

Warning signs of workplace conflict

How can you tell when trivial issues are poised to turn into major headaches? From conflict management experts Gayle and Nabil Oudeh, here are some warning signs to watch for:

- **The same issues keep coming up.** "Sometimes we're blindsided," say the Oudehs, "because we're so busy putting out the little fires that we don't even see the cause of the flames in the first place." Start looking for what's really behind a recurring problem. If a work rule's consistently being ignored, or a deadline's continually being missed, you need to do more than just clarify the importance of the rule or deadline and eliminate external obstacles. Start asking what's keeping your people from being motivated to do the job right.
- **A flurry of minor complaints.** "If employees are complaining, they're not working. And if they're distracted from their work, then you've got a situation that needs to be addressed." Individually, each employee's issue may seem silly. But if you're hearing from a bunch of different people, or hearing a bunch of different complaints from one person who is otherwise productive—i.e., not a whiner—start digging deeper. Often, focusing on petty issues is a way to avoid big issues that are too difficult to talk about.
- **Cliques and secret gatherings.** "When people are unhappy or frustrated by a difficult situation at work, they talk." It's not that unusual for informal groups of employees—the folks around the water cooler—to clam up when you walk in. You're the boss, and so on. But keep an eye on whether employees are gathering and having discussions they want to keep secret from each other.