When Conflict Strikes, Don't Run the Other Way

Four tips for mediating worker strife before it gets out of hand.

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A well-functioning team of employees is critical to any organization's success. As all plant managers know, however, conflict is simply part of the job, which makes conflict resolution a critical skill for leadership. Unfortunately, conflict may not always be confronted in the healthiest of ways.

Recently, I consulted on and mediated a conflict between a foreman and one of his delivery drivers at a commercial HVAC manufacturing plant. The plant director had been unsuccessful in mediating the conflict himself, as he simply did not have the tools to do so, and the problem was only getting worse. In addition to their conflict creating productivity problems and delivery issues, it was now creating an atmosphere of tension among other team members. Factions were forming. Some workers were on the foreman's side, while others were on the driver's side, and now these entire groups of people were seemingly at odds. All of this was being led by an initial conflict between two individuals.

If there is one thing I have learned from coaching manufacturing workers in conflict, it's that their managers tend to avoid these conflicts, hoping they will just "work themselves out" and disappear. Unfortunately, I typically get the call very late in the conflict when much damage has already been done.

Conflicts that go unconfronted tend to fester and spread. Not only could workers in conflict negatively affect morale and result in the loss of valuable employees, but the distraction of conflict could lead to a lapse in safety precautions at manufacturing plants or job sites and maybe, in worst cases, even lead to dangerous workplace sabotage. In manufacturing environments especially, conflict has the potential to lead to hazardous working conditions.

So, learning to mediate conflict between co-workers is a precious competency that can save time, money, and potentially lives and limbs. Here are four steps to help you quash a problem early.

1. Invite the Conversation

Before you can start working toward a solution, you'll have to gain a clear picture of the problem. Invite each of the individuals involved to confidential, one-on-one conversations with you.

Two things are critical for these initial conversations: confidentiality and neutrality. If employees are afraid of blowback or rumors as a result of what they say, they will be hesitant to disclose their experiences. Also, if either feels you've already taken a side, they are likely to respond defensively, in which case necessary compromise may become impossible. In order to hold a safe and impartial interview, it's important to truly listen to each party separately and seriously consider their unique perspectives.

The interviews may become heated, but that's OK. Hearing out your employees and being respectful is what can make the difference between a successful mediation and one that goes nowhere.

Validate and Take Notes

During these interviews, it's best to validate what your employees express, even if you don't necessarily agree with their perspectives. Validating helps get past the emotions and increases employees' buy-in to move into a collaborative space to has out solutions.

Feel free to take notes during these meetings and read back what you've documented. This way of reflecting helps maintain clarity of the situation and lets your employees know you're listening and actually taking them seriously. In each session, be sure to ask your employees what solutions they may be able to identify on their own. This will be helpful later.

2. Facilitate a Joint Meeting

Once you've spoken with both parties independently, you can determine whether it will be effective to facilitate a conversation between them. The only time it would be inappropriate to have the two conflicting employees come together is if the solution isn't interpersonal but instead requires policy change. Otherwise, facilitating a conversation between them is in everyone's best interest. As the leader, you'll manage the conversation.

Some guidelines for how the dialogue should go:

- *Set-up*: Prior to the meeting, set up the room where there is a circle or triangle of chairs without anything else in the way. Although, if you prefer to sit around a desk in order to write, this should be fine.

- *Intro*: When all parties have entered the room, take a few moments to thank them for their time and willingness to speak. Assure them that what they discuss is confidential and that you're there to help them feel safe in expressing themselves.

- *Problems*: Then you, as the facilitator, can begin to disclose what you wrote and confirmed in each of the private meetings regarding the grievances indicated by each person. By you leading the conversation here, restating the problems at hand, you avoid the risk of things becoming heated and unproductive. Keep it concise and read from your notes as needed. When you are finished restating the problems as you heard them, ask each employee if you've got it all correct and if there is anything they want to add.

- *Solutions*: Finally, ask each employee to restate what they believe could be effective solutions for their issue. This might require a brainstorming session which could indirectly serve as a

team-building experience for these employees. During brainstorming for solutions, allow all ideas (even the crazy ones) to be stated and written down. When all ideas are out on the table, then you can evaluate them to determine which are doable and reasonable. Don't leave the room until there is at least one workable, actionable solution for each problem.

- *Commitment*: Ask for commitments from each involved employee to follow through on their part of the solution.

3. Implementation and Accountability

Once you have negotiated solutions with your managerial seal of approval, it's time to put words into actions. The solutions agreed to should be implemented ASAP. Whether they're behavioral changes or amendments to standard procedures, quick implementation helps build trust that the issue was taken seriously and that everyone is committed to making necessary changes.

As the leader, you'll need to develop accountability measures to assure they will each stick to their roles in the solutions. Often, conflict management requires coaching from the manager. So, be prepared to follow up regularly, especially at first, with each of the employees to hear how the solutions are working. You'll need to support them both as they look to develop some new behaviors and interpersonal skills.

Holding each participant accountable for their part is critical. If someone's not living up to their end of the deal, it's best that you step in early rather than allow another conflict to brew and eventually escalate. Remind your employees why they've committed to making these changes and consider the possible consequences if they continue to fall behind on their agreement.

4. Adjustments

It's possible that your first attempt at a solution doesn't have the desired effect. This is OK and a natural part of the process. The important step to take here is not to pretend it is working or to try to force something that doesn't work. If changes need to be made to the solutions as agreed to, address them quickly and make the changes.

Ongoing Prevention

While you might be looking at a successful conflict mediation now, it could be worth establishing some preventative measures going forward. For example, you could introduce team-building events that help employees get to know each other more as human beings and not just co-workers. In manufacturing workplaces, stress can be high, especially in high-risk environments where safety is paramount. Offsite team-building can strengthen the trust and communication between employees in otherwise stressful workplaces.

At the very least, it would be wise to implement some sort of interpersonal activity among co-workers on a regular basis. No, this is not always easy in the manufacturing world, where the good old' boy spirit still tends to be the norm. So, make sure any activities aren't cheesy or too silly. Make them challenging and interactive. Even friendly, team-inspired competition may be good. Whatever you try, do your best to be a progressive manager who aims to bring workers together. If done tactfully, you'll help ensure both a physically and emotionally safe workplace culture.