

Manage the Green-eyed Monster in the Workplace

ENCOURAGE OPEN COMMUNICATION TO REDUCE ENVY AT WORK.

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Envy is a huge challenge for HR professionals. It is not possible to eliminate envy from the workplace as it is the manifestation of human beings to seek, grasp and attain what others have. Only when a person is completely enlightened will the need to have what others enjoy become obsolete.

Transactional analysis models demonstrate how employees take on parent and child roles and only those who reach a high level of awareness make it to the level of behaving like self-correcting and self-generating adults. The ‘children’ at work thus bring their unresolved sibling rivalry to work in their laptop bags and hearts - and this is what creates much of the unhappiness. Neither gets left in the car park. These feelings often fester into unspoken emotions which in turn lead to stress and illness. Others will project envy as gossip, which may translate to conflict and even dismissals.

Consultants and business authors have created some sexy models of totally flat structures and equal pay scales. These theories are however steeped in idealism, and the reality is that there will always be some rank structure; and some positions will attract more compensation than others. The net result is that while we live in a capitalistic world there will be plenty of fodder to feed envy.

It is HR professional’s responsibility to diagnose and implement solutions to such pockets of negative attitudes, which ultimately affect the organisation’s profitability and sustainability. I have identified envy in people at work based on Enneagram typology.

THE PERFECTIONIST

They become envious about what they perceive as unfair. This could involve someone earning more than them or losing out on a promotion which they believe was rightfully their opportunity. Their response to envy may be demonstrated as direct bursts of anger but is more likely to be shared with colleagues than the authority figures seen as the cause of their moral outrage.

THE HELPER

Envy is usually based on their perceived views of favouritism of the manager. They may believe that the manager is giving more attention to another team member or they have been ignored in a discussion. Helpers who are image obsessed will complement others on their finery but will secretly covet the others snappy suit or hairstyle. If they are not invited to lunch they will sulk as they are challenged in voicing their grievances.

THE ACHIEVER

Envy translates to competition for Achievers. Their juice is to be in the limelight and to be recognised for their achievements. When others are accomplishing more than they are, they will push them themselves even harder or even resort to finding devious ways to beat the system. They will ensure that they drive the most stylish car and dress to impress.

THE INDIVIDUALISTS

Envy is often internalised as the Individualists become more moody and depressed. If they feel done in due to an unfair company policy, they can hold a grudge for years. They will express their feelings and will find a seemingly diplomatic way to meet the CEO who will need to be patient and hear their lengthy lament. If they are ignored they will become morose and will find ways to break the rules under the radar – undetected by their manager but often most damaging to themselves.

THE INVESTIGATORS

It is surprising how long Investigators can harbour grudges of perceived unfairness. They will seldom push back directly on authority to voice their dissatisfaction. Instead they will spend much energy, which ironically they mean to preserve, pondering about the facts which led to the state of unfairness. If invited to give their opinion, they will do so in a structured and unemotional way, provided the manager is sufficiently open to respectful opposition.

THE LOYALISTS

Loyalists have a strong inner code of how everyone should be treated the same. They will become emotionally reactive if their belief of ‘equal is fair’ has been violated. They will seldom be direct in expressing their feelings but are want to discuss their views with others who are part of their trusted circle. The intention is to rally support for their cause and they will often use the plural ‘we’ in expressing a view, which after probing turns out to be their own projected feelings of envy.

THE ENTHUSIASTS

Enthusiasts are quite breezy about demonstrating envy. They will often joke about what seems out of their reach or plan to level the playing fields by playing golf with so-called customers and having extended lunch dates. They can become more directly assertive if they believe that they are consistently missing out on what their colleagues are enjoying and will express their anger in a burst of emotion.

THE CHALLENGERS

They will not admit to envy and will argue that their only motive is fairness. They do not want to be placated in any way and will be fierce about earning their position and compensation. Others often envy their strength and fortitude and they are either feared or respected for their strong leadership and outspokenness. If they are envious of others, they will find a way to usurp their position or they will simply leave the organisation.

THE PEACEMAKERS

If they feel envy they hide it very well. It is more a longing for what others might have and what they might be missing out on. They do not typically show behaviour which is evidenced as conflictual – unless it is passive aggressive which is not easy to detect. Aspiration to achieve to their full potential in emulating a role model is helpful for them, and would not translate to envy.

Envy is not a pretty emotion and I apologise for the torpid illustrations. However, one needs to have a sober view of how base feelings show up in order to implement strategies to alleviate the effects on the collective group. The extent to which these feelings show up as negative influences will depend on the individual emotional intelligence and this we know is based on the gifts of nature, nurturing and willingness to grow our EQ . I have identified the following HR interventions which can lessen the negative effects of workplace envy.

Create and have robust communication organisational values; Leadership should walk and talk these values; Ensure that HR policies and procedures are current and communicated; If you have policies such as Affirmative Action, which support fair discrimination, ensure that people understand the ethos and managers are able to deal with the complexities; Implement an effective grading system which is transparent and acts as a guide to ensure fair remuneration; Benchmark remuneration levels with your competitors and pitch your salaries at the higher quartile; Conduct annual climate surveys which indicate the motivation levels of your workforce; A credible grievance procedure will encourage employees to air genuine issues which need attention; Ongoing management training and coaching is essential to cultivate a mindful leadership; Individual or group conflict should never be ignored. Listen to the conflicting voices, reflect on the issues raised, discuss with the executive team and formulate the best action plans; and Toxic envy should not be ignored. If after counseling and support the behavior remains destructive, implement a formal plan which may lead to dismissal if the behavior does not change.

The most important strategy in dealing with workplace envy is to ensure that an ethos of open and honest communication prevails which will encourage people to express their feelings before they are allowed to fester into unhappiness.

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