

Workplace Conflict: Managing employee disputes

Disputes between employees are common and inevitable. But if left unresolved, they can disrupt your department's productivity, sap morale and even cause some good employees to quit.

Supervisors and managers don't need to become certified mediators to settle disputes. They just need to understand some basics about human behavior, practice the fine art of paying attention and serve as a neutral party who wants to resolve the problem.

Know when to step in and referee

The difficult decision is knowing when to step in, says Joseph F. Byrnes, professor of management at Bentley College's Graduate School in Waltham, Mass. "Give the warring parties a chance to resolve it on their own," he says. "The time to take action is when things get out of hand, and the problems are affecting their work or disrupting other people's work."

Find out if the conflict is work related and has a structural root or whether it's interpersonal and has no relationship to the job, Byrnes advises. An interpersonal conflict can happen on or off the job, whereas structural ones are inevitable in many organizations.

Byrnes points out that structural conflicts can often turn interpersonal. After months—sometimes years—of battling, the two people concerned forget that there are actually systemic reasons for the conflict.

Managers can resolve both structural and interpersonal conflicts, Byrnes says, and often the techniques are not so different. To resolve a structural conflict:

| **Expand resources.** You can often alleviate a workflow problem by changing the way jobs are scheduled or by providing more resources.

| **Clarify job responsibilities.** Conflicts frequently arise when one department encroaches on another's domain. In engineering companies, for example, designers and engineers often have their differences. The designer creates a product on paper so that the engineer can create the actual product. Inevitably, problems arise when the two professionals work together to create the prototype. Each has his or her own ideas about how things should be done; hence, tempers often flare before solutions are found.

Don't turn your back on 'difficult' employees

Working alongside difficult people can be hard enough. But managing someone with whom you have a personality clash can cause major tension.

Experienced managers know how to separate emotions from the work at hand when dealing with employees.

But in too many cases, managers simply turn away from their least favorite employees.

Turning your back on difficult employees isn't just a management mistake—it can also create legal trouble. That's why, when confronted with employees who don't do what's asked, it's best to devise a strategy for making the best of a potentially explosive situation.

Tip: Although it may be hard to transform a difficult employee into a warm, friendly ally, there are several steps you can take to make it easier for the employee to comply. Learn six steps for managing difficult employees in [**Workplace Conflict Resolution: 10 ways to manage employee conflict and improve communication, the workplace environment and team productivity**](#), a new special report by Business Management Daily.

Don't be swayed by office politics

Let's assume that operating procedures are about to be changed to meet a new production schedule. Senior members of your staff favor one solution; the younger ones defend an alternate way. Either one could work.

Each faction is jockeying for power, each wants your support, and you are caught in the middle of office politics. How do you handle the situation?

As the manager, your approach should be to resolve the situation without offending or alienating either group. "Uppermost is not being seduced by the politics of one group over another," says clinical psychologist William Knaus.

When politics get in the way, it's time to step in cautiously. "You don't want your boss to think that your division is riddled with divisive disputes," Knaus says. "Your credibility is on the line if you can't right the situation."

Easing tensions between warring factions isn't easy.

"A bad move on the manager's part could create irreparable barriers, decrease productivity, as well as dampen morale," Knaus says. "The situation must be carefully managed so that you're not taking sides."

Your goal is to keep everyone focused on solving a problem and not be sidetracked by personal or political issues.