

Managers as Mediators: Resolving Those Annoying Employee Squabbles

By Paul Falcone

Managers usually ignore minor disputes among staff members and hope they work out their problems. But what do you do when war breaks out and threatens office productivity?

While you can't "manage" their differences, you can take on the role of mediator so they can solve their own problems in a controlled, safe environment. At the same time, you can enhance your position as a leader and establish your reputation as a fair arbiter of disagreements.

To begin, meet one-on-one with each combatant. Your goal is to give them a chance to vent their feelings, as well as to start them thinking about resolution. Ask questions such as:

- "Why do you think Joe feels the way he does?"
- "What would you like to see happen?"
- "What would you be willing to change about your behavior?"

At this point you're ready for a joint meeting in your office to open the lines of communication. First, lay down these ground rules as referee:

- "First, don't hold anything back. This is your chance to get it all out in the open. If you withhold anything, you will have missed a golden opportunity to share your side of the story."
- "This is your only chance to address these issues. After our meeting today, I am re-welcoming you both to the company as if it were your first day of employment. I am also holding you accountable for reinventing your working relationship from that point forward."
- "Everything you share has to be said with the other person's best interests in mind and in a spirit of constructive criticism. There is no attacking and no need for defending anyone's actions."

To get the employees talking to each other, you'll need to change third-person "he/she" discussions into an "I /you" dialogue