

How can I appropriately manage conflict?



ADDRESSING WORKPLACE HARASSMENT: TIPS TO PREVENT WORK RAGE AND MANAGE CONFLICT

Remember that elementary school bully who pushed the other kids around and stole lunch money? Or the middle school wise guy who made fun of other kids' names? Unfortunately, some of these people never "grow up" and their adolescent antics carry over to the workplace. The work environment is full of conflicting personality types and in some cases this can lead to various types and levels of harassment.

Some forms of harassment are easier to identify than others, but unwelcome comments, stereotyping, sexual jokes and discriminating behaviours, shouting, degrading or belittling a person publicly, withholding work or information and/or setting an unrealistic workload on an employee are all serious issues that should not be taken lightly.

Nip it in the Bud

Although every issue is unique—and should be handled as such—there are general steps you can take to prevent and stop workplace conflict before it spirals into harassment or violence. Be sure to:

Communicate policies. Making sure your employees understand the types of behaviour that won't be tolerated is a critical part of managing workplace conflict and preventing harassing behaviour. Be familiar with the formal policies in place, be clear about your expectations and go over them on a regular basis. Include conflict-resolution tactics in your training and encourage your team to use and develop these skills. Employees should also understand the steps to take and who to approach (management, union rep, committee, etc.) if they're in conflict with a colleague or dealing with harassment.

Regardless of whether you're dealing with conflict, harassment or both, it's your duty as a people leader to stay aware and respond appropriately to protect the mental and physical health of your employees.



The Conflict Spiral


Harassing behaviour interferes with an employee's performance, creates a hostile and uncomfortable work environment and can leave the organization liable. The sooner you take action the better because a seemingly small conflict can lead to:

- Unhealthy competition
- High employee turnover
- Absenteeism
- Low morale and motivation
- Inefficiency and low productivity
- Increased frustration, anxiety and depression
- High tension

The real challenge as a people leader is to spot the signs as early as possible. Your employees may be being bullied or harassed if they are:

- Missing work more often
- On edge or anxious
- Responding very negatively to internal workplace surveys
- Producing inadequate work
- Missing deadlines or not finishing work
- Suddenly disinterested in socializing or are isolating themselves from the work group

As the supervisor or manager, you have to take some of the responsibility for the problem and be a part of the solution.



These tips will help me support my team.

Don't dodge issues. Arguments between employees are very common and, unfortunately, inevitable. As a manager it can be difficult to know when to step in and get involved and you may be fearful of overreacting or jumping to conclusions. Although it's a good idea to give people a chance to deal with things on their own, unresolved issues typically won't disappear if left unaddressed—or if there is a clear power imbalance. Realize that when stress increases or another disagreement happens, old unsettled battles are likely to surface. Be aware of triggers, particularly regarding two employees in conflict, and respond as soon as you notice them. Make sure your door is always open so your team feels comfortable approaching you with problems.

Encourage discussion. Meet with everyone involved and ask each person to summarize their point of view—you may be surprised to find out that their visions are not so far apart. To find a compromise, work backwards from common long-term goals. Sometimes everyone may agree to disagree which can actually be quite relieving. Just be sure to intervene if employees start to attack each other and it never hurts to have a union rep and/or HR specialist attend. Realize that inviting people to speak up may initially increase the level of conflict, but sometimes you have to pass through this to find a solution.

Realize the impact. Understand that the employees involved in the conflict are not the only ones affected. Everyone on your team can start to feel the stress of the issue and live through the hostile work environment. Extend your support to everyone and even ask for input—depending on the type of conflict you're dealing with.

Workplace Violence

If workplace conflict ever escalates to threats, sexual harassment, physical contact or intimidation you need to respond immediately. You're strictly responsible for the safety of your team and, depending on the situation and policies in place, will have to contact HR, the union or the authorities. To prevent conflict from reaching this point try to be as approachable as possible and keep your eyes and ears open for warning signs.

Mitigation and Management

As a manager the job of mediator comes with the territory. This can be a real challenge because of the dicey situations you may be faced with and there's no straightforward rulebook to reach for. Conflict in the workplace is inevitable but by dealing with these issues before they become more complex, you'll ensure squabbles don't escalate into poor morale, lost productivity or worse still, harassment. Help create a work environment that lets people succeed by identifying and defining inappropriate behaviour, setting a good example and creating a culture of openness.

Take Ownership

Praise and Recognize

Make efforts to reward your team for their hard work and build morale. This could mean a lunch out after meeting a big target or an evening event to celebrate an employee's milestone. Make sure that your expectations are realistic and consistent and try to treat everyone equally. If your team feels valued and appreciated they will be less likely to start fights or be in harsh competition.

Practice What You Preach

You can't expect your team to act appropriately and get along if you don't. As a manager you should never gossip or be swayed by office politics. Think before you speak and be aware of "danger zones." Never comment on personal appearance and always avoid jokes or nicknames that relate to race, gender, religion, ethnicity, age, disability or sexual orientation. Lead by example and your team will be more likely to follow suit.