.uk

Respectful workplaces and free speech

"As an HR practitioner, I've become convinced that the greatest threat to workplace relationships isn't disagreement.

It's our declining ability to deal with disagreement."

The problem of being right

- Growing tendency in society, and perhaps workplaces, to place a high value on being right.
- We then not just believe that we are right but need other people to agree that we are right.
- When they do not, there is the temptation to move beyond disagreement into judgement.
- People who agree with us are intelligent, reasonable and well-informed.
- People who disagree are ignorant, malicious, dangerous and perhaps morally deficient.
- So now we are not discussing positions and ideas, we are judging people and it becomes personal.
- The more emotionally invested we become in our views, the harder it becomes to separate a person's opinion from their value as a person – this becomes a significant challenge when it manifests in the workplace.

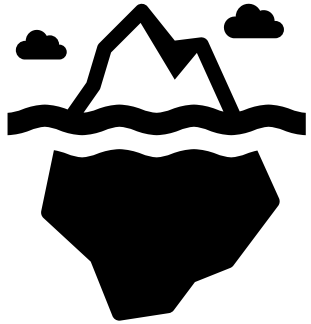
HR and the problem of being right

- Grievances & Disciplinaries
- Essentially encouraging a decision on who is “right” and who is “wrong”.
- Necessary sometimes but often a very blunt instrument.
- Is it reconciliation and rehabilitation or one-up-man-ship and revenge?
- It’s rare that these processes repair relationships, it often entrenches positions.
- Mediation is being proposed as the alternative and I genuinely support this. But mediation cannot be effectively applied if both parties have gone too far down the line to be in a room together.

The radiator



The iceberg



Above the waterline

- The grievance
- The disagreement
- Social media posts
- The desk move
- The radiator
- Offensive comments

Below the waterline

- Unresolved frustrations
- Resentment
- Perceived unfairness
- Fear
- Damaged trust
- Historical tensions
- Sense of not being heard
- Deep seated resistance to change

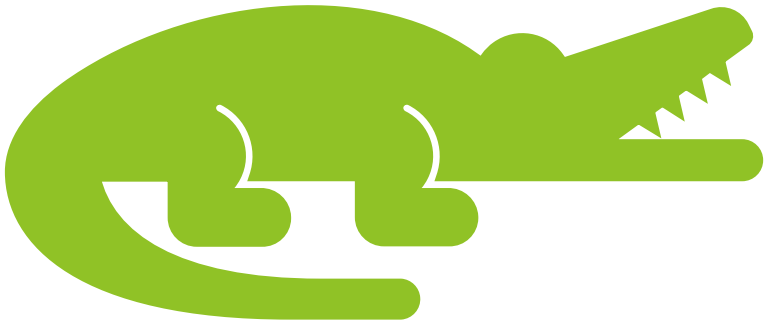
What was really happening?

- The story began in covid
- Healthcare environment
- One shielding and clinically vulnerable
- One attending work throughout the pandemic at times when PPE supplies were limited.
- One felt isolated, vulnerable and forgotten
- Another felt frightened, exposed and unsupported.
- Neither believed the other fully appreciated their experience.
- **The radiator was not really the issue.**

Workplace conflicts – when it isn't about a radiator

- Gender identity
- Religious belief
- Immigration
- Diversity and inclusion initiatives
- International conflicts
- Political viewpoints
- Pronouns

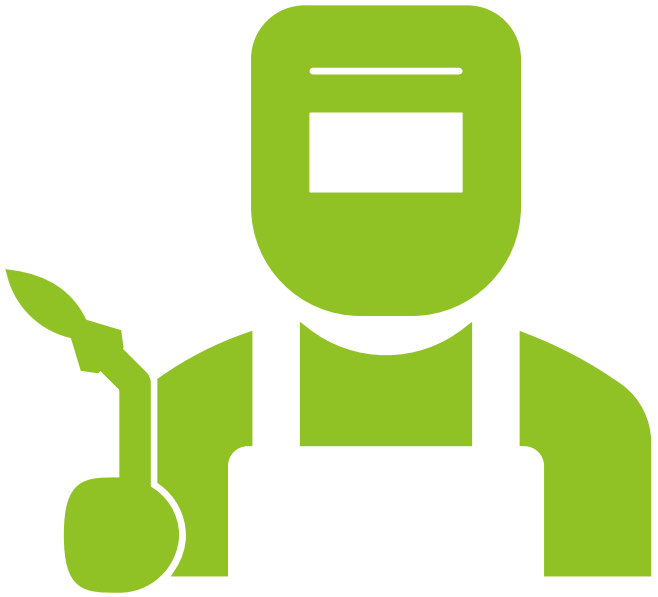
- Issues where genuine disagreement exists
- Neither side is likely to persuade the other
- Deeply held beliefs and identities involved
- Respectful workplace conversations become both more difficult and more important
- Agreement may never be achievable but respect still has to be.



Caught in a trap!

Respect

- Respect is how we behave when agreement isn't possible.
  - Respect is listening.
  - Respect is curiosity.
  - Respect is allowing another person to explain their position.
  - Respect is challenging ideas without attacking individuals.
  - Respect is recognising the humanity of the person sitting opposite us.
  - And importantly, respect is not endorsement.



What can HR contribute beyond a process?

Frameworks with considering

- Nancy Kline's "Thinking Environment" – People think better when they receive genuine attention.
- Nancy identifies behaviours such as attention, equality, encouragement and appreciation as creating the conditions for better thinking and stronger relationships.

- Paul Dolan's "Beliefism" - we are increasingly defining ourselves by our beliefs and then judging others according to whether they share them.
- His EMBRACE framework encourages us to engage with people rather than withdraw from them.

- Steven Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

Final thoughts

- The real test of workplace culture is how we treat people when agreement is simply not possible.
- As HR professionals, managers and leaders, our role is not to create consensus.
- Our role is to create the conditions in which people can think, listen, challenge and disagree without destroying relationships.
- Free speech and respectful workplaces are not opposing forces.
- Without respect, free speech becomes harmful.
- Without the ability to express different views, respect becomes little more than enforced conformity.

Questions