Workplace Hostility: First, Name It...But Don’t Stop There!
By Wendy Leebov, Ed.D

While workplace hostility, horizontal hostility, lateral violence, coworker disrespect and conflict—whatever you call it—has been plaguing health care teams for years. Recently, healthcare leaders determined to build high-functioning teams and retain talented people have begun to name it and address it.

While leaders most often apply the concept to relationships within nursing, it certainly applies to other coworker relationships as well—relationships between doctors and nurses, nurses and pharmacists, Generation X and Boomers, long timers and novices, and staff in different entities within a system where animosities thrive unabated.

Many of the strategies I’ve heard about focus on:

- Raising awareness of the symptoms of workplace hostility
- Promoting courageous conversations so people nip hurtful behavior in the bud by giving direct feedback to the culprit
- And establishing a zero tolerance policy enforced by leaders

I do think that naming workplace hostility is important. I agree that raising awareness of the symptoms is essential, so people can catch themselves and stop.

And certainly, we should help our teams overcome reticence about confronting each other and help them learn to formulate and deliver caring feedback when they see workplace hostility in action, so they can nip it in the bud. Also, leaders in denial should get courageous and establish zero tolerance of interpersonal hostility and disregard.

I don’t think we can make a policy against negativity and workplace hostility and expect it to go away. I think we need to spend much more effort and energy (and yes, time) building positive relationships with proactive team building. In my view, it makes more sense for our teams to work together to strengthen our relationships and define how we DO want to relate to each other, instead of how we don’t.

I had the privilege of conducting a team-building experience with a newly formed Senior Leadership team at a nearby hospital. It was uplifting to see people engaging with each other in new ways, getting to know each other on a deeper level, sharing perspectives on the organization, and developing ground-rules for positive working relationships and creative collaboration. There is no doubt that a series of positively focused activities lowered the walls between silos and built connections that will ease working together.

What if in every staff meeting, work teams engaged in a short team-building exercise or stress-reducing game during which people have fun with each other? Over time, the team grows deeper roots and solid trusting relationships.

But, I’m concerned. I don’t think strategies should stop there, because the approaches I mentioned—the most common approaches—are all negatively focused.

Adapted from HeartBeat on the Quality Patient Experience Volume 1, Issue 6 (June 2009)
Take a look at a few of my favorite, short team-building activities:

- Commonalities and Uniquities
- The Whip
- The People Hunt

**Workplace Respect:** That’s the goal I wish we would adopt. What DO we want in our relationships with each other and how do we build that?
A Great Staff Meeting on Workplace Hostility:
The Signs and Symptoms

1. Introduction.

Talk a little about workplace hostility as a cause of personal distress, anxiety, energy drain, and turnover. Assert zero tolerance for the sake of patients and families and also each and every member of the team.

2. Explain.

“I want everyone on this team to become attuned to the signs and symptoms, catch ourselves so we can eliminate the behaviors and words, and together nip destructive behaviors in the bud when we see or hear them.

Today, let’s identify the words and behaviors that show workplace hostility. Let’s become more aware, so we can catch ourselves and also provide caring feedback to each other.”

3. Divide people into groups.

**Small group work:** If your group is small (10 or under) divide into two groups, giving one group Worksheet 1 and the other Worksheet 2. Have the groups brainstorm together to complete their worksheet. Make sure someone in each group takes notes.

**Large group sharing:** If you have more than 10 people, divide people into groups of 3 or 4. Give half of the groups Worksheet 1 and the other half Worksheet 2. Afterward, focusing on one question at a time, have small groups share their responses.

4. Personal Commitment

Then, ask people to turn to a partner and share one destructive behavior that they believe they need to stop doing and one positive behavior that they need to do more often.

5. Closing

End with a strong statement about the importance of replacing the destructive words and behavior with positive, supportive ones.

(See Worksheets on following pages.)
### Focus on Words and Actions of Longtime Employees Toward Less Experienced, Newer Coworkers

| What are all the ways a longtime employee can make a less experienced, newer coworker feel bad (discouraged, excluded, disrespected, embarrassed, insecure, anxious)? | What are all the ways a longtime employee can make a less experienced, newer coworker feel good (supported, respected, helped, included, encouraged, appreciated)? |
Focus on Words and Actions of Less Experienced, Newer Employees Towards Longtime Employees

| What are all the ways a less experienced, newer employee can make a longtime employee feel bad (disrespected, dead wood, stuck in their ways, unhelpful, ignored, anxious, embarrassed, discouraged)? | What are all the ways a less experienced, newer employee can make a longtime employee feel good (supported, respected, helpful, included, encouraged, appreciated)? |
Attachment 2: Workplace Hostility Fact Sheet

Definition of Workplace Hostility: A form of violence. It is also known as co-worker abuse or workplace bullying. Workplace Hostility is aggressive behavior demonstrated by individuals or group members towards another individual or group.

