

Define the Non-negotiable

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Business people, films, friends and sometimes even family members will suggest that “everything is negotiable.” This phrase suggests that no matter how strongly you feel about something, you might be persuaded to change your mind. The phrase also suggests another longstanding saying that “everyone has a price,” which suggests that if the reward is high enough everyone will give up their promises, ideals, and values.

On the other hand, there are those of us who believe and suggest that there are non-negotiable items, values, and approaches that we individually and collectively live by each day. Some non-negotiable lists include: never swearing, never letting customers swear at employees, never stealing, never telling a lie, never breaking a commandment, and never breaking an organization rule or policy.

Another way of defining the non-negotiable things in our lives is to think in terms of the “always” statements. Always tell the truth. Always respect the ideas, thoughts and feelings of others – even when you disagree. Always be grateful for the good to be found in each day’s experience. Always model the behavior that you say you want from others.

When values and behaviors don’t match up, conflict and stress typically arises. People sometimes quit jobs over the conflict they feel between their person non-negotiable items and what they sense is allowable and non-negotiable in their workplaces.

What are the non-negotiable items in your workplace? Consider the treatment of customers. Maybe customers are not right when they treat you or your co-workers badly. In some cases, it may be very appropriate to fire a customer because of a crossed line on a non-negotiable. Clearly embezzlement is unacceptable and non-negotiable. What about using the office copier to print flyers for your child’s school event? The way you answer this question will give you insight into your non-negotiable list of actions and behaviors.

Speaking of schools, they are workplaces too. On a recent elementary school tour, the school principal said “procedures are not punishment. When I came to this school, there were no procedures in place. Now we have them for moving about the halls, getting to recess and lunch, and interacting as a team of teachers.” Procedures, agreements on non-negotiable approaches and supporting each other when things get challenging are all a part of a strong, viable and future-oriented workplace.

Action Item: Define the things that are non-negotiable for you, your work team and for your organization. Talk about the non-negotiable items and actions and then reach agreement with your team about how you’ll hold each other accountable for living up to your agreements.

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