

## Six

# EARNING RESPECT AT THE WORKPLACE

*In the world of business, performance commands respect,  
performance sets you apart, performance gives you an advantage.*

—Niyi Taiwo

Now let's return to a brighter side. We have already established that there are three categories of respect—human respect, positional respect, and earned respect. We have also established that the common theme, or binding thread, for these three categories is your *value system*. Recall also that earned respect is the one category that you control most of your life. So how do you earn respect?

There are various venues where you stand to establish and gain respect. The most common include the following:

- |                                  |                                |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| home (family)                    | worship house (congregation)   |
| hangout (friends / peers)        | social event (social group)    |
| school (classmates)              | public domain (general public) |
| workplace (employer / coworkers) | foreign country (hosts)        |

With the exception of full-time retirees, full-time students, and young children, most of us are employed in one capacity or another at a place of work. Our employer and the workplace represent a location where we spend a good part of our daily lives. Therefore, I'd like to cover the workplace venue in this chapter and defer discussion of the other venues to the next chapter.



Employers hire you to serve in a specific role and perform clearly defined functions or tasks. These activities are linked to other functions or tasks within the larger organization, all for the purpose of providing a value-added product or service (or both) to customers. In return for performing these functions or tasks, an employer offers you remuneration in the form of a salary, bonus, health benefits, retirement benefits, or more. Your job function is usually equated to a seemingly, but not always, appropriate level of remuneration.

In my experience working for and with a variety of large, medium, and small companies, one formula has proved successful time and time again for achieving and maintaining workplace respect. This four-step formula consists of the following:

- Step I: Act professional
- Step II: Respect superiors
- Step III: Respect peers and subordinates
- Step IV: Be a performance employee

## **STEP I: ACT PROFESSIONAL**

There is a reason why you were selected for a job with an employer. There is an expectation of you, by your manager and other superiors and by your subordinates, if any. These expectations include dressing appropriately, coming to work on

time, performing the duties for which you are being paid, and adhering to workplace policies, including work ethics and safety measures. These expectations are the norm with most workplace positions around the world.

If you serve in a management position, with subordinates reporting to you, try to set an example for proper professional behavior. Spend some time to review your employer's manual on workplace code of conduct, if one exists. Whether you realize it or not, your team will take their cue from you. Your professional conduct and management style will be perceived as a reflection of the company culture.

#### *The PF Zone*

*As I indicated earlier, I once served as the manager of an information technology development group for a financial services firm. As the head of the group, I established certain standards of professional behavior which I also practiced. One of such standards was the absence of profanity (foul language) in the workplace. I communicated this message to all members of my staff, and I showed leadership by practicing what I communicated.*

*I soon became known for my "Profanity-Free Zone" in the workplace, and this effort created an atmosphere of respect and professionalism for my group and for most other business units that we worked with.*

## **STEP II: RESPECT SUPERIORS**

There is also an expectation of respect for people in higher-level positions. This is part of the hierarchical structure that we discussed previously, common to all business environment. This form of respect expected of you is positional respect. Regardless of the qualities of a person serving in a superior role, you should exhibit a capability of showing respect for the position, for reasons that we have examined previously. Due respect, when shown,

never goes unnoticed. It may not always be acknowledged, but it registers mentally.

### **STEP III: RESPECT PEERS AND SUBORDINATES**

There is an expectation by your peers and subordinates, if you have any, to be treated fairly and respectfully. Many people fail in this area, especially with subordinates.

Subordinates, and sometimes peers, represent individuals who may prove to be critical to your success within a position of a company. Subordinates work to fulfill the tasks delegated to them in an effort to support your objectives and goals. It is therefore paramount that you gain and maintain their loyalty and commitment by affording them due respect as employees. This includes listening to them, soliciting their input and opinion, and recognizing their contribution. This approach indeed reciprocates (earned) respect.

### **STEP IV: BE A PERFORMANCE EMPLOYEE**

This final step of the formula is where 80 percent or more of employees do not excel. I have seen this all too often. A performance employee is not someone who comes in daily to fulfill his or her job duties while acting professionally. You are already getting paid to do this.

To be a performance employee, you have to operate consistently well above the norm—not once in a while, not only when you are called upon, but rather on a sustained basis. Also, you have to achieve results that matter to your superiors and to the company. This in turn requires full understanding of what matters to your superiors and to the company—that is, goals and priorities.

A performance employee is a problem solver—an initiator of ideas that lead to solutions to problems or improvement of existing standards. You know that you are a performance employee

when you have a reputation for quality work, high performance standards, and when you are highly sought for high-profile and very important special projects or initiatives.

*When it's crunch time, high performers rise to the occasion while others retreat.*

—Niyi Taiwo

Being a performance employee does not imply that you work hard all the time. Rather, it means that you work smart all the time and work hard when necessary. This is the secret work style of performance employees, and this almost always commands (earned) respect.



So how do you become a performance employee? What can you do to achieve this status? How long does it take? Here are some guidelines.

First and foremost, further your education. Most young adults believe that once they sail through college graduation day (undergraduate or graduate), then their education days are over. Wrong! The fact is, much of what you learn in college is only a part of the foundational knowledge that you need to establish a successful career. There was a time when you would go to college, study in a particular field, pursue employment with companies that utilized that field (of study), and work with one or two such firms your entire career. Well times have changed. Nowadays, you find people who go to college to study in a particular field and end up pursuing a career in a totally different area. This has become a common practice. Of course there are some exceptions as with doctors, nurses, pharmacists, scientists, and other expert occupations.

In an article written by my mother, currently in her late sixties, early in 2007, for a newsletter publication about her secondary-