2 Counter-Productive Work Behaviors: The Nature and Size of the Problem

Introduction

This chapter addresses some definitional issues, and goes on to describe specific CWBs and their impact in the workplace.

The list of anti-social, deviant and destructive behaviors at work is long: absenteeism, accidents, bullying, corruption, fraud, disciplinary problems, drug and alcohol abuse, sabotage, sexual harassment, tardiness, theft, whistle-blowing, white-collar crime and violence are typical examples. Some are relatively trivial (occasional absenteeism, tardiness); others have much greater impact (fraud, theft, sabotage). In the US and in many academic institutions, the term “CWB” is used to cover the whole range of employee acts which have a negative effect in the workplace.

“Misbehaviors” at work, from an academic research perspective, usually come under one of the headings discussed in the following sections.

Aggression, hostility and violence

This refers to everything from workplace homicides to rude comments. Aggression can be described on various dimensions: whether it is primarily physical or verbal, whether it is active or passive, whether it is direct or indirect. It may be directed at various groups – upwards, lateral, downwards. Another distinction is whether this is targeted at the individual(s) or organizational systems, and whether it should be considered serious or not. Thus, a practical joke played on an individual may be considered a minor, personal incident, while a wildcat strike or Ludditism as a major organizational incident.

It is not clear whether this sort of behavior is, indeed, on the increase or whether it is simply a function of interpretation and monitoring. Next, there is the important issue of whether there are corporate cultures that actually approve, endorse or encourage workplace violence.
Absenteeism, withdrawal and social loafing

There are many ways in which not working can be seen as counter-productive. Total absenteeism, arriving late, leaving early, sudden departures (turnover) can all be seen as having tremendous and immediate financial consequences. Added to this, it is possible to include low-quality work, slow-downs and general sloppiness which require correction.

There is also the concept of social loafing or the propensity to withhold effort. This has also been called shirking or free-loading. It means, quite simply, not pulling one’s weight. Particularly in team settings, it means letting others do the work while often pretending to put in full effort.

Workplace bullying

This is behavior that deliberately targets an individual and aims to humiliate, threaten, undermine or victimize. It may be intentional or unintentional; it may involve the perpetrator being a subordinate, superior or colleague; and the cause may lie both inside and outside the organization. However, bullying does have recognizable characteristics: it is unreasonable, repeated over time and not aimed at increasing productivity.

Typical bullying acts include verbal and physical abuse; isolationism; assigning meaningless, impossible or very stressful tasks; withholding or distorting vital task relevant information. It could include hate-mail, gossip-mongering and psychologically threatening behavior. Bullying is hurtful not only in the short term, but also the long term.

Inactivity, insults and rudeness

Service businesses require and rejoice in interpersonal activity and politeness. Courteous, civil, kind behavior is valued. Could the use of rude comments or gestures, thoughtlessness or selfishness – like queue jumping or attention-seeking behavior – really be considered counter-productive work behavior?

Societies, groups and organizations have normative behavior systems or codes of conduct that people are required to follow. This includes how they dress, address each other, use profane language and help one another. These explicit and implicit rules may be broken by the use of inappropriate dress or language. One can deliberately keep people waiting, humiliate or defame them, show open and obvious favoritism or indulge in mocking. These insults could be of a racial or sexual nature. Hence, a great deal of interest in sexual harassment and racial discrimination. Both of these behaviors can easily cross the line between boisterous, high-flux bantering and flirting to serious, illegal behaviors.