

BALANCE

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Protocols for Political Talk & Workplace Productivity

According to a 2007 survey by Vault (a career information and research firm), 66 percent of respondents say that their coworkers discuss politics at work, while 46 percent have witnessed a political argument at the office. If you're talking high-spirited politics, here are a few rules to keep your office productive and harmonious. Remember that a particular political viewpoint is a set of ideas and has no bearing on an individual's integrity or intelligence. Never allow political disagreements to become personal. Always take care to avoid inflammatory language, personal insults and sweeping generalizations. Allow your sensibilities to be guided by basic courtesy. A good rule of thumb is to follow the same conversational etiquette that you would follow if you were a dinner guest in your coworker's home.

Give 10 Minute Breaks More Respect

Ten-minute breaks can be powerful recovery periods for managing stress. Try to avoid heading for the staff kitchen or a coworker's cubicle on break since you'll shortchange the health benefits. Instead, go on a quick walk, go to the lounge on another floor or head around the corner and sit on a bench. If possible, leave your cell phone, pager and BlackBerry behind. The complete shift in focus is what maximizes these mini-rejuvenators.

Affected by a Mentally Ill Family Member

Each year millions of people are diagnosed with mental illness. Family members commonly feel an overwhelming sense of helplessness and anxiety and may secretly blame themselves for the mental illness, believing that something they did caused it. Since family members are often the key to successful intervention, empower your ability to cope and intervene by the following:

- 1) Learn about the mental illness, including its signs and symptoms, so you can act sooner to intervene.
- 2) Avoid falling into traps of shame or guilt. Reach out for support from professionals or self-help support groups.
- 3) Don't ignore the needs of children. Let them know they are not to blame for mental illness, and provide them with suitable information.
- 4) Understand the patient's responsibility for managing illness—a key principle in chronic disease management. Work with professionals to appropriately reinforce the patient's management of the illness and know the laws pertaining to involuntary hospitalization in case you need legal help.
- 5) Take care of yourself! Being affected by a family member with mental illness will take a toll on your own mental health. Schedule activities that are fun and also make sure you have social support.



Work and Sleep

According to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the average adult is now getting less than seven hours a night of sleep and nearly a third report being so sleepy in the daytime that it has interfered with their work and social living. Back in 1910, the average person slept nine hours a day.

Why are people getting less sleep? According to a survey from the National Sleep Foundation (NSF), the average American worker puts in nine hours and 28 minutes on the job per day, and more than half of them are bringing their work home with them; and 20 percent of those workers are doing work-related functions at home for more than 10 hours a week.

In the same survey, the NSF found that people working 50 hours or more a week indicate that they have greater impatience with others, more difficulty concentrating and notice their productivity was lower than expected when compared to people who work 30-39 hours a day.

Sleep may be a major factor in that difference, as a good night's sleep helps improve memory and cognitive functioning. According to the HHS, studies have shown that people are better able to learn tasks and remember what they learned if they are well-rested.

Sacrificing sleep also seems to have a negative impact on and off the job. Of the people who reported sleeping less than six hours a night, significantly more were likely to:

- work longer hours per week; have drowsiness that interferes with their activities;
- take 30 minutes or more to fall asleep at night;
- use a "sleep aid" at least a few nights a week;
- and be at risk for insomnia and other sleep disorders.

Sleep can also be a major factor on the job for night shift workers. Because the natural internal "biological clock" of your body is largely governed by light, people are, on average, more productive in the day

than at night. According to the HHS, more than two-thirds of nighttime workers have sleepiness when awake on the job and trouble sleeping when going to bed. Night shift workers are more at risk for getting into car crashes and one study found that one-fifth of night shift workers reported getting into a crash or a near miss in the preceding year from sleepiness on the drive back home from work. They are also more at risk for running into physical problems like heart disease, digestive problems and mental health issues.

The HHS recommends the following tips for night shift workers:

- Increase your total amount of sleep time by taking naps.
- Make sure your work area is brightly lit.
- Drink caffeinated beverages only during the first part of your shift.
- Eliminate sound and light distractions in your bedroom during daytime sleep.

Attitude-Changing Secrets

Scott Hamilton, the famous Olympic skater, once said: "The only disability in life is a bad attitude." How well we master positive thinking is reflected in how we behave and interact with others. Our attitude says something about how we are doing with our most important job—living.

