

AVOIDING A WORKPLACE 'TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS'

Garrett Hardin's dilemma of the "tragedy of the commons" states that multiple individuals who act in their own interest will tend to destroy a common resource. Employers should be looking to avoid a workplace version of this "tragedy".

The scenario by which Hardin's theory is often explained is that of cow herders sharing a common, finite parcel of grazing land. The grazing pasture will support only a limited number of cows.

But, human nature being what it is, individual herders will tend to put as many of their own cows as possible into the common grazing pasture. The benefit of taking more than one's share is enjoyed exclusively by the individual herder while the cost (being the gradual degradation of the grazing land) is spread amongst all the herders.

In a nutshell, one or more persons acting selfishly will eventually ruin the resource for everyone.

Hardin's theory can, of course, be readily applied to many aspects of modern life. As individuals, our actions – excess consumption of fossil fuels, overuse of pesticides, contribution to land fills – provide individual benefits while harming the population as a whole by degrading shared resources.

Can Hardin's theory be applied to the workplace? I think it is applicable to the workplace "atmosphere" - the result of employees' interactions with each other.

Let's assume that any business starts off with the benefit of a good atmosphere. As in Hardin's "tragedy of the commons", a person who is continually a negative influence in the workplace – a bully, for instance – will gradually degrade that resource.

That person is, in effect, taking more out of the workplace than he or she is contributing. Whatever the motivations, the negative impact of his or her conduct poisons the atmosphere for everyone else.

What can individual employees do to ensure they are not degrading the common resource at the expense of others?

First, I think we can be mindful of the boundaries of others' personal "space". This has, of course, both physical and emotional elements.

Personal space can refer to physical proximity, and everyone in the workplace should be aware of treading over the boundary into the zone of discomfort or even harassment. But personal space also means respecting the boundaries of interaction such that feelings are not being hurt.

Second, employees can do good work. Taking the job seriously and making the commitment to advancing the employer's objectives sets a good example for others to follow.

There is no more vibrant workplace than one in which all the employees have made that commitment. Conversely, there is no worse workplace dominated by a group of habitual whiners.

Third, employees should think about becoming "joiners". Joiners are people who willingly participate in workplace initiatives, both work-oriented and social.

Volunteer to be part of a process-improvement committee or to set up a team building event. Organize a workplace fundraising event. Be part of a group which performs any of a variety of community services.

Fourth, employees can look for ways to be a positive influence on others in their various day-to-day dealings. These are people who become recognized as leaders, both inside and outside the workplace.

I've seen that these people share certain personality features. One of the most prominent is that workplace leaders are neither "glass half empty" nor "glass half full" types. Instead, their objective is to "fill the glass".

Fifth, in the workplace we can all benefit from being, as they say, quick to listen and slow to speak. Although we don't always believe it, the reality is that an individual usually stands to learn more from a group than vice versa.

Finally, what list of desirable personal attributes would be complete without the inclusion of the "golden rule"? We can all be pleasant and courteous in our workplace interactions in the hope that others will treat us in a similar fashion.

Employees (staff and management alike) who adhere to these six rules will surely be contributing to a positive workplace atmosphere. Unlike the herder in Hardin's "tragedy of the commons", they won't be degrading the common resource at the expense of all those around them.

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