Building Civility

The University of Minnesota is committed to providing outstanding educational experiences and a positive and supportive environment in which to work and learn.

When offensive, hostile, and intimidating behavior occurs, it interferes with one's ability to do well. In fact, 80% of respondents in a recent U of M survey who experienced these destructive behaviors said that it 'somewhat or completely' prevented them from doing their best work.

Departmental leadership can have a big impact on their unit's environment. How to get started in promoting a healthy and productive climate? One step is to regularly and proactively communicate the importance of a positive climate in your department (even if it is not something you are immediately concerned about). Frequently communicating that a supportive climate is a core value for your department (along with taking some of the other steps outlined below) often goes a long way to achieving one.

Another important step is to assess the political-cultural landscape:
- How can you support the things that are going well?
- What problematic issues come up over and over again?
- What is the level of your concern?

Levels of Concern

Level One - Apathetic / Disconnected
People look out for themselves, perhaps compete with others for scarce resources.

Level Two - Micro-aggressions
Subtle, offensive comments; may be directed at a non-dominant group. May be intentional or unintentional.

Level Three - Abrasive Behavior
Offensive, hostile, intimidating behavior that interferes with one's ability to work and learn.   May be intentional or unintentional.

Level Four - Abusive Behavior
Systematic destructive behaviors directed at individuals over time with serious negative consequences.

* The kinds of behaviors identified above are often normalized, tolerated, or difficult to identify.

Pro-active Steps to Building a Healthy Culture

These seemingly small initiatives can help people feel part of a larger enterprise and build stronger departmental identity and community.

- Design informal social opportunities or spaces, such as a monthly sponsored 'pizza lunch', to encourage positive interactions among students, staff, and faculty. Set up a sponsored coffee lounge in a comfortable space.

- Include a page on your department's website focusing on your unit's commitment to a positive culture; include information on "Wellness Matters" and Active Bystanders.

- Develop group norms, check in regularly to see if they are working. Encourage faculty to use a "Welcome to My Lab" letter. Challenge the notion that graduate advising is simply replicating one's own experience as a graduate student. Encourage students with a variety of career goals.

- Identify faculty liaisons who are available for students to talk with informally about their concerns.

- Assign advising mentors to assist new faculty and those advisers who are experiencing difficulties in training and graduating their advanced students.

- Dig deeper into the root causes of significant, long-standing problems through anonymous surveys or other assessment tools. Provide workshops to departmental personnel on how to better manage problematic issues.

- Provide incentives for improving advising and mentoring of graduate and professional students.

- Establish consequences for not meeting departmental standards.

Addressing Problems

Don't do nothing if someone comes to you for help with a problem. Resist the temptation to overlook difficulties that arise. While some problems will resolve themselves, those that remain will only get worse – sometimes much worse – over time.

Listen to the person raising the issue; be aware of power differences.

Consult with campus experts, especially on serious issues such as abusive behavior. Your collegiate associate dean is also a resource for you in such matters.

Act with care, so as not to make the problem worse. Not sure what to do? Try something you think might help, reassess, and stay engaged; remember small actions can have large effects.

Resources

Student Conflict Resolution Center
www.sos.umn.edu
612.626.0689, 254 Appleby Hall
Contact: Jan Morse

Office for Conflict Resolution
www.ocr.umn.edu
612.624.1030, 662 Heller Hall
Contact: Tamar Gronvall

Graduate School
www.grad.umn.edu
612.625.2815, 321 Johnston Hall
Contact: Karen Starry

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