

Workplace Conflict

Contributed by John F. Macek LCSW

There is hardly a workplace that does not experience conflict from time to time. Instead of producing goods and services, the conflicting parties wage war. What can an employer do to control this problem?

The causes of a conflict can range from simple misunderstandings to deep-rooted psychological issues. Conflicts can originate within the workplace or be brought in from outside sources. Following are some guidelines for dealing with this issue.

1. Relationships are a two-way street. Both parties contribute to its maintenance and its dysfunction. The company's concern is to get the goods and services it is purchasing. Hold both accountable for failure to deliver.
2. We all tend to view our perception as fact, even when it conflicts with the perceptions of others. We see this in the conflicting stories police hear from witnesses. This happens for several reasons. First, each witness saw the event from a different angle or a certain part of the event. Second, a witness's attitude and other variables influence their perception. In a conflict, individuals are responding to their perceptions as though they are fact. The first step in conflict resolution is to distinguish perception from fact.
3. Every employee has experiences outside of work that can impact how they view a colleague. A dating relationship may sour. A coworker may hear negative comments about a colleague from family or friends. These external events and messages are brought to the workplace and often become a source of conflict.
4. People draw conclusions from what they hear and see. If a worker's responsibilities require irregular hours, coworkers see late arrivals or early departures as shirking duty. Lack of information is a frequent contributor to resentment and conflict.
5. It's a bonus, but not job requirement, that colleagues like each other. People with an intense need to be liked might make overtures that are not reciprocated. Feeling rejected, the needy party tries to find fault with or embarrass their non-responsive colleague.
6. When an employee is promoted, colleagues usually make judgments about whether the promotion was "deserved." Such judgments miss the point. The relevant issue in filling a position is matching skills with position requirements. It's management's job to make that decision, not individual self-assessment of "worth" or that of a friend. Emphasizing that filling positions is a matter of matching skills and position requirements will not make the pain go away, but will demonstrate best effort.
7. Employees often view compensation as a referendum on their personal worth. Compensation, however, has little to do with individual worth or importance. Compensation relates more to supply and demand for needed skills. Remind personnel of that fact. Compare it to decisions they make when shopping. Assure them that every position is important. That's why it was created and why it is continued. Aligning compensation with the market is fair and objective. Regular

salary surveys can assure both you and your personnel that you are in line with the market.

8. Conflict can occur because of individual psychological issues. For examples, victims of domestic violence have difficulty trusting. Bullies try to achieve self respect by putting others down. Employees suspected of engaging in conflict because of personal psychological issues should be referred to an Employee Assistance Program.
9. When a conflict occurs, try to keep it at the level of origin. HR plays an important role in coaching and supporting the immediate supervisor and assuring that the resolution is consistent with company policy, labor contracts, and the law. If the front-line supervisor cannot settle a dispute, HR should take over. Avoid moving up the chain of command. Allowing that rewards conflict by giving disputants access to higher levels of management. Going over the head of the front-line supervisor undermines that manager's authority and credibility. HR should be the party that, along with immediate supervisor, quietly checks signals with higher level decision makers.
10. If a serious conflict cannot be resolved internally, bring in a competent outside party. The bottom line remains exactly the same: Employers have a right to get what they are buying. An external consultant can inform the disputants that the company wishes to keep both employees if the conflict can be stopped. That interpretation shows good will on the part of the company while drawing a line in the sand.
11. Conflict can quickly spread through an entire work unit if parties to the conflict start recruiting allies. This is a cancer that calls for quick eradication. It is perfectly legitimate for an employer to terminate both parties to a conflict when it can be documented that their continued warring seriously impairs productivity.

Employment is not a parent/child relationship. It is a contract for goods and services. If a contractor fails to perform, the company has every right to find another contractor who will.

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