

Smokeless Offices without Inflamed Tempers

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By Mortimer R. Feinberg and Aaron Levenstein

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After New York Mayor Ed Koch issued regulations limiting smoking in public buildings, he said he would seek curbs on smoking in nonpublic offices too. But even in the absence of specific legislation, mounting esthetic objections to smoking to the office have forced companies to consider sweeping changes in policies.

Tort law may result in damage suite against employers who compel employees to work ta a toxic atmosphere created by colleagues who smoke. C&P Telephone Co., target of a \$110,000 medical-expenses suit, is taking no chances on future lawsuits and has informed its employees that any one person may effectively call for a smoking ban in his work unit.

This issue is serious business-and business had better take it seriously. Proprietors of public places such as restaurants have already been required in many communities to provide segregated areas for smokers or to install ventilation systems that will keep the fumes away from nonsmokers. Such costs, however, are relatively small. A much more difficult and potentially more explosive problem is the in ternecine warfare that may break out, or be stepped up, among employees. Mayor Koch's original draft of his proposed ordinance, without defining terms, said that "any employee in a place of employment shall have the right to designate his or her work area as a nonsmoking area."

For most employers, the key problem is the potential resistance from addicted smokers. To be sure there are always prin cipled objections like that of a New York Chamber of Commerce spokesman who says: "We oppose government intervention in the workplace." But 1986 does seem rather late to raise that issue.

Some executives anticipate conflict among employees, union opposition led by cigar-chomping officials, and loss of production as workers sneak off to a smoking area. It is not unreasonable to expect that some executives will slip out of meetings more frequently if the smoke-filled conference room exists only in nostalgia.

We conducted a mini-survey on smoking in the office among executives in various industries, and received 159 responses. While not a basis for projecting national trends, the responses indicate manag ement is confident that-except for minor disruption-it can handle the smoking problem with or without legislation.

About 80% of our respondents say that a smoking ban in their facility would have "no effect" or a mere "temporary effect" on job performance. A substantial minority - 12% - even accepts the notion that smoking bans, far from interfering with production, may even advance company interests. That coincides with the view of Joseph Califano Jr., chairman of Chrysler Corp.'s employee health care committee and former secretary of health, education and welfare in the Carter administration, who cites this example:

"A program at Johnson & Johnson encouraging employees to quit smoking, and to eat and exercise properly, has slashed absenteeism by 20% and hospitalizations by 30%, recapturing three times the cost of the company's effort."

Some 58% of our respondents stated they had clearly designated no-smoking areas. But a sudden, complete ban on smoking at the work site could raise problems: indeed, one-third of our respondents do expect "substantial resistance" from smokers, but about half thought there would be only "moderate objection."

For the most part, however, our survey indicates that most managements that dealt with the problem have changed to a nonsmoking workplace without too much difficulty. Their comments are reflected in these guidelines:

- **Avoid moralizing or addressing exhortations to character and willpower.** Don't suggest that smokers are somehow inferior to nonsmokers or are less concerned about the welfare of colleagues. In the 1960s, when the anti-smoking campaign was gathering momentum. Dr. D.N. Goldstein, in a Wisconsin Journal of Medicine editorial, wrote: "The social climate must be changed so that smoking is looked upon as it used to be—a damned, dirty habit and a vice." Such an approach, attempted in the workplace, is more likely to generate resistance than cooperation.
- **Where law mandates company policy, use it as your springboard for action.** Your people do not expect you to violate the law. Indicate quite clearly and firmly that the company intends to comply with the law and will not allow exceptions.
- **Take pains to establish thorough interdepartmental communications on the new policy.** Begin with your front-line supervisors and foremen. You will need their support, even though some of them may be heavy smokers. Explain your reasons and how you expect your policy to work. Ascertain from your supervisors how many smokers they have in their units and be prepared to give special backing to those who anticipate trouble. Get their suggestions on what should be included in the notices sent to the employees.
- **Back up your no-smoking policy with an educational campaign.** Remember that education begins with example. This policy must have the complete support of executives. They must understand that they can't walk out of their offices on inspection tours while merrily puffing away.
- **Policies should be consistent.** A substantial majority of the companies we reviewed circulate general health literature and material describing the hazards of smoking. But we found that 45% of our respondents still permitted cigarette vending machines on their premises.
- **Provide help for employees who want to kick the habit.** Almost 30% of the employers polled conducted smoke-ending workshops or paid the fees for employees attending extramural groups. In addition, more than half indicated that they used related activities such as employee-assistance programs, stress management work shops, etc. to help smokers quit.

The fact is that some people actually do perform better when they can use a cigarette as a psychological crutch. Such people may be particularly important in your operations, and you don't want to throw them off stride. In conferences with smokers who are hit hard by the new rules, emphasize that you can't make exceptions but you feel they are so valuable that the company is willing to provide professional counseling or other assistance if the situation becomes too stressful.

Mr. Feinberg is chairman of the New York-based BFS Psychological Associates. Mr. Levenstein was, until his death last week, professor emeritus of management at Baruch College.

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