

Responding to Environmental Issues In the Workplace

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What is the environment? Who is responsible for the environment? Why should I care about the environment? These are questions that we often ask, but for a company what are the answers. The general environment is the surroundings or conditions in which a person, by extension the company operates. This will include interactions with the natural environment as well as the office dynamics. Due to their legal responsibility, employers need to protect the environment, their employees and neighbours. In doing so, a proactive approach to environmental compliance will help avoid litigation today or in the future, while promoting greater employee satisfaction within the company.

Across Barbados many businesses have subscribed to the green business model which has been driven by the current economic forecast. This was a reactive measure undertaken to rectify the company's financial position. While the bottom line is important, reactive responses do not effect changes in behaviour. Peter Drucker a management consultant once said, *"the first duty of business is to survive, and the guiding principle of business economics is not the maximisation of profit – it is the avoidance of loss..."* When a company has proactively managed their work environment and their natural environment, successful avoidance of loss is the end result.

Environmental issues in the workplace are a growing concern for companies, especially as it relates to employee health and safety. Bad air quality and ventilation as well as broken asbestos structures can lead to sick building syndrome, which can compromise the health and comfort of your employees. Not only can poor workplace environments reduce productivity, but research has shown they may be linked to asthma, lung cancer and other medical problems.

Yes, companies are in the business of making money, but there must an understanding of the dynamics of the environment within which they operate. If our operations degrade the environment it will have a domino effect on the ecosystem and workplace culture. If a company negatively impacts the environment, it later becomes difficult for the employees to work; when the employees are ill, the company operates at lower productivity levels. Less productivity means less money; so therefore we are back to square one – the bottom line.

To ensure the health and welfare of their workers, employers need to take affirmative steps to solve the problems. Confronting the problem makes business sense as it can positively impact absenteeism and contained insurance premiums. So how do Human Resource Officers/Managers respond to such concerns?

1. Listen to the concerns

Listening is key to effective communication, and especially when one is trying to get to the root of a problem. Without the ability to listen actively and effectively, messages are easily misunderstood – communication breaks down and the sender of the message can easily become frustrated or irritated. When an employee is disgruntled by what is happening around them, passive or silent listening is not the best choice, the listener must participate in the conversation and ask important questions to gain a full understanding of the concern and its effect on the employee.

2. Conduct Investigations / Risk Assessment

Triage the root cause of the problems to determine what went wrong. It will be necessary to obtain additional information from the employee to accurately analyse the root cause. It may be necessary to outsource an environmental consultant to conduct empirical testing to adequately identify the hazards.

3. Create a possible Action Plan

After the report has been compiled and all root causes identified, management and the safety committee should compile a corrective action plan, in an effort to avoid duplicating the problem. This action plan should itemise the concerns (hazards and risk) and the corresponding corrective measures. Additionally, a time line should be created with a person attached as liaison officer for the project.

4. Rectify the problem if possible or contact relevant authorities

It is best to contact an agency or organisation that has the capacity and the competency to conduct the work needed. Before selecting a company to conduct the work, ensure that sufficient due diligence has transpired. The organisation should seek to rectify the problem by using the best practice procedures for the particular hazard. Additionally, it is best to contact the Environment Protection Department before conducting any works to verify that any standards or general practices are met. For instance, only approved freighting companies can transport asbestos to the waste disposal site at Rock Hall, St. Philip.

5. Document Steps taken

It is always important to document procedures and actions taken for two main reasons. This action taken will provide a platform for any future concerns

and secondly, the documentation becomes evidence which could be used in court.

6. Report to staff on the progress

When possible, follow-up with the employee after sufficient time has elapsed to establish that the corrective action has been effective. Demonstrating compassion and attentiveness three days after a problem has been resolved, is a powerful message to show that management care about the individual employee and the entire staff compliment.

If you're unsure of the best approach for handling the concern seek assistance from credited sources. Dealing with complaints and handling employee concerns can be an overwhelming task ... but the risks of letting problems fester are even scarier!