

What to do When Trouble Brews



Most managers agree that one of their most dreaded tasks is dealing with conflict between two employees. Serious disagreements that affect work relationships don't happen often, but when they do they can have an impact on entire departments and organizations. Managers have an important role to play in moving those involved toward resolution.

Don't tell people to work it out on their own

When employees come to their manager for help, it is because they feel they don't possess the skills or insight to resolve their differences themselves. This doesn't mean that the manager should simply provide a solution. It means the manager needs to become involved as a mediator leading the two employees towards a resolution.

Respond to complaints early

Just as employees often avoid confronting problems early, managers may hope that if a problem is ignored it will go away. Unfortunately, it usually doesn't. This doesn't mean managers should jump in every time they think someone is unhappy. It does mean, however, that they should not shy away from opening the door to employees who raise small concerns and help them to work it out.

Communicate expectations ahead of time

Rather than waiting for a problem to arise and then trying to engage two employees in the process of resolution, managers need to talk about expectations ahead of time. They'll want to ensure everyone is familiar with acceptable and unacceptable behaviours defined in the organization's code of conduct. They may also want to meet with employees to discuss how disagreements will be resolved. Early intervention reduces conflicts.

Prepare employees for high-stress times

When organizations undergo change, departmental resources are often cut back and workloads increased. It is natural that employees will experience greater stress, and they may focus their frustration on each other. Managers who understand this don't hesitate to talk about upcoming periods of difficulty.

Promote teamwork

When employees allow their differences to get in the way of team performance, they are placing their individual needs above those of the team. No organization can afford to let this happen. Employees rely on each other to get work done, and managers must constantly reinforce the need for a willingness to work with, not against, co-workers.

Where conflict is concerned, early intervention and supportive coaching by managers helps employees overcome disagreements while maintaining the integrity of the team.