5 Steps For Helping Coworkers Resolve Workplace Disputes



Workplace conflict that is serious such as harassment and bullying should be addressed through formal mechanisms that take into consideration the seriousness of the actions. However, conflicts that are less serious in nature, such as co-workers who cannot be civil to one another, who cannot agree on a professional course of action for a work project, who gossip about one another including posting negative comments (but not harassment or threats) on social networks and more can still cause disruption in the workplace. When disputes seem less serious in nature it can be a mistake to sweep them under the rug and hope they resolve themselves.

Recently Psychometrics Canada surveyed HR professionals on the topic of workplace conflicts. Their responses included indicating that poor leadership (73% of respondents) was a contributing factor in workplace conflicts (egos and personality clashes, dishonesty, stress and clashing values all made the top 5 of the survey). In the article HR professionals cited management's inability to deal with toxic people, lack of clarity around workplace expectations and failure to model good workplace behaviour were key reasons for poor management of workplace conflict.

5 steps for helping coworkers resolve workplace disputes

Sometimes despite the best leadership and efforts from an organization conflicts do arise between employees. Once a conflict between co-workers has emerged it can have a disruptive influence at work. The sooner you take steps to manage the situation the better.

Once you learn about a co-worker dispute or conflict it is worthwhile keeping your ears and eyes open before the problem grows.

- ***Do some digging:*** A supervisor, manager or HR can take an informal approach that includes meeting with and listening to each individual employee share a perspective on the situation. Based on the information gathered a determination can be made as to the substance of the conflict and if there is enough credibility on both sides of the story to warrant intervention with one or both parties.

Although there may be two or more sides to every story it is also true that sometimes one person is the instigator of a problem. That does not mean you only address one person because often the second person can use guidance on better ways to manage the

situation.

It is feasible that this digging reveals the presence of a simple misunderstanding that can be resolved by sharing information in a brief meeting and the result is a quick resolution. This digging can also reveal the existence of another problem such as a personal problem that may need to be addressed separately from the conflict.

- ***Offer perspective:*** If it appears there is a conflict that may not dissipate find a way to create a brief opportunity for coworkers to meet and share their perceptions of the situation face-to-face with a neutral observer present. Ideally this person could be an experienced employee with conflict resolution training or a member of the HR team. This is not a meeting to debate the dispute or necessarily resolve it. The goal is to have the parties share a space and hear one another.

When might this not be appropriate? if there is a concern over personal or mental/emotional safety or a significant power imbalance between the co-workers there may need to be intervening steps.

It is feasible that during this conversation that the dispute is resolved quickly and amicably but even if this occurs a follow-up process is recommended (see step 5).

- ***Opportunity for Reflection:*** Providing each party with time to reflect on the perspective of the other person should be the next course of action. This can involve a brief break of an hour or a few days. Following the meeting the observer can speak with each party individually to review the conversation and provide some guidance on the perspective of the other party. Ask each person to reflect back, verbally or in writing, what they heard from the other person. Let them know that one of the goals is to share their reflection and perspective back to the other person not to debate the details of the situation.
- ***Focus on the Future:*** Reflection may yield information that allows the co-workers an opportunity to move on. However, sometimes a tangible action from the organization and/or one or both parties is called for. If it is determined that the actions of one or both parties were inappropriate apologize, counselling, increased supervision or even disciplinary may become part of a resolution. This may require additional meetings and agreements for future behaviours. Open lines of communication that does not disclose personal details or breach confidentiality is required going forward. Both employees need to feel valued and heard and this is more likely when they feel informed and supported.
- ***Follow-up***: Sometimes a minor dispute and a quick resolution really is the end of a matter. Often, however, there were mitigating factors such as an individual's personal situation or differences between people (personality, culture) that were contributing factors. Monitoring the situation over the next 3-6 months can include checking in with both parties informally (or formally in the case of a disciplinary situation or where other issues such as stress, health and so on were contributing factors) once per month as a way to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to both parties. The initiating issue need to be the focus of the follow-up conversations, instead the health, satisfaction, well-being of your employees should always be on the agenda.

On an ongoing basis finding opportunities for employees to see from the perspective of others is a useful way of building a supportive and successful workplace culture. Providing opportunities for co-workers to engage in non-work related activities, talk informally through shared meals or activities, learn more about other people is a great way to avoid future conflicts.