

Skip the cuss jar--just take the right steps to keep the language clean



If you think profanity is only spewed in workplaces such as lumberyards, auto parts warehouses and off-shore oil platforms, think again. Try also accounting firms, medical clinics and beauty salons. In other words, it's everywhere. And it rolls off the tongues of both men and women for all sorts of reasons.

Maybe your workplace has a policy against crusty language on the job. Many places don't.

If yours doesn't, don't just sit back and let your ears ring from the F-bombs bursting in air as the cuss jar quickly fills up to bankroll the next pizza party. As a boss, you need to temper the language, if not put a downright stop to it.

Here are some points to ponder:

Since nasty words affect different people in different ways, you're going to have an employee or two who will take profanity as an affront to their sensibilities. Others aren't bothered at all. But a crescendo of crustiness could open your organization to accusations of hostility, sexual harassment and discrimination. That, of course, leads to costly litigation, embarrassment and bad PR. Just keep in mind that many managers get dragged into employees' lawsuits and must squirm through a deposition.

Consider the context: Do people use it as adjectives to describe their co-workers, their bosses or certain aspects of their jobs (or worse, customers)? Or is it directed at the copier when it goes into mangling mode? Or perhaps the vulgar word is used in a moment of passion, like when a huge contract proposal was accepted or a high-dollar client was lost. You'll need to make the distinction and act accordingly. But never tolerate any profanity that's directed at people. That's bullying.

It's unprofessional. According to a CareerBuilder.com survey, four of five hiring managers believe that the use of curse words brings the employee's professionalism into question. Others are concerned with the lack of control and the low level of maturity. Many think swearing at work makes an employee appear less intelligent.

Avoid using foul words yourself. A manager sets the tone. Thus a boss who curses with impunity is

essentially allowing that type of culture to fester. Take the higher road. Develop a vocabulary that motivates on an intelligent level, not a boorish one.

It's not a First Amendment right. An employee may argue that it's his First Amendment right to use words he chooses. Not so in the private workplace. The First Amendment protects citizens against the *government* restricting speech, not a private employer.

Cal Butera is the editor of Business Management Daily's *Office Manager Today*, *Manager's Legal Bulletin*, *Managing People at Work* and *Communication Briefings* newsletters. He has been with Business Management Daily since 2007 and worked 22 years for midsize daily newspapers as sports writer, news reporter, layout and design editor, copy editor and city editor.
