



DIGNITY IN THE WORKPLACE

The Latin word for dignity (*dignitas*) means “to be worthy.” From Randy Hodson’s *Dignity at Work*, the author describes dignity as “the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others.” When we have the opportunity to use our skills, become experts in our fields, and create positive outcomes for others, work—where we spend the majority of our waking hours—becomes a main source of dignity in our lives. At Pepperdine, showing dignity to others goes far beyond good business practice. It honors people made in the image of God.

The best supervisors treat staff with dignity by granting autonomy, demonstrating trust, balancing grace and accountability, assigning challenging tasks that stretch employee performance, involving employees in important conversations, encouraging growth, recognizing accomplishments, and fostering employee independence alongside team interdependence. Employees perform their best when they are treated as leaders, are asked to speak first, and are granted ownership of their time and responsibilities.

By contrast, supervisors fail to treat employees with dignity when they take advantage of the inherent vulnerability of power imbalances, subvert control and autonomy, weaken opportunities for employees to contribute real value, fail to recognize accomplishments, and ignore suggestions for improvements. This quickly turns into a downward spiral where discouraged employees reduce their effort, which causes managers to treat them with less respect and leads to further employee disengagement, among other undesirable outcomes. Morale is quickly diminished when employees are robbed of the opportunity to grow and see a task through to completion. This is often done unintentionally by failing to delegate responsibility, neglecting to provide effective feedback, and commandeering tasks rather than coaching employees toward success.

ACT IN FEBRUARY

1 Communicate information quickly and freely.

While certain pieces of information may be confidential, supervisors often withhold information by simply forgetting to pause and provide meaningful context. When supervisors are stingy with information or slow to communicate, it quickly leads to employees feeling left out or unimportant. Make employees feel valued by bringing them into conversations early and often.

2 Ask your direct reports for suggestions on how to improve processes and outcomes.

Every employee on your team has unique strengths and experiences with something meaningful to contribute. Ask employees what is working well and to identify irritants in their daily tasks. Rely on their expertise to create processes that provide a better experience for your stakeholders. By gaining their input, employees will experience the true satisfaction of adding value to create the best outcomes for Pepperdine and its students. Also consider how processes in your own department are experienced by end users and the ways you can improve those outcomes.

3 Demonstrate trust and grant autonomy by delegating challenging tasks.

Identify one thing on your to-do list that one of your employees would be challenged by, yet is capable of completing. As employees deliver challenging work, you gain confidence in their work and they gain confidence in themselves. When employees approach you with an obstacle, do not jump to solve it for them; rather, ask questions about their process, offer guidance based on your experience, be specific with feedback, and help them achieve success.