

Employee Conflict Results in a Higher Quality Work Product

Employee conflict is inevitable in the workplace. However, many people go to great lengths to avoid conflict with co-workers. In my view, differences of opinion should be encouraged. Some conflict is healthy and, if voiced in an appropriate tone and manner, conflict results in a higher quality work product. Problems occur when conflict is mismanaged or improperly communicated. By avoiding or escalating conflict, this may greatly impede productivity and permanently damage relationships. Dysfunctional teams, where trust becomes permanently damaged, may occur. The worst case scenario is employee litigation or a human rights complaint.

What Not to Do

When an employee raises a complaint to their manager, it is important to be very self-aware of your response. The below responses to an employee complaint or conflict must be avoided:

- Joking about the incident with others.
- Rushing to judgment and taking sides.
- Firing the complainer.
- Texting, e-mailing, using social networking to discuss the complaint with others.
- Ignoring the complainer in meetings, in e-mails and during office activities.
- Talking or interrupting.
- Looking or seeming agitated.
- Touching the person.
- Looking away, taking a call or reading.
- Attempting to problem solve or otherwise get to "the heart of the matter".
- Referring the employee to a grievance procedure or legal.
- Saying "I know how you feel" or "It will be all right."
- Suggesting they misunderstood someone's actions or words.

What to Do

When an employee first raises a complaint, the best thing to do is listen. You need to understand the context and full details before reaching any conclusion or taking a stand on the issue. The first meeting where the employee airs the complaint is critical to building trust and credibility.

Managers need to respond in the right tone and context. It is critical that conflicts be resolved quickly rather than festering. Delaying conflict makes open communication more difficult and the relationship will continue to suffer. Managers can help resolve workplace conflicts by leading employees through the below conflict resolution process. The key is showing a mutual respect for the issue, the people, and the process. For interpersonal issues, it is recommended to involve the employees engaged in the conflict so they take accountability for the resolution.



CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROCESS

STEP 1

Meet with each party privately to gather information.

- What issues are disputed?
- What is each employee's perspective?

STEP 2

Prepare a written agenda for a joint-meeting with both parties

- Maintain confidentiality and review with HR beforehand.
- Consider the emotional impact on each party.
- Prepare a neutral question to open the meeting with.

STEP 3

Conduct the joint meeting. Frame issues in a neutral way.

- Facilitate the meeting to help each understand the other's perspective.
- Encourage each employee to reframe what they heard the other say.
- Try to reach an action plan, agreed to by all, before the end of meeting.

STEP 4

Facilitate problem solving to involve employees in the process

- Set SMART actions (specific, measurable, actionable, relevant, timely).
- Discuss what information will be disclosed to others.
- Agree to reconvene in two or three months to monitor progress.

Source: Society for Human Resources. "The Exchange" Steven P. Dinkin & Ashley Virtue.

If a conflict involves a more serious issue, it is better to engage professional human resources, as a neutral third-party, to mediate a resolution or perform an investigation. This is particularly important in situations that involve a conflict of interest, harassment, substance abuse, theft, etc. Where a conflict is strictly interpersonal, you can start by encouraging the two employees to work through it themselves.

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