

Combatting the “Ism” Challenge to Company Culture: Proactively Keep it From Rooting

by Jason Gladfelter, Vombuds – Virtual Ombudsman

Start A Brewery asked for my input as to what can employers do to step up and do the right thing regarding sexism, racism, and exclusion. The recent exposure of sexism on Instagram highlights this need.

As a conflict-management specialist, I look at conflict, how humans react to it, ways to better understand it, and methods of resolution. This perspective is a bit different than many.

Generally, I see Conflict as a good thing—it is necessary for progress. I often use the analogy of a tire gripping the road, using friction (conflict) to move and stop. The challenge is how each conflict, dispute, argument, and disagreement are managed. A car can steer, thus managing the direction the tire-road friction takes us. When I read those Instagram comments, I see opportunity for progress, on top of being exasperated.

So, my input for employers goes beneath many layers and can be seen as a reset, of sorts. My lens removes sex and gender to look at conflict dynamics and discover, or uncover, core issues so that the roots of remedy can be applied. There is no magic wand or “easy” button. Sexism, racism, agism, et al are extremely large subjects that cannot possibly be tackled in any article*. Yet they all have common foundational roots within the conflict dynamic realm. What I can do is provide a checklist to address the foundational issues upon which the -isms are built and thrive. Implementing some foundational tools can:

- Make it more difficult for “isms” to take root.
- Decrease the fuel that feeds the “isms”.
- Support vocalization and exposure of offenses.
- Facilitate management of offensive issues.
- Help strengthen the internal dynamics (the “People Ingredient”) of a brewery
- Enable transference of at-work lessons to external arenas, thereby helping address societal issues.

This last point may need a bit of clarification and expansion.

(continued)

Combatting the “Ism” Challenge to Company Culture

(Page 2)

Craft Brewing is not the Center of the Universe (no matter how much we would like it to be)

“Sexism in the craft brewing industry” is an interesting qualification. Sexism (all -isms) exists regardless of industry and society, really. This qualification seems to hint that it is up to the industry, and brewery owners, to fix it. Can craft breweries fix real-world problems that extend beyond their small companies?

If beer is a social lubricant, let’s use this strength and look at what *could be* done. Instead of...or maybe in addition to...breweries demanding that social dysfunction not enter their establishments, they could serve as a type of learning campus where those who enter (the staff, management, etc.) obtain, experience, receive lessons that they could then transfer to society (customers, family, world). The craft beer industry, with individual breweries as its roots, can be the catalyst for social change. To be sure, this is a HUGE amount of pressure and responsibility, but I think it can begin with a few basic, and ostensibly simple steps.

Workplace Erosion

The “isms” thrive on atrophy, the breakdown of order. I use the term “erosion” to indicate that in context of a business, this breakdown can be gradual and consist of tiny variations that build up and create pressure. Most of these go unnoticed over time until the constant erosion energy becomes apparent through costly damages. Large, sudden blows can cause damage, but at least they are noticed and can be addressed tout suite. Latent and constant pressure is usually more destructive.

As such, it is imperative to stop the erosion, prevent it in the first place, or at least mitigate the impact of these tiny variations.

Daily Checklist

A daily checklist is designed to establish a foundation upon which a great work environment can be built as well as a first barrier against workplace erosion. It may sound simple, but it can be challenging to fine tune and implement. To begin, we must learn new habits, and unlearn bad ones, that we are used to overlooking or taking for granted.

Be Civil

Growing up in Kansas, we said “hi” to strangers we pass on the sidewalk and wave to approaching cars on the highway. I did this in Denver and was looked at...weirdly. But I still do it in a more subtle way; I feel odd not doing it. Keeps me grounded, I guess.

Combatting the “Ism” Challenge to Company Culture

(Page 3)

Simple pleasantries go a long way: Examples: “Please”, “thank you” (not just “thanks”), “you’re welcome” (not “no worries” or “you bet”), “I am sorry”, etc. Put a bit of thought and effort into them. Say them to everybody. Not saying these things can start or feed the erosion process.

This may sound like advice for customer service, and it is. But the point here is to engage everyone like this, at least at work. If you need to scold someone, do so, but do so civilly. Prepare for difficult conversations and be transparent (e.g. “this won’t be easy to hear and we have to talk about it...”). Civility is a touch different than “being nice”. Being nice is a way to tread lightly and not hurt anyone’s feelings. Being civil realizes that this cannot always work, but stops short of being rude, dismissive, or indifferent.

Emotions

We all have them. We all deal with them differently. They come from anywhere and everywhere. Sometimes, we wake up in a bad mood, or traffic sucks, or you stub your toe, or all three plus ten more things. They are neither right nor wrong. We cannot be told to stop feeling a certain way—that can make matters worse.

Our two main responses (subconsciously) to our own emotions are: we keep them to ourselves, or we unleash them onto others—usually straight out of the blue and the recipients don’t know what hit them or why.

If you are on the one venting emotion, try to communicate that with others (“I’m feeling a bit frustrated now, please bear with me”). Not always easy to do since sometimes we don’t even realize our own emotions. After venting, make sure to follow up with whomever it affected--could be an hour or a week later, but do it. Tell them the situation and apologize if necessary.

If you are on the receiving end, try not to take it personally. Easier said than done in the moment, for sure, because it can be disguised as a personal attack! One person venting an emotion can trigger another person to experience agitated emotions. A cycle can...usually does...continue. Meanwhile, these emotions go unaddressed.

Do “Branded” Things

What traits does your company embrace? How can you and your staff demonstrate, exemplify, practice, and/or illustrate these things every day? Think of at least three things that can accomplish this, or at possess such traits.

Combatting the “Ism” Challenge to Company Culture

(Page 4)

For example, if I want my company to be like a friendly neighbor, here some things my team and I could do every day:

1. Use first names.
2. Ask how they are doing, feeling. How their weekend was. Etc.
3. Have a “Welcome” mat at each entry door.
4. Greet everyone who comes in. A simple “hello” is sufficient.
5. Don’t talk while they are talking. Listen.
6. Try not to stand directly in front of someone when speaking/listening. (Directly face-to-face can seem psychologically confrontational. Instead, try to stand slightly off to the side or next to the other person. Maybe turn your body a bit at an angle).

Patience

Inevitably, you will encounter people who do not have this checklist, are passive aggressive, love confrontation, are joke prone, are more expressive with emotions, or just do not have the skills or experience dealing with difficult people and situations. Be patient. We all make mistakes. Mistakes don’t mean evil is upon us. They don’t happen to bring you down or ruin your life. If someone offends you say so and explain why, without accusing them. Chances are, it was an accident.

And be patient with yourself.

Check Yourself

Many sports have a “film day” where the team or individual watches a recording of a previous performance. This helps them study mistakes they made, or why they did well. It’s a replay of the game, match, etc. We can do this ourselves in our business. Schedule time each week to check yourself. Go over the mental film of your week. What happened, how did you react/ respond, was it the best way, what could have done differently, do I need to speak to someone to apologize, clarify, explain, or ask for help, etc. This can be difficult and uncomfortable. Don’t beat yourself up over mistakes, learn from them. It may help to write things down as, or just after, they occur so you can go over them later.

(continued)

Combatting the “Ism” Challenge to Company Culture

(Page 5)

That’s all. A short list of things to incorporate into your daily business life. Because they are small adjustments, they can easily be overlooked, which make them not-so-small. This “double edge” makes them potent. Large, sweeping changes encounter staunch resistance. Direct action usually misses the core issue and impacts the outer walls. Incorporating this list, or ones like it, aims to take out the foundation of “isms” and start replacing it with more sound footing.



Contributing Author
Jason Gladfelter

Owner, Vombuds—Virtual Ombudsman

Helping small businesses promote excellence, increase organizational learning & participation, decrease litigation, avoid bad publicity, promote positive employee relations, & enrich problem solving abilities. Vombuds is a confidential, informal, independent, and neutral first stop for tensions, complaints, and general discussion. Big corporations, governments, universities, and organizations benefit from Ombudsman programs. Now, small businesses can as well.

* Through a conflict management lens, it seems that the “isms” are not fully understood. When asked to explain what an “ism” is, most people respond with an example or definition. But where do “isms” come from? How do they begin, sustain, and grow? Without knowing these core answers, we cannot address them. This article looks to help mitigate the sustainment and growth of “isms”, without going into their origins.