



Some Causes and Cures for Entitlement in the Workplace

Entitlement: "The belief that one inherently deserves privileges or special treatment."

Whether it is a teenager thinking that a car is owed them at the age of 16 or a degreed college student expecting his first employer to offer him a handsome wage so he can pay off his school loans within a year or a new hire in the workplace that believes because of their previous training they should immediately begin the job in a first class position without working up through the ranks; a sense of entitlement is everywhere.

An executive coach states, "Entitlement is a mindset that says, 'I don't have to give much, but I expect that my employer/boss/co-workers will give me something, just because.'"

As I have been looking into this subject, I have taken note that there are some common characteristics of entitlement.

Common Traits of Entitlement:

- Resistance to feedback
- Overestimation of talents and accomplishments
- Expectation for increased benefits and advancement sooner than deserved
- Frustration with delayed gratification or perks
- Tendency to blame others for mistakes

- Bad attitude that has an "I want it now" feel about it
- Inability to adapt well to new responsibilities
- Not a team player

I'm telling you, this is a hot button issue with leadership and employers of smaller companies, not to mention employees who have entitlement junkies for bosses. And, by the way, entitlement doesn't discriminate between the ages. An older and more experienced worker can have an entitlement attitude as well. Perhaps because they have had more education and years under their belt or have had their own companies, they struggle with receiving direction and adapting to new ways of doing things because they are not used to playing second fiddle.



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Where does Entitlement Come From?

A Few Ideas:

1. Our Culture

In the past 35 years, at least, many have raised children with a “you are a winner and can do no wrong” message. I remember a psychologist saying that we have been coddling our children way too much with little challenge to work hard and grow. He said if our little Johnny strikes out at the plate these days, we applaud him and yell, “Good strike out, Johnny,” so as to not hurt his feelings!

I just watched a documentary on CNN about a former attorney for the mob that wasn't so clean himself and ratted on many of the mob's leaders in order to avoid prison time. He was shocked that after all the good he did, he still had to go to prison for 13 years for the bad he'd done prior! You talk about entitlement.

I also just read an HR expert state that all of the proposed incentives down through the years that companies have offered employees to keep them satisfied, may have done more harm than good.

Listen to a few of them:

- Employee carwashes in the parking lot
- Onsite flu shots
- Free pet owner insurance
- Attendance bonus programs for those who show up on time everyday
- The right kind of kale at the free salad bar

Seriously? Don't get me wrong, if there is legitimacy in retaining employees and creatively saying thank you for jobs well done, fine. But in the meantime, we can also create a sense of expectation and entitlement that will only grow with time. By the way, the employees that were compensated for consistently arriving on time were the very ones who were arriving on time before the bonus program began. Now they are being rewarded for what their inner work ethic always dictated without a bonus!

I was once interviewing the president of a private college on a talk show and asked him his opinion on what seemed more effective in terms of who pays the adult child's tuition. Was it to be the parents who should pick up the tab, the student, or both? His answer was revealing. He said, “Historically, my best students have not had a full ride and free tuition, but have had to participate in some way.”

My youngest son, Joe, told me when he was about 16 that one of his friends did not have a good relationship with his parents. When I asked why, he said, “Dad, his parents give him anything he wants and he disrespects them for it!”

2. Silver Spoons and Golden Platters

Something tells me that at least a part of entitlement comes from the fact that we have had it too easy in life (not at all meaning we haven't experienced hard knocks) and that much has been handed to us without a lot of effort on our part. Were we raised with a silver spoon in our mouth? Have we received much of what we have in life on a golden platter?

In working with a group of physicians recently, we were talking about the phenomena of entitlement in the clinic and one of them said, “Entitlement? Residency beat entitlement out of us.”

You have probably heard that we never really appreciate what we haven't had to work hard for. Metaphorically speaking, I think our fingernails are too clean and hands are too soft.

We have also heard there is no such thing as a free ride. There seems to be something substantive about working our way up the ranks, appreciating what we have, and patiently waiting for new opportunities to present themselves. The world doesn't owe us “just because.” We get out of the workplace what we put in.

So if you find yourself in a supervisory position and entitlement is becoming obvious for some, a few ideas might help:

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Advice for Management

1. Have a Candid Discussion

We know that entitlement can sour an attitude and permeate through the office quickly, so it never hurts to have an honest discussion about what the employee is exactly frustrated with.

It's time to sit with the entitled individual and have a heart-to-heart to see if this is the best position or job for them. Maybe out of that dialogue you can discern different responsibilities for them or at least send the message that their disposition needs to change. Attitude should truly be a part of the performance evaluation since an entitled one sends so many toxic signals to others. One of the biggest complaints I receive from staff members across the board is that leadership tolerates problematic behavior way too long.

2. Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

Entitlement isn't defined as such when promises or benefits have been promised to the employee and haven't been delivered. Maybe in the interview process there wasn't clarity about their position or benefits or perhaps a former supervisor (no longer there) made statements about advancement for the staff member that is now unrealistic to fulfill. Whatever the case, you may want to go back through previous discussions to decipher if an inappropriate expectation was inadvertently set for the employee.

However, they should also know that there is due process for advancement and that it works this way for all employees.

By the way, it has been suggested that a good way to detect entitlement characteristics in the interview process is by asking questions like:

a) Tell me about a time when you failed and made a big mistake at work. How did you go about addressing it? Since the entitled have a tendency to blame others for their mishaps, there will be very little ownership taken.

b) Ask about a situation in their past work experience where they couldn't accomplish a project on their own and what they did to solicit the help of others. A sense of entitlement isolates individuals from the team and it's all about them.

c) Inquire about past accomplishments. If they use the word "we" a lot and give credit to others that have helped them in their successes, that is healthy. On the other hand, if you hear the word "I" in every other sentence, there could be a problem.

Appreciating What We Have

In conclusion, it is so true to human nature that we truly don't appreciate what we have until we lose it. We seem to have a tendency to take work, people, and opportunities for granted.

I have recently developed some pain in my thumb due to overuse from years of enjoying my hobby of landscaping. I've been very limited in what I can do lately in my backyard. My orthopedic doctor told me I needed to go to "thumb school" to learn new ways to ergonomically use my thumb. It has been a major eye-opener for me. Even the everyday use of my thumb can be taken for granted and what I thoroughly enjoy is now missed.

Time and time again I have seen men retire because they "paid their dues," only to go back to work.



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Recently I've known of a clinician changing her job because she wasn't "treated right by co-workers," only to admit that she moved too quickly and now wants her job back.

If a job is not a good fit for you or administration truly lacks credibility and nothing is being done to address it, then it's probably time to relocate. However, if all you need is an entitlement adjustment, the best way to get one is to begin appreciating the job you have and become a solution rather than a problem!

For more information on training on this subject matter, click on the workshops link for: Attitude is Everything in the Workplace-Track #6 and Professionalism in the Workplace-Track #9.

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Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.