

Bringing Harmony to the Workplace

By Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron

Most people spend a good part of their day at work, so it is important to be able to incorporate our Dharma practice into this area of our life. We can do this in several ways: generating a good motivation, being mindful of how we interact with others, and counteracting old, habitual, dysfunctional behaviors.

Generate a Good Motivation

Our motivation is the key; it influences the choices we make, determines the karmic or ethical value of what we do, and affects what we do and how we do it. Here we need to do some soul-searching: what is our real motivation for going to work? Is it to make money? To become well-known in the field? To be praised for our skill, knowledge, or creativity? To feel we are worthwhile and successful? To compete with someone else? While working may bring these results—and it's not guaranteed to bring them—we may still experience a sense of malaise, wondering what the real benefit of working long hours are. This occurs because the above motivations are primarily centered on Me, I, My, and Mine.

Imagine expanding our motivation, thinking:

Today I'm going to work to serve my clients, customers, and colleagues and to bring happiness into their lives. I greet them with friendliness, speak the truth to them, and treat them honestly and with respect because I want to bring harmony to their lives and my own. I'm working in order to contribute to the welfare of society by using my skills with wisdom and compassion. May everyone who receives the goods and services provided by my labors be happy, have a peaceful mind, and in turn seek to benefit others. In the long term may my efforts lead to the enlightenment of all sentient beings.

Take your time in contemplating the meaning of this motivation so that it will remain steadfast in your mind during the day. When you first get up in the morning, practice generating this motivation and see how it affects your day, especially your relationships with the people at your work place and your family.

At Sravasti Abbey we gather for a short meeting every morning to plan the day's activities. Then we recite together this verse to bring harmony to our "workplace":

We are grateful for the opportunity to offer service to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha and to sentient beings. While working, differences in ideas, preferences, and ways of doing things from our companions may arise. These are natural and are a source of creative exchange; our minds don't need to make them into conflicts. We will endeavor to listen deeply and communicate wisely and kindly as we work together for our common goal. By using our body and speech to support the values we deeply believe in—generosity, kindness, ethical discipline, love, and compassion—we will create great merit which we dedicate for the enlightenment of all beings.

Be Mindful of How We Interact with Others

Then, during the day, practice being mindful of how you speak and act towards others. Be aware of the intentions that lie behind those actions. If you notice that your mind is getting agitated,

aggravated, annoyed, jealous, or arrogant, stop and breathe. Come back to the beautiful and inspiring motivation that you generated in the morning and remember why you are working.

Recently I participated on a panel for a radio show with the Mayor of Spokane and the vice-president of a Teachers' Credit Union on the topic, "Can institutions, not just individuals, be compassionate?" All of us affirmed they can, and the mayor and the business executive went on to describe how. The mayor said that she reminds herself and the city employees that they are there to serve the people who contact them. In other words, rather than seeing their jobs as enforcing a cumbersome bureaucracy, they should do their best to help the people. Within her office, she has face-to-face meetings rather than doing everything over email. While some people initially didn't like this, they were eventually weaned from excessive emailing and realized that they could reach conclusion faster by sitting together with others in the same room and discussing issues in real time.

The business executive said that the Teachers' Credit Union consciously cultivates a caring attitude for both the employees as well as the customers and clients. When employees need time off to care for family—for example, if a family member is ill or has died, when a baby is born, when a child is having difficulties in school—they do their best to provide this. Furthermore, they listen to their clients and customers and do their best to meet their needs.

One element in cultivating good relationships at work is honesty. Many businesspeople ask how they can avoid lying and still make a profit. I respond that if they lie and deceive or cheat their customers and clients, those people will eventually find out and not continue to do business there. Whereas if they know that businesspeople are honest and not just selfishly trying to get as much profit as they can, they will continually return to that company to do business. Thus in the long term, the company will financially benefit. Furthermore, there will not be an atmosphere of mistrust and deception in the workplace, and this will create a pleasant and supportive atmosphere that will encourage people to do their best.

In other words, the bottom line is caring about others more than money and fame. This is correct, isn't it? Aren't human beings more important than money and fame? Human beings have feelings; they want to be happy and avoid suffering. They do so much to help us. Money, on the other hand, is simply pieces of paper, and fame and reputation are nothing more than other people's fleeting, unreliable thoughts about us.

Counteract Old, Habitual, Dysfunctional Behaviors

Very often we get stuck in habitual behaviors that we do not even recognize, even though they interfere with creating a good environment at our work place. For instance, we easily become defensive; we seek to get the credit for a team project while doing as little work as possible on it; we backbite and scapegoat our colleagues. What do these dysfunctional behaviors look like and what can we do about them when we find ourselves acting in these ways?

Sometimes our manager or another colleague will ask us a question—when something will be completed, what our plan is for a certain task—and we immediately think, "Oh no! They're criticizing me!" What follows is a long explanation, "I did this because I thought that and I was waiting for this other thing. I couldn't have done it any sooner because..." giving the person a lot of information that they don't want or need. Meanwhile, the other person may be getting impatient because he or she just wants a short direct response that shares a specific piece of information. What is going on in our mind at these times? Attached to praise and seeking a good reputation, we defend our ego. We want to hear only good comments and don't want to hear anything bad about ourselves, and we are in the habit of assuming that any question or even a small comment is meant as criticism of who we are as a person. This over-sensitivity is based on believing that we are so very important—this is the work of our self-centered thought, which is the real enemy that destroys our peace and happiness. Meditation on the disadvantages of attachment to fame and reputation and the faults of the self-centered thought will help us correct

this. Then, when someone asks a question, we will answer it directly and concisely, and if we make mistakes we will acknowledge them and seek to correct them without making a lot of excuses.

Another bad habit is that when working on a team project we do as little work as possible and yet seek to get the credit when the project goes well. Of course, if there are flaws, we blame those on other team members. In other words we want responsibility-free praise! This behavior creates bad feelings at our workplace, and our blindness to it leaves us puzzled when others say they have difficulty working with us. This is another function of our self-centered attitude, a negative quality that we are quick to judge others for having and slow to acknowledge that we have ourselves. The antidote to this is caring about the other people on the team and the people who will benefit from the project. With a magnanimous attitude, we will then do our part of the project in a responsible way.

A third behavior that creates ill feelings at our workplace is backbiting and scapegoating, which often stem from insecurity on our part. Lacking self-confidence, we seek others' support and think that by making one person in the office or factory look bad, it means all the rest of us are good. This twisted sense of community is based on resentment and ill will. By encouraging others to backbite and scapegoat, we are setting the stage for ourselves to be the object of these disagreeable behaviors, for all we have to do is slip up a little and others will complain about us behind our back.

When there is a conflict in the workplace, we need to talk with the people concerned instead of involving the entire office. If we have personal difficulty with an individual, we should approach him or her and ask to speak privately to work it out. If we feel vulnerable, we can ask another person to sit in on the conversation and mediate to facilitate communication.

In conclusion, to create the causes of happiness now and in the future, let's integrate our Dharma practice into our work. Generating a good motivation each morning; being mindful of what we say, do, and think when we are with others; and applying antidotes to unproductive habitual behaviors are a good way to do this.

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