

Workplace Distress: The AFP line is busy, please hold!

Pending the audit of AFP's human resources management, SUD continues to tirelessly support employees experiencing difficulties. In listening to them, we have observed a pattern of selective and systemic neglect of their experiences, which contrasts with management's stated commitment to ensuring the well-being of all.

Over the course of various meetings with management in recent months, we have heard a great deal of astonishment from management. How could a case of suffering at work have escalated to the point of triggering an alert DGI (serious and imminent danger), an external investigation, and the intervention of the labor inspectorate? Why are cases "not reported to us", asked the HR department? Why are we informed when it is already too late and the employee's health has deteriorated and the conflicts have become inextricable? Management has gone so far as to ask the labor inspectorate and the unions to propose ideas when it is up to them, as management professionals, to find improvements, even though staff representatives are there to help vet their proposals.

We're concerned about the commitment to change. "We've launched an audit," senior managers have said as if this satisfies their obligations. Yet, we can already clearly see the problem of reports that have been brought to the attention of management are stuck at a standstill. If procedures to prevent harassment and workplace suffering prove insufficient, it's worth closely examining the process for an average employee to raise and resolve their difficulties. Experience shows that conflicts between employees of the same hierarchical status, though rarer, can be addressed promptly and thoroughly. But the process doesn't work well when an employee faces difficulties with their manager.

Instead of listening... confrontation

When a complaint concerns a manager, SUD has noted that management listens and moves slower. There are considerable errors, such as involving the manager in analyzing the situation when he or she is himself or herself implicated, thereby giving the advantage to one version of the story instead of putting each version on an equal footing and considering the hierarchical relationship as an aggravating factor in the situation. Instead of listening in a way that provides reassurance for the employee in difficulty, confrontation is systematically favored, giving rise to minimization and intimidation. What we hear during these confrontations is never the observation of a management error, but always a lack of skills or, worse, of "interpersonal skills" on the part of the employee, who often only demands an improvement in their working conditions. According to the investigation reports, an employee who questions their hierarchy is systematically described as failing and their work belittled. No wonder many employees come away feeling humiliated.

Management also maintains that the overall situation at the Agency is not so serious since the employees concerned don't resign. But as the company doctor's latest annual report states, AFP staff are committed to the company and determined to improve it

rather than abandon it. They therefore persist in seeking a hearing, providing clear evidence and often even constructive ideas to resolve the conflict. This is where the problem deepens: not only does the Human Resources Department struggle to challenge management, but this bias is compounded by listening that is never followed by action, broken promises, and waiting times for an appointment or even a simple acknowledgment of receiving an alert by an employee.

Faced with conflicts that have escalated, management resorted to contacting external service providers to provide the Health, Safety, and Working Conditions Commission) for solutions. And at the same time, it has pleaded excuses for its lack of action. "It's in the past," "the alleged victim took too long to inform the right people," "it's one person's word against another," leading to the classic and despairing conclusion: "We lack the elements constituting moral harassment." So what then? Nothing: Case closed. This is too legalistic an approach. Let's look at it from a medical perspective: Does a doctor, upon seeing an infected wound, wait, without doing anything further, for a miraculous improvement? Experience has shown that management lets the situation fester and ends up suggesting amputation.

An obstacle course for employees in distress?

It's clear that open conflict with a manager also creates social isolation. Colleagues in the same service find themselves in a delicate position, with the risk of falling out with their manager. This situation is detrimental to team spirit and undermines performance. This is why it's important to resolve situations urgently: the colleagues of an employee in conflict with their manager shouldn't have to choose one side or the other to preserve their own working conditions, nor should they have to endure a tense atmosphere in their workspace. But just as waiting for a miracle is never a solution, removing an employee from their team only exacerbates their suffering, and discourages others from coming forward.

Yet, in a recent case of alleged sexual harassment and assault, management demonstrated its ability to react quickly, take the initiative, and treat serious matters in the manner they deserve. We can only welcome the social and workplace evolution where sexist behavior and sexual violence is no longer acceptable. But what about psychological violence? When an employee must stand firm despite the denigration of their skills, or even their person? When they must find the courage to open up and talk about their suffering, and the strength to insist on getting a response? Is this the obstacle course that the AFP is proposing victims?

SUD categorically refuses to let employees navigate this path alone and calls on everyone to speak out and seek support. There is a whiff of panic in management's response to the latest economic threat to the Agency. In trying too hard to manage that threat it coldly calls "polarization," there is a great risk of forgetting the human in Human Resources. Neglecting current crises to focus on other projects, however important they may be, will cost the Agency and its employees dearly as long-term success of the Agency depends on the well-being of its employees.

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SUD-AFP (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy)