Ten Secrets for Eliminating a Drama-Based Culture

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The other day I received a call from the office manager of a company looking for help with workplace drama and conflict. She shared her observation that there was too much gossip, wasted time, avoidance and tension in the office. I asked her what the company tried so far to address the drama-based culture. She said they had “told everyone to stop.” Unfortunately, she reported, after a brief lull, it all started back up; only this time more secretly and subversively.

Just Tell Them to Stop!

After delivering a keynote at a recent conference, a woman approached the table where I was signing books and eagerly grabbed a handful of our “no drama” stickers. She proudly announced to everyone nearby, “I’m going to put this sticker on my office door because I simply don’t allow drama.”

Zero tolerance for drama doesn’t work.

Drama-based Culture

Drama-based culture operates with the following rules of engagement.
1. We are not transparent about how we really feel.

2. We communicate indirectly, especially when emotions are involved.

3. We avoid accountability.

4. We try to solve everybody’s problems except our own.

5. We use fear, guilt, or intimidation to get what we want.

6. We worry more about being justified than being effective.

7. We don’t talk about the rules of engagement.

*Culture is the environment created by how your behavioral norms are lived out.*

Drama-based culture suffers from lack of safety, lack of curiosity, and lack of consistency. And the cost is staggering. A study commissioned by CPP Global estimated the annual cost of workplace conflict in the US to be $359 billion in lost productivity and time spent dealing with conflict. Add to this the psychological, physical, and emotional toll and the drag on our economy is colossal.

**The Secret to Creating a No-Drama Culture**

It’s unrealistic to eliminate drama completely, but low-drama cultures are possible. What is the alternative to drama?

**Compassion.**

Compassion originates from the Latin root meaning “to struggle with.” Compassion-based cultures engage in positive conflict for the purpose of creating something amazing. They engage in conflict without casualties.

**The secret is in changing the rules of engagement.**

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Compassion-based cultures operate according to different rules of engagement. The Compassion Cycle is a model for building a no-drama culture which encompasses three core competencies (Open, Resourceful, Persistent) and three critical choices (State your wants, Let go and move on, Stop and listen) to remove drama. Together, they form six rules of engagement.
The Rules

There are four additional rules to ensure the three compassion skills and three choices are successfully applied. Here are the ten rules of engagement for drama-free cultures.

1. **We are open** | Openness is about courageous transparency and a spirit of non-judgmental acceptance of people and their experiences. We practice openness by showing empathy, validating each other, and disclosing our honest emotions without blaming anyone or expecting anyone to fix them.

2. **We state our wants** | We verbalize our needs, desires, and emotional end-goals not because we expect anyone to fulfill them, but because we know we are worthwhile.

3. **We are resourceful** | Resourcefulness is about curious and creative problem-solving. We approach problems with open minds. We check assumptions and ask questions when we aren’t sure. We don’t restrict information or resources that might be helpful. We encourage people to try new directions, make mistakes without fear and fail forward.

4. **We let go and move on** | We acknowledge that choices come with consequences and moving forward requires grieving the loss of what could have been. We aren’t stuck trying to control each other or the future.

5. **We are persistent** | Persistence is about finishing what we start, making good on our promises, and aligning word and deed. We talk to each other about boundaries, goals, and standards. We strive for excellence and ask the same of each other.

6. **We stop and listen** | We know striving takes a toll on mind, body and soul. So we make time to rest, reflect, rejuvenate and check-in with each other.
7. **We accept conflict as a necessary and healthy part of authentic relationships** | Conflict is simply the energy generated by the gap between what we want and what we experience. How we use that energy distinguishes drama from compassion.

8. **We believe compassion and accountability can co-exist** | Compassion without accountability gets us nowhere. Accountability without compassion gets us alienated.

9. **We train and practice every day** | We know that to exchange drama for compassion requires new attitudes, behaviors and beliefs. This takes training, coaching and practice.

10. **We build it into everything we do** | Everywhere you look, you will see compassion rules of engagement embedded. They are in our policy manual, our performance conversations, our meetings, our daily interactions, even in how we apologize to each other.

The Compassion Cycle is a comprehensive model for how people build resilience to drama and lead themselves and others toward compassionate accountability. Follow the arrows to avoid drama in day-to-day interactions. Use the entire model to map the most effective approach for a change initiative. Order matters, and you’ll get the best results if you apply the first six rules in the order listed.