

Hugs in the Workplace

The issue of hugs in the workplace is getting more attention due to awareness raised by the #MeToo movement and its revelations about unwanted physical contact in the workplace. In addition, the related issue of a “hostile work environment” (displaying pictures, calendars or objects, or making references or jokes, of a sexual nature) is also gaining more awareness and concern. According to an article in the Wall Street Journal, a Federal court in Los Angeles ruled this past February that, “...hugging employees – no matter the gender of the person doing the hugging – may create a hostile work environment.”

The issues of unwanted physical contact on the job and hostile work environments, always difficult to navigate in the best of times, may seem even more like mine fields in these contentious times. The purpose of this Productivity Update is to take a look at these issues in a calm, common-sense way.

Back to Basics

Let’s first take a moment to remind ourselves of a basic truism: some people like to touch and be touched, and some people profoundly do not. It’s not a simple “yes/no” distinction; most of us exist somewhere along a spectrum of enjoying physical contact with some but not all people we know.

If you are a “hugger,” it can be hard to imagine that some people don’t enjoy a hug. If you are person who does not like to be touched in any way, it feels awkward and uncomfortable to casually hug other people.

It doesn’t matter whether you are a “hugger” or a “touch-me-not,” all hugs are open to interpretation, and the fact is that our *intentions* are not always as visible as we think they are.

Good Intentions vs. What’s Perceived

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines hugging as “to hold tightly especially in the arms”, and the affirmation of affection that a hug between parent and child demonstrates is a familiar one. Hugs as a demonstration of affection between two people who want to demonstrate that affection feel good and do the heart good.

For the purpose of this article, let's set aside any question about whether it's appropriate to use hugging or other close physical contact in the workplace to demonstrate deep affection for one co-worker over another, or to maintain close personal relationships. It's not. Personal relationships should be conducted on personal time, not business time.

The problem with hugging and other close physical contact in the workplace arises, then, when it is used inappropriately, and in most cases this means when it is used to show appreciation for work well done. From the point of view of the person who initiates the hug, the intention seems innocent and affirmative, *but the person being hugged may see it very differently.*

Others can't see our good intentions because our intentions are inside our own heads. What others see or hear us say or do is what they base their assumptions about our intentions on. This can lead to a perfect storm of misunderstanding between people who both have good intentions but fundamentally different ideas about appropriate hugging and/or physical contact at work.

Showing Appreciation on the Job

It seems to be a fair statement to say that most people want to be appreciated on the job – for their attempts to do a good job and for their successes. Knowing that your efforts are appreciated is motivating, as well, for most people.

There are many ways to show co-workers and employees that their efforts are appreciated, ranging from a quick smile and nod, verbal praise and/or thanks, formal acknowledgment of effort or achievement (such as an announcement or award at a company meeting,) to promotion and/or bonuses.

Here's the crux of the matter: Is it appropriate to use hugs or other forms of physical contact (for example, putting one's arm around the shoulders of another person) to demonstrate appreciation for work well done? Given the opportunity for misunderstanding or offense that such actions create (whether intentional or not), the answer has to be, "No."

This is especially true when the person initiating the physical contact is in a supervisory or managerial position over the person being thus addressed. And the reason for that is that a person in a subordinate position may not feel free to reject the physical contact, no matter how innocently it is intended.

We Don't Want Any Employees to Feel Uncomfortable; What Can We Do?

From your company's point of view, the place to start is with your company's policies and procedures. It should be part of your company's policy that physical and sexual harassment,

intimidation, and misbehavior will not be tolerated. Your policy should include a clear, confidential, and safe way for misbehavior claims to be handled in a way that is safe and non-prejudicial for the both the accuser and the accused. Clear consequences for both malicious accusations and confirmed misbehavior should be established.

If your company has had difficulties in the past with misunderstandings over unwanted physical contact, consider holding a series of brief, company-wide discussions of what is appropriate and what is not. Use these meetings to make your company's policy clear.

On a personal level, here are some simple suggestions:

- If you are a hugger, curb yourself. Just because you are a hugger doesn't mean that your hugs are welcome. Don't take it personally if people with whom you work would rather that you *tell* them what you like about their work.
- If someone hugs you, *gently* reciprocate and *don't linger*.
- Use your words: use affirming language instead of a hug. Sincerely compliment the person with specific comments.
- Use your words respectfully to make your discomfort with physical attention clear, if that is the case.

The Bottom Line Is Respect

We are not all the same, thank goodness! What an uninteresting place the world would be if we were all the same. That being said, our differences can sometimes seem to jangle our nerves, and that certainly is true in the case of physical contact on the job.

Show respect for your co-workers by avoiding these misunderstandings altogether. Use words, smiles, recognition, and other tangible rewards to show your appreciation for the efforts your co-workers make.