

HOW TO MANAGE CONFLICT

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Do you have people in your greenhouse that dislike each other? Do they cause problems for everyone else? Conflict in the workplace is a painful reality. The goal is to recognize friction and tension and deal with it before it escalates into a major problem. One point is clear – conflict does not magically go away if ignored.

Certain types of conflict in the workplace, such as sexual harassment and discrimination, are very obvious and readily identified. Other forms of conflict may not be so easily identified. Small, irritating events that occur repeatedly over time may cause one individual to strike out at another. Managers who exhibit favoritism toward one or more employees set themselves up for problems with the “non-favored.” Employees who find ways to appear busy while doing nothing can easily create dissatisfaction among the rest of the department. Conflict may develop when an employee, because he or she did not fully understand the job responsibilities, receives an unsatisfactory job evaluation.

What type of conflict requires intervention? Anything that disrupts the office or poses a threat to other employees needs addressing. The degree to which you tolerate a situation before intervention may vary.

A manager may not feel it necessary to intervene when a minor exchange of words occurs between employees – unless such an incident becomes a daily occurrence and expands beyond the employees initially involved. However, a situation where one employee threatens another requires immediate action. When handling conflict, some basic guidelines apply.

Acknowledge the situation. I remember an exchange between a manager and an upset employee. The manager said, “Well, don’t worry about it. It really doesn’t matter.” To which the employee replied, “Just because it doesn’t matter to you doesn’t mean it doesn’t matter to me.” Refusing to acknowledge an employee’s anger or concerns only adds fuel to the fire.

Get all the information. Few situations are exactly as presented by one person or even two. Before you try to settle a dispute, you need to hear all sides of the matter.

Take your time – be patient. The old adage, “Haste makes waste,” has more truth in it than we sometimes realize. Take time to evaluate all information. A too-quick decision can do more harm than good when it turns out to be the wrong decision.

Focus on the problem, not the individual. Employee X may not be the most congenial of your employees. Most people know at least one “problem employee” during their work experience. This is the employee who is consistently unhappy and uncooperative – regardless! This does not mean employee X does not have a legitimate problem. Focus on identifying and resolving the problem. If, after careful and thorough investigation, you determine the individual is the problem, then focus on the individual at that point.

Keep talking; keep listening. Keep the communication open. Allow the employee to express his/her viewpoint, but also share with the employee the view from your perspective. In addition, be aware of the difference between talking “with” the employee and talking “to” the employee. Talking “with” the employee involves listening.

Act decisively. Once you have taken time to gather information, talked to all the parties involved, and reviewed all the circumstances, make your decision and act. Leaving the matter in limbo can damage your employees’ perception of you as an effective manager. They may view you as either too weak, too uncaring, or both, to handle the problem. The employees may not all agree with your decision, but at least they will know where matters stand.

Do not try to resolve conflict by intimidation. Yelling as someone or using manipulation techniques may stop the problem at the moment, but do not fool yourself into thinking it is a long-term solution. Odds are the problem will resurface. At that point not only will you have the initial problem to deal with but also the angry feelings that have festered below the surface in the interim.

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