



Employment: Why good workers leave bad workplaces

Bias at the office can drive good employees away. The key is to be open to the realization that bias exists and then to address it.

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By Ann Belser, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Freada Kapor Klein heard the best management story recently.

An Asian woman was on an elevator when one of the top bosses at her company got on and barked an order at her.

She had no idea what he was talking about, but she did know who he was and what division he managed. So she went to the company directory, found the Asian woman in his department and then tracked her down.

The two women walked to his office and stood side-by-side in his door and smiled. There was 6 inches difference in their height, one had long hair, the other short. Even their ancestry was from different countries, so they looked nothing alike.

It was a lesson for him, and he never confused them again.

Ms. Klein said there were two great aspects of this story: first, that the situation was resolved simply and with humor. The second came from the telling, which was not by either of the women. She heard the story from the man who made the mistake in the first place.

That is how we solve the problems of bias in the workplace: by being open to the realization that there is bias and making it possible to address it.

"If you worry about protecting the company from being sued, you're pointed in the wrong direction," Ms. Klein said. "The focus needs to be on making the company a great place to work."

Ms. Klein, who holds a doctorate in social policy and is the founder of the Level Playing Field Institute, has recently written a management book called "Giving Notice: Why the best and the brightest leave the workplace and how you can help them stay."

In the book and during a recent conversation, Ms. Klein said it's those subtle and not-so-subtle slights that can add up to an unworkable environment, causing many to walk out on their jobs.

Rules don't fix behaviors. Ms. Klein said a company that tries to legislate behavior is not on the right track either, because they can't issue an edict on language. Likewise, senior managers can't

tell people certain jokes are inappropriate. For instance, the two bawdy friends who like to tell raunchy jokes have a right to do that, just not in the conference room during a meeting in which others might be offended.

"What I'm advocating is a workplace that says everyone has a right to draw a line between appropriate and inappropriate," she said. "Treat people like adults and let them know when they have stepped on your toes."

The best way to work, she said, is at a place where complaints are handled between the parties, not by the folks in human resources, and where employees are given honest evaluations.

She said that for most office slights there should be another employee or friend to whom a worker can turn to determine if they are overreacting. And, if they aren't, if something truly offensive has just happened, the employee should be able to talk about it with the offending person.

"When we turn this into a chilly culture where everyone is walking on eggshells and we're not allowed to say to someone they look nice, then we lose a chance to learn about each other," she said.

She said it was ironic that every other management trend is pushing responsibility down, so that employees can solve their own problems, but bias issues are being pushed up the management chain to senior managers and human resources.

She said the best people to deal with any situation are those in it, so they can learn the lines that mark the boundaries of appropriate behavior.