

Friendly workplaces make labor days easier

By Jennifer Harper

More than a century has passed since the first Labor Day celebration in New York in 1882, and Americans remain fascinated with the mysteries of the workplace.

Should it be home away from home, impersonal fortress, torture chamber or amusement park? The workplace can be any or all these things, depending on which expert is doing the talking.

Some advocate the cuddly, chatty workplace.

"For a long time, the impersonal work ethic has been seen as essential to the success of Western business organization," said Jeffrey Sanchez-Burk, a University of Michigan psychologist who said a friendly workplace increases productivity.

Workers, he contends, should bring their emotions to the office, get cozy and thus become attuned to the nuances of communications.

"It's difficult to accept that staying on task may actually be a barrier to productivity in today's global environment," he continued, citing business practices in South Korea, Japan and Latin America, which place a premium on personal relationships between workers, bosses and clients.

Mr. Sanchez-Burk's research specifically cites the South Korean tradition of *chaebol*, or "company familialism," and *simpatia*, the Mexican custom of displaying charm, hospitality and graciousness — particularly on the job.

These qualities are absent in the American workplace, he said, blaming "Protestant relational ideology," which, he said, discourages emotional entanglements on company time.

But the concept of a "friendly" workplace has become a political term as well.

The National Organization for Women advocates a "woman-friendly" workplace, free of harassment and "workplace abuse."

The state of Oregon, by official order, aspires to a "breast-feeding mother-friendly" workplace, which provides a designated area for the activity, and on-site breast pumps.

The National Fatherhood Initiative, meanwhile, wants the "father-friendly workplace," which supports dads who want to take time off for their children.

Unmarried America, a singles' rights group, wants the "singles-friendly" workplace to ensure singles don't get short shrift in pay or benefits.

What's a conscientious boss to do?

Go with it, advises the American Management Institute, which offers a two-day "Managing Emotions in the Workplace" course for supervisors and other workers, which is so popular that the group has trademarked the name.

The course addresses decidedly nonbusiness things such as "emotional trigger points," "explosive" co-workers, criticism, the all-important "Personal Quiet Time Method" and hurt feelings.

"Do tempers seem shorter, nerves more rattled in the office these days? If you're experiencing increased pressure at work, you're not alone," the course description notes.

In addition, the burden of paying taxes means that Americans spend much of the work year laboring for the government — this year's "Tax Freedom Day" fell on April 19, according to the Tax Foundation.

Indeed, a workplace survey released for Labor Day by the Connecticut-based Marlin Co., a workplace communications consulting group, points to an edgier workplace.

In a poll of 753 office workers taken May 22 to 29, the company found 42 percent reported that co-workers were complaining more in the past year. A third said there was more gossip, 24 percent more rudeness and 29 percent more anger.

A third also reported an increase in stress-related illnesses. The biggest worries were the economy (cited by 28 percent), family problems (27 percent), war/terrorism (24 percent) and the job itself (15 percent.)

There was good news for bosses: 73 percent of the respondents would "trust their boss to baby-sit their kids for a night," and 58 percent said their boss was at least "trying" to improve morale.

"Interestingly, employees report most of their stress is coming from outside the workplace," said spokesman Frank Kenna, who advises managers to listen to employees.

"This is a tall order, as the past assumption has been that most stress is job-related," he said. "Unfortunately, today's managers were schooled in yesterday's techniques."