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More than Work; Domestic Violence can Spill into Workplace

By Tim McGuire

Your co-worker is always absent on Mondays. She's not doing her work well. You and your colleagues often cover for her. She wears long-sleeved clothes and uses a lot of makeup. Her husband calls the office constantly. He gets upset when she's not at her desk. Co-workers gossip and even suggest to the boss that something seems odd.

The boss firmly reminds you that work is work and home is home and makes it clear that it's none of your – or his – business. That's the idea behind "None of Our Business," a play that's been turned into a public television show that vividly connects domestic violence and the workplace.

The show is scheduled to make its debut in Minnesota in October. Its sponsors, Verizon Wireless and the Workplace Action Team in Ramsey County, hope to entice PBS stations throughout the country to air it. The play was written in 1997 by Marysue Moses and Alfred Harrison for the Workplace Action Team.

It brims with messages about how violence at home affects workplaces. It equips employees, supervisors and human resources departments with ways to prevent domestic and workplace tragedies. And it pointedly demonstrates liabilities a company risks by ignoring warnings of violence.

"None of Our Business" shows two parallel work situations. In one case, countless warnings of violence in the home are ignored at work until something terrible happens. In the other case, we watch a human resources supervisor successfully intervene to protect an employee from violence.

A powerful line in the play comes from a human resources professional who says to an obviously troubled employee, "I would rather risk offending you than not offer you the resources you need." The line is a discomfiting reminder that many supervisors and HR professionals worry way too much about offending people rather than offering help.

Ineffectual supervisors and a slow-to-respond human resources department are a key part of the play. The presentation should be sobering to companies convinced "something like this could never happen here." The supervisors in the play are convinced that, before they can act, there must be a serious performance issue. They seem to forget their responsibility to all the human psyches in their workplace.

The supervisors also fail to perceive the impact domestic violence has on productivity. At one point, it becomes obvious that if the supervisor had stepped in and taken action, an incredible amount of wasted time could have been saved.

The play is not a neat little package of obvious answers and happy endings. Yet it is effective in communicating the chaos domestic violence creates at work beyond the abuser and the abused. Other people can be put in jeopardy. The Verizon Wireless sponsorship of this production gives corporate credibility to an effort that should open eyes and make some people squirm in boardrooms, in offices and on plant floors.

As is always the case with good art, the play allows us to see issues we'd never see in a how-to manual. The teaching power of the play is why Verizon Wireless and the Workplace Action Team plan to make the show into a training video to help supervisors and managers develop workplace policies to deal with this problem. The video and DVD training tools will be marketed and sold through the Sheila Wellstone Institute beginning this fall.

“None of Our Business” forcefully reminds us that we must never make the boundaries between work and home so rigid that we become blind to important societal problems.

- Tip for your search: Do not go looking for trouble. However, if you are concerned about a problem at work, consider finding a co-worker with whom you can partner to report the problem behavior. Use a simple code. Would you like someone to speak up on your behalf if you were in a similar situation?
- Resource for your search: “Rude Awakenings: Overcoming the Civility Crisis in the Workplace” by Giovinella Gonthier with Kevin Morrissey (Dearborn Trade Publishing, 2002).

Contact Tim McGuire at tim@timjmcguire.com.

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