

## **The Power of Dignity in the Workplace**

by Monique Valcour

April 28, 2014

Imagine that you've been working in your job for a while. You enjoy your work, know how to do it well, and take pride in the results you produce. And then one day things change. Perhaps a new boss is hired from the outside, who doesn't talk to you or your colleagues in sufficient depth to understand what works well and what challenges you face. When you offer suggestions about how to improve performance, she ignores them. New policies and procedures are introduced — perhaps ones the boss applied in a different context or read about in a business school case. But they subvert the control and autonomy you have enjoyed in the past. They weaken opportunities for you to apply your expertise and rob you of the investment you've made in your work. Your ability to produce value for the organization is diminished — and so is your morale.

The situation above illustrates one of the most common themes in my executive students' reports of the worst experiences they've had with leaders. Leaders who undermine employee autonomy are corrosive because they undermine the *dignity* of work. This is a serious issue, because dignity is fundamental to well-being and

to human and organizational thriving. And since many of us spend the majority of our waking hours at work, work is a major

source of dignity in our lives.

Not many people would argue with this. Yet few managers receive any guidance on how to uphold dignity in their workplaces on a daily basis.

According to scholar Andrew Sayer, dignity is a fundamentally social phenomenon that arises through interaction, and therefore it depends on a mix of both independence and interdependence. It involves recognition and trust, as well as autonomy and self-mastery. In dignified work relations, people carefully avoid taking advantage of the inherent vulnerability of the employment relationship and power differentials in organizations. This is why *les formules de politesse*, like saying “Bonjour, Madame” at the bakery before ordering your bread, are such a big deal in France, where I spend most of my time. It’s a voluntary act that acknowledges that although the employee is there to serve the customer, she is a first and foremost a human being with dignity and the autonomy to decide how she will perform her job. (It’s also the secret to getting great customer service in France.) Likewise, in large organization settings, dignity exists when people are listened to and taken seriously regardless of their position – and feel they can disagree respectfully and be heard, without fear of reprisal.

Take this recent study of a turnaround at a badly performing hospital that had suffered poor quality of medical care, declining patient numbers, high staff turnover, and severe financial difficulties. The new CEO was determined to take full advantage of the knowledge and commitment of his experienced workforce. A history of labor-management disputes made the challenge daunting, but he managed to put in place a shared leadership model that relied on employees taking personal responsibility for improving the quality of care and reducing operating costs. He created representative councils to give employees meaningful involvement in shaping care practices and the quality of their lives at work. In the early phases of implementation, the researchers found that employees contributed most to the change initiative when they believed that

doing so would increase their control over their work and work environment. When they followed up three years after implementation, they discovered that the employees contributing most actively to the shared leadership program also expressed high trust in management and perceptions of fair treatment.

These hospital workers managed to turn things around because they were treated with dignity – which employees experience as self-worth, self-respect, and the respect of others, as sociologist Randy Hodson explains in *Dignity at Work*, the most comprehensive study of dignity in the workplace. Showing trust, granting autonomy, and recognizing the value of individual contributions all build employees' sense of ownership of their work and pride in performing it. (So does providing the option to work from home; it is appreciated by employees not only because it reduces work-life conflict, but also because expresses trust.) Greater ownership, and the motivation to do well that comes with autonomy, yield higher quality outcomes for customers.

Conversely, refusing to grant trust and autonomy and failing to recognize and respect employee contributions corrupt the very foundations of what makes work fulfilling.

Unfortunately, once dignity is assaulted, a downward spiral is often set in motion. Employees may respond by reducing their effort and commitment, which leads misguided managers, who may interpret such employee withdrawal as petulance or unwillingness to cooperate, to treat them with even less respect. The skilled manager, by contrast, understands that the first steps on the pathway to superior performance are to place as much control of work in the hands of employees as their capabilities

allow and to support their autonomous accomplishment of meaningful goals. The enlightened leader knows to treat people with dignity.

**Monique Valcour** is an executive coach, keynote speaker, and management professor. She helps clients create and sustain fulfilling and high-performance jobs, careers, workplaces, and lives. Follow her on Twitter @moniquevalcour.