To fire up a new attitude, practice thinking and believing things that support the attitude you want. The more you practice this, the faster change can occur. Try this "cloud seeding" technique: As you are lying in bed at night, mentally check-off all that you have done well that day and focus on what went right. As a new attitude unfolds, you'll not only feel and act happier, but you'll also notice more opportunities.

Saving Money and the Earth

In 1970, the U.S. government designated April 22 as Earth Day in order to celebrate past accomplishments, bolster awareness and create new goals in order to lessen our impact on the Earth. Increasingly, awareness of how we impact the earth—and how it, in turn, impacts us—has become an emerging theme in our daily lives. Yet, sometimes more awareness can be overwhelming—where do I start? Where do I find information? Will it cost more money? As it turns out, some of the simplest acts can have a huge impact—and can end up saving us money. Here are 10 ideas that can get you started today:

- Buy compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFL). It costs a little more upfront, but CFLs save in energy costs and last longer than standard lightbulbs. A single 60- to 100-watt bulb can save you \$30 to \$36 in energy costs over the life of the bulb. Also, if every household in the U.S. replaced one light bulb with a CFL, it would prevent enough pollution to equal removing one million cars from the road.
- Turn off lights and unplug appliances when not in use—appliances use electricity even when they're turned off but plugged in.
- Do some household maintenance: check your hot-water heater to make sure it's set at 120 degrees (many are set higher, which requires more energy and raises the risk of scalding); change the air filters in your ventilation system; vacuum the coils behind your refrigerator to make sure it's operating as efficiently as possible; insulate your home, water heater and pipes.
- Utilize different modes of transportation (bus, carpool, walk, bike, subway, train, etc.) as much as possible. Avoiding just 10 miles of driving every week would eliminate about 500 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions a year.
- Use the Energy Star program (www.energystar.gov) to find energy efficient products for your home. The right choices can save families about 30 percent (\$400 a year) while reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.
- Contact your power supplier to see if “Green Power” (renewable resources such as wind or solar) is available for your home’s electricity. You can even get refunds from the government if you choose to switch to a clean energy producer, and you can also earn money by selling the energy you produce and don’t use for yourself.
- Use less water and look for the WaterSense label to identify water-efficient products and programs. For more information, go to: www.epa.gov/watersense/index.htm
- Reduce how much you use, reuse what you can, and then recycle as much as possible.
- Learn more about toxins and how to handle them properly. A database of household products is available at <http://hpd.nlm.nih.gov>
- Buy locally grown and produced foods. The average meal in the United States travels 1,200 miles from the farm to your plate. Buying locally will save fuel and keep money in your community.

For more tips and information, visit: www.earthday.gov

Your Performance Exceeding Standard

Everyone enjoys that coveted prize on their performance review—the outstanding performance rating (also known as “exceeds standard”). Do you have a solid understanding with your supervisor about how to get it if this hasn’t been sufficiently described? Or are your fingers crossed each year just before your review? Most employees don’t ask, “Can we discuss the criteria for “outstanding performance?” To get that top rating, discussion of it is required. Define it with specifics so you can work toward it all year.



The Family Plan

Late night school practices, fast-food dinners, cramming for tomorrow's schoolwork, sports events, errands, housework—now repeat. If this routine rings familiar and you can't give anything up (right now), how do you reduce family stress? Those who've done it say the trick is to implement "family management rules."

- 1) **The Huddle:** Organize a family meeting to discuss how to make the week less stressful.
- 2) **Map It Out:** Agree on the weekly routine. Include completing homework and getting ready for school (the night before); doing chores—who, what and when; what activities are scheduled; and when the lights go out for bedtime. This organizing effort will reduce stress; it won't turn you into robots.
- 3) **Recharge:** Weekends are also busy, but find several hours of family alone time and just have fun. If it can't be all day, try only a few hours.
- 4) **Weekly Summit:** Meet to analyze and make adjustments for the following week. Pass out kudos (and cookies).

Practice with the Small Stuff

Working in a fast-paced and sometimes nutty environment can leave you so wired that any frustrating experience (no matter how small) begins to stimulate an overblown emotional response. You just missed your bus...You spilled coffee all over your shirt ...Your neighbor's unraked leaves keep blowing into your yard...You keep tripping over your spouse's shoes...

Use these small challenges as practice sessions to gain better control by taking a deep breath or counting to five and then reminding yourself about what is really important in your life. Once you have calmed down, continue to deal with the situation, if needed.

By managing your emotions during the small challenges, you'll also develop an ability to better manage the more significant stress-inducing events.

To speak with an EAP professional,
please call: **800.327.2384**