Workplace hostility in the workplace is destructive and unacceptable behavior. It includes all acts of unkindness, discourtesy, sabotage, divisiveness, infighting, lack of cohesiveness, scapegoating and criticism. For example:

- Belittling gestures e.g. deliberate eye-rolling, folding arms, staring into space when communication is attempted; body language aimed to discomfort the other
- Verbal abuse including name calling, threatening, intimidating, dismissing, belittling, undermining, humorous 'put downs'
- Gossiping (destructive, negative, nasty talk), talking behind the back, backbiting
- Sarcastic comments
- Fault finding/nitpicking (except when requiring professional/clinical feedback)
- Ignoring or minimizing another’s concerns
- Slurs and jokes based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation ‘Freezing out’ excluding from work and social activities and conversation. Comments that devalue people’s area of practice, women, others different from the ‘norm’. Disinterest, discouragement and withholding support
- Behaviors that seek to control/dominate (power ‘over’ rather than power ‘with’)
- Elitist attitudes about work area, education, experience; a “better than” attitude
- Physical behavior such as intimidation using posture, hitting or assault.

Workplace hostility can result in:

- Poor self esteem
- Hypertension, nervous conditions, sleep disorders
- Eating disorders
- Apathy, disconnectedness, depression, low morale, suicide (successful or not)
- Impaired personal relationships
- Removal of self from workplace - psychologically, physically (sick leave, stress leave, resignation); reduced productivity
**Personal Action Strategies** (to avoid workplace hostility and create a safe, happy workplace)

You can (for yourself and your peers):

1. Name the problem: use the term 'workplace hostility' to refer to the situation.

2. Raise issue at staff meetings: break the silence about this issue

3. Ask managers and leaders for help dealing with this issue in your workplace

4. Raise yourself awareness about your own values, beliefs and attitudes. (*We all are part of the problem at times; note it and address it*)

5. Engage in self-caring behaviors: counseling, peer support, good nutrition, adequate sleep, time out, meditation, exercise. Do the things that help you to be healthy and happy in all aspects of your humanness.

6. Speak up when you witness it and name ‘workplace hostility’ for what it is.

**Acts of workplace hostility are unacceptable at work.**

**Do not be a part of the problem.**
An Upbeat Team-Building Activity: Commonalities and Uniquities

This is a great activity for team-building. People realize they have a lot in common, and they come to appreciate the uniqueness of each person as well.

1. **Instructions**
   Form groups of four or five people. Give each group two sheets of paper.

2. **Commonalities**
   Ask people to spend five minutes identifying and writing down the things they have in common. In order to make the list, the item must apply to every person in the group. Tell people to avoid writing things that people can see (e.g. “everyone has eyes,” or “we are all wearing shoes”). Encourage them to dig deeper. After 5-7 minutes, ask a spokesperson from each group to read their list to the whole group.

3. **Uniquities**
   Using the second sheet of paper, have the groups now list “Uniquities”. This time, each item must apply to only ONE person in the group. Ask the group to try and find at least 2 uniques for each person. After 5-7 minutes, ask a spokesperson from each group to read their list of Uniquities one by one and have the whole group try to guess who it refers to. (Again, when people make their lists, encourage them to avoid listing things that people can easily see).

4. **Reflect**
   After all groups have reported, ask people to reflect on the experience. What struck them? What impressed them?

5. **Conclusion**
   End with a comment about how we have plenty in common AND each individual has unique gifts and talents to bring to the group.
Attachment 4:
An Upbeat Team-Building Activity

The Whip:
A Rapid Way to Learn More
About Each Other

1. Gather your team in a circle.
2. Pose a series of topics one at a time.
   For each topic, ask people to whip around the circle, with each person taking a turn to respond. Do a whip for each of several topics.
3. Offer the option to “pass”.
   Don’t pressure people to respond. Tell them that if they prefer to not answer a particular question, just say “Pass”. And at the end of the whip for that question, if they then want to share their answer, they can have their turn then.

Sample questions:
- A favorite game from your childhood
- Your favorite TV show
- An actor or actress you really like
- Something that makes you feel proud
- Your favorite task at work
- Your least favorite task at work
- Something you enjoy doing outside of work
- …and invite your group to suggest other questions.

4. At the end, ask people to react:
- What themes did you hear?
- What impressed you?
- What did you realize?
- What questions should we ask next time?
Attachment 5:  
An Upbeat Team-Building Activity

The People Hunt

Give everyone the following worksheet. Ask them to walk around and mingle for 5 minutes, trying to find someone to whom each item on the People Hunt list applies. Ask them to write the initials of the person next to that item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHO…?</th>
<th>Initials</th>
<th>Initials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hates pizza</td>
<td></td>
<td>14. Had an unusual job before entering healthcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Loves to read</td>
<td></td>
<td>15. Can name three yo-yo tricks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Doesn’t have a cell phone</td>
<td></td>
<td>16. Has a profile on Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Has a unique favorite sport</td>
<td></td>
<td>17. Is very interested in astronomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Doesn’t eat red meat</td>
<td></td>
<td>19. Does volunteer work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Has grandchildren</td>
<td></td>
<td>20. Likes to draw and does it often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Likes ACTIVE vacations</td>
<td></td>
<td>….and add your own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Has been to Asia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Speaks another language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Doesn’t mind conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Can instantly tell you a joke</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Has a nickname unknown to people at work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After five minutes, convene the group and ask:

- How many items did you complete? (Take a poll.)
- For which items couldn’t you find anyone? Let’s see if there IS someone here after all!”
- What did you learn that surprised you?
- Your conclusions from the experience?