

COMBATING DISRUPTIVE CONDUCT

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By Karla Hignite

Barbara Butterfield (butterfield@sibson.com) has more than 40 years of experience in higher education, including appointments as chief human resource officer at the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University, and the University of Michigan. She currently is a senior consultant for Sibson Consulting, a division of Segal. In this interview with HR Horizons, Butterfield discusses the problem of "disruptive conduct" within the academy and how to build a culture that defines values and promotes expectations for positive workplace relationships and civil engagement among colleagues campuswide. She is currently writing a book for which the issue of disruptive conduct is one chapter of a broader focus on how to measure effective human capital investments and positive performance within the academy.

What are the dynamics of "disruptive conduct" and how does this differ from what many might consider or label as bullying?

Bullying is a term more often used to discuss how teens and younger people treat one other. In an academic context, this is better understood in terms of abrasive or disruptive conduct. Disruptive conduct can encompass the full range of acts of intimidation or attempts to demean another individual—from dismissive gestures and sarcastic comments to full-blown name-calling, public criticism, and personal attacks on character.

In the context of higher education, as one progresses in his or her career within the academy, two characteristics become major components of success. One is performance, and the other is conduct. One might perform brilliantly or generate highly regarded research, yet exhibit behavior that is questionable or that falls within that gray area between what is acceptable or unacceptable. The conduct itself may not break any laws, but instead of making an effective contribution to the institution and to the work of colleagues, an individual's conduct may in fact serve to denigrate others and thus work against institution values of collaboration, civility, and productivity.

Can you say more about what makes this conduct "disruptive"?

The term *disruptive* is apt because it encompasses inappropriate conduct and results in adverse effect on the relationships and productivity of an entire work group. In one example, I was doing some executive coaching for a leader at a private university that was experiencing a great deal of turnover at the middle-management level. Institution leaders were concerned about the drain on employee morale and the inability to retain top performers. Digging deeper, we discovered patterns of conduct on the part of an individual impacting the performance of the entire research team simply because the behavior was unchecked and unaddressed.

How would you characterize how the higher education sector as a whole is addressing this issue?

I have not formally researched this, but my impression from experience working in and consulting with institutions is that many colleges and universities do a fair job of conveying expectations for conduct for staff below management levels. However, most are less proactive in defining, clearly communicating, and actively encouraging adherence to professional expectations for faculty and administrative leadership. That said, among my most frequent requests these days is to address groups on matters of professional and disruptive conduct, so anecdotally I can attest to a growing level of interest in how to implement and socialize clear values, standards, and expectations.

Whose responsibility is it to address disruptive behavior within the institution?

This really constitutes a leadership challenge. Leaders must take responsibility to address employee performance and conduct across the board. It doesn't matter whether yours is a public or a private institution, you must be clear about the conduct expected from every member of the faculty, staff, and administration. Leaders must also model those behaviors and show the courage to address conflict.

What do you mean by showing courage?

It's one thing to accommodate an inadvertent error and an honest difference of opinion. It is another to tolerate intimidation or incivility. Where there are undefined expectations and a lack of leadership courage to address dysfunction, a pattern of conflict avoidance emerges and takes hold. Likewise, wherever a lack of consequences exists for a breach of acceptable conduct, the perpetrators are the ones who prosper.

When a climate of disrespect and intimidation is allowed to foster, "by-standing" becomes another version of conflict avoidance that becomes embedded among colleagues who feel powerless to confront what they see taking place-the "Am I glad that is not me" attitude.

Leadership must commit to develop a mutually supportive climate for productivity and success that eliminates any toleration for conflict avoidance in themselves and others.

What is the best way to address specific incidents of disruptive conduct?

When an incident occurs that is disrespectful, leadership must convene an immediate, confidential meeting to address the incident. This may require sorting out differences of interpretation about the incident. It also includes laying out expectations for corrected behavior. While it is not leadership's responsibility to repair relationships and is up to the perpetrator to make amends, leaders must remain firm about what must change and establish a timeline for addressing those changes. Follow-up is also crucial to ensure the necessary changes in conduct are taking place, providing support for positive change while also reiterating consequences and potential sanctions for individuals who fail to change their conduct.

What kind of sanctions are you talking about?

Possible sanctions for disruptive conduct in the academy may include freezing compensation, withholding or delaying consideration for a promotion, withdrawing access to discretionary resources, removal of supervisory responsibilities, academic or administrative admonishment, and possible loss of employment.

What steps must institution leaders take to build a culture that seeks to eliminate disruptive conduct?

For institutions that haven't yet done the work to develop, document, and communicate clear expectations regarding values and professional conduct, the first step is to collaboratively develop a set of expectations around professional conduct in support of the kind of culture to which the institution aspires. These expectations should be developed with input from many members of your faculty, staff, and administration, and they should be formalized through written guidelines and definitions. Once this is done, leaders need to ensure everyone is aware that from this point forward, guidelines are in place that detail expectations and identify consequences for disruptive conduct.

Some institutions have been quite successful at defining and documenting expectations for professional conduct and what this means to the entire campus community. Those expectations may incorporate broader discussions of institution values surrounding culture and conduct.

Can you say more about the nature of these values?

There are a variety of ways to talk about conduct. One term I have found that seems to be understood universally is the idea of professionalism. Others might refer to concepts of collegiality and civility. Every institution will define conduct in a slightly different way and with various value attributions, such as integrity, collaboration, ethical character, or respect. More important than the particular language used is for leaders to ensure that institution expectations and values surrounding conduct are clearly defined, communicated, and socialized into day-to-day conduct.

Using your preferred term, how does professionalism fit into this conversation about conduct?

Defined, professionalism consists of principles-the values upon which the framework of an institution's standards are based, and standards-examples of how actions meet principles. Standards of professionalism are expectations that support excellence and quality in an institution's environment of teaching, learning, research, and service. These standards provide guidance to all members of the campus community in the performance of their professional responsibilities. Any definition of professionalism should spell out associated standards so that all are clear what this means.

How do you maintain a positive culture surrounding conduct once you build it?

Building a culture of appropriate conduct requires not only communicating values, standards, and expectations regarding professional conduct and leadership modeling, but also helping to build skills in conduct in others through feedback, coaching, and conflict resolution so that these become engrained in individuals throughout the institution.

With a top leadership change, some institutions tend to reorient to the expectations of a new leader. Institutions with a strong focus on culture are more likely to maintain that culture through a leadership change.

What are the potential impacts if disruptive conduct is not addressed?

Leaders must first understand how these disruptive behaviors can take hold and grow ([see the "Disruptive Conduct Continuum" sidebar](#)) and consider the long-term impacts for tolerating dysfunction. These impacts go beyond individual relationships and work groups to the potential loss of public trust or harm to the institution's reputation.

Near the top of the list of reasons for leaders to care about disruptive conduct is the risk it poses on various fronts. For instance, when you consider the costs from legal settlements and paying out contracts for individuals you must let go, you realize that it is far less costly to focus on building a culture that doesn't tolerate disruptive conduct in the first place. Other potential costs to the institution include impacts on reputation and an inability to recruit and retain top talent. Disruptive conduct can also take a toll on employee productivity and health. This is an area where monitoring certain metrics can provide clues about the fairness and effectiveness of your culture.

What kind of metrics are helpful to monitor in this respect?

Among the metrics that may indicate drivers of dysfunction within an institution are segmented turnover, transfer requests, absentee rates, productivity rates, EAP use rates, medical insurance claims and pharmaceutical use, employee engagement surveys, and complaints in general. To effectively monitor the strength of an institution's culture, there should be strong collaboration between legal counsel, risk management, HR, EAP, and your ombuds office. Annual integrated incidence reporting will help track any escalation or decline in the strength of your culture.

That said, it is not enough to simply track these drivers of dysfunction. If leaders and unit leaders do not examine and act on the data further, they can't expect to change the culture surrounding conduct in a positive way. Real leaders will seek to understand the data in an effort to increase desired retention and increase remediation of negative conduct.

What is most important for leaders to keep in mind?

Leadership modeling and courage-don't let disruptive conduct take hold in the first place. This can be difficult if leaders themselves are unaware of the continuum of escalating dysfunction and how it can affect not only the victim, but also others around him or her. Accountability is a crucial component of this process. When you lay out clear expectations for conduct, you must hold all accountable even as you take action to improve conduct and model a culture that addresses conflict head-on.

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Disruptive Conduct Continuum—Examples

| Focus | Early | Escalating | Extreme |
|-------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Disruptive Person | Dismissive gestures Sarcastic comments | Blaming Undermining | Public criticism Personal attacks |
| Target of Disruptive Conduct | Anger Embarrassment | Betrayals Isolation | Turnover Increased absence |
| Affected Work Unit | Relief (we are not the target) Shock | Bystander silence Coalitions form | Social Media comments Mobbing |

Organization

| | | |
|----------|------------------------------|------------------------|
| Avoiding | No candid feedback to | Formal complaints |
| Denying | abrasive person | Abrasiveness viewed as |
| | Excuses – Abrasive person is | institutionalized |
| | high producer | |

Source: Preliminary research by Barbara Butterfield, Jerry Goodstein, and Rachel Schaming, March 2014.

Note: The examples above are excerpted from a longer list of behaviors that can take hold when early signs of disruptive conduct are not confronted and are allowed to escalate and become embedded as part of an institution's culture.

A CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE ON CONDUCT

The 2015 Consortium on Abrasive Conduct in Higher Education (CACHE) will be held June 23-24 at Harvard University. This will be the third annual CACHE, which seeks to develop an ongoing dialogue and thought leadership to explore and generate best practices in addressing the problem of abrasive conduct in the academy. The 2014 colloquium addressed the question of what it takes to solve the problem of workplace bullying in higher education, building on findings from the 2013 colloquium about required elements to become catalysts for change. For more information and to join the group via LinkedIn, go to <http://tinyurl.com/CACHEgroup>.