

At Work: Be Forbearing, Be Kind, Be Steadfast

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If you think of the finest inner qualities of the best people you work with, you'll realize they're forbearing, kind and steadfast.

These essentially spiritual characteristics serve us well in our inner lives, but they also serve us especially well in our work lives. People with those qualities usually succeed in the workplace. They make true friends and allies. They build fellowship and unity. They're peacemakers and progress creators. They're trustworthy, helpful and genuine.

So how do we go about developing those admirable, attractive and amiable characteristics? The Baha'i teachings have some recommendations.

Be Forbearing

The Baha'i teachings urge us all to be forbearing with one another—to control ourselves when provoked. Baha'u'llah taught the principle of forbearance: **“Should anyone wax angry with you, respond to him with gentleness.”** – *The Most Holy Book*, p. 75.

Abdu'l-Baha further explained that the principle requires immediate forgiveness of the offender: **“If someone commits an error and wrong toward you, you must instantly forgive him.”** – *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 8.

Forbearance instructs us to let any hostilities, any aggression or any insults and slights die with you. The standard goes beyond gritting your teeth and bearing an insult—it also encourages us to not take any offense, as you cannot be offended and forgive the offender at the same time. Neither can you forgive with conditions or lingering resentment. This forbearing behavior can convince others that you bear them no ill will.

Of course, some workplaces commonly have open hostility and aggressive exchanges. (Perhaps you should just leave those jobs.) Many have passive aggression, and most all have well meaning

but inconsiderate people, or simply poor communicators, who can provoke conflict. A common expectation is that if you don't stick up for yourself in workplace conflicts, the problem is yours.

Keep a Kindly Tongue

When someone shouts at you at work, or you receive a flaming email, it may seem like you just have to react defensively—or be diminished. There is a middle way, however, and it starts with not contributing to the problem. Baha'u'llah wrote:

Defile not your tongues with the cursing and reviling of any soul, and guard your eyes against that which is not seemly. Set forth that which ye possess. If it be favourably received, your end is attained; if not, to protest is vain. Leave that soul to himself and turn unto the Lord, the Protector, the Self-Subsisting. Be not the cause of grief, much less of discord and strife. – Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 27.

Keeping a kindly tongue does not mean that you can't say whatever you need to say, it just means that you wouldn't be wise to say it however you *want* to say it. A kindly tongue maintains a high standard of communication with careful messages and active listening. Sometimes poor communication is part of a company culture. Have you ever gotten a terse email that could be read in more than one way? We all have—but that doesn't mean we have to respond the same way.

Many organizations coach employees to “assume positive intent.” Whether you're an employee, a partner or the boss, assuming positive intent is a good tool for changing your frame of reference. You can use this tactic to go from feeling like you must defend yourself, to assuming that there must be a perfectly innocent and reasonable explanation for the other person's challenging behavior. What a great way to avoid workplace conflict! Commit to yourself that whenever you feel attacked, you will first check in with your assailant in an open and accepting way. You'll be amazed at how that approach defuses hostility and creates lasting friendships and alliances.

The modern workforce operates as a team. In healthcare, software development, food preparation, factory jobs, agriculture, and just about everywhere else, teamwork is paramount. That's because, when working together, a team of people produces more than the potential sum of each individual's effort. As a leader or member of a team, the unity of the team must be paramount—because nothing kills productive potential faster than hostility, harmful behavior or hurt feelings.

When working with a team of people, and especially in any leadership role, you have great responsibility to keep a kindly tongue. Baha'u'llah wrote:

In truth, the hearts of men are edified through the power of the tongue, even as houses and cities are built up by the hand and other means. – *The Most Holy Book*, p. 77.

Be Steadfast

The culture of the workplace functions just like any other culture: it will support behavior in agreement with the accepted norms, and challenge behavior outside of those norms. This can

make going against the grain difficult, requiring steadfastness. Demonstrate an open mind, call yourself to account, offer forbearance and a kindly tongue—and do not relent. Stick to your principles. Own it when you fall short of these standards, and resolve to keep at it. You may not be able to single-handedly dictate your company culture, but you can always endeavor to be someone you are proud to be:

Be ye confident and steadfast; your services are confirmed by the powers of heaven, for your intentions are lofty, your purposes pure and worthy. God is the helper of those souls whose aim is to serve humanity and whose efforts and endeavors are devoted to the good and betterment of all mankind. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 449.