Employee Disputes Not Helped by Feeble Leadership

Lets face it, just like you cannot choose your family you cannot always choose your co-workers. Within workplaces filled with different personalities, different perceptions and different working styles conflicts and disputes are bound to arise. When these conflicts are serious such as harassment, theft, bullying and other unacceptable activities your organization may have formal ways to investigate and resolve these conflicts including disciplinary actions. However, what happens when conflict between employees falls short of serious and leans more towards the trivial?

Psychometric Canada surveyed Canadian HR professionals and asked what were the most common causes of workplace conflict they address. In an article titled 'Warring egos, Toxic Individuals and Feeble Leadership' they shared the most frequently cited sources of workplace conflict:

- Warring egos and personality clashes (86%)
- Poor leadership (73%)
- Lack of honesty (67%)
- Stress (64%)
- Clashing Values (59%)

Understanding Employee Conflict

It is important to understand why people have conflict because this perspective can allow managers and HR to more effectively intervene. Frequently conflict among co-workers results from misunderstandings and miscommunication often fueled by personal issues such as stress, personality issues, health and mental health and other factors include generational and cultural differences.

When you have an employee involved in a dispute or conflict with a co-worker it is worth considering if there are underlying stress that can be addressed as part of managing the situation.

Reduce the Risk: Four of the best ways to reduce the risk of employee conflict include

- **Improved Insights and Understanding:** Provide employees with opportunities to understand their own and their colleague's perspective, style and personality better including information about cultural, generational and personality

differences. Personality or emotional intelligence assessments, attitude, believe and values surveys and more can be used to provide employees with insights into their own styles, perspective and preferences. Exposure to other people's perspectives, through stories, conversations, videos and more can help increase empathy and the ability to understand from a different perspective. Provide opportunities for employees to share experiences and down time to talk and learn about one another.One of the best ways to avoid conflict is to help a person see from the perspective of another.

- **Training and Information:** With understanding you are better able to help employees develop skills for relationship and self-management. Provide employees with opportunities to practice recognizing and then reacting differently to conflict by providing ongoing competency development opportunities in self-management, composure, conflict management and communication style differences.Combining increased understanding with specific training will benefit the organization in a myriad of ways including reducing conflict between employees.
- **Reduce the Stress:** Stay on top of times when employees may be experiencing additional stress and find ways to offer stress reduction opportunities. These can include positive team building exercises (not called such but with team building in mind) such as volunteer and project work or other opportunities for co-workers to work together for a common purpose that does not involve their regular work tasks. Offer access to stress reduction support including exercise such as Yoga and access to supports for counselling including financial and personal counselling on an ongoing basis and not only in response to a problem.One of the biggest causes of workplace conflict is individual stress that makes people more prone to mistakes and more sensitive to conflict with others. By being consistently aware of individual and workplace stress management needs organizations
- **Better leadership**: These HR professional mentioned in the Psychometric Canada article were asked how effectively managers in the workplace were at dealing with conflict; only 18% felt management did an effective job and 63% indicated management was somewhat effective. When asked what HR thought management should do to deal with workplace conflict they responded that managers could manage toxic individuals more firmly (75%), provide more clarity about their expectations (77%) and model appropriate behavior (84%).

Too often management suggests that employees should 'grow-up' and resolve personal or professional workplace disputes like 'adults' – which often means to just get over the issues. Yet because frequently other issues are involved employees are not in a position to just resolve a conflict without some support or guidance. The items the HR professional listed, including better managing toxic employees, being clear with their behavioral expectations and modelling appropriate behavior should be generally mean that managers would benefit from gaining perspective and an understanding of their own behavior and blind spots. Not always an easy task, but if you are going to provide employees with opportunities across the first three components begin by inviting managers to engage in those opportunities first.

The best way to manage conflict is to reduce the opportunity for it to begin in the first place by offering employees skills to manage themselves and their interactions with others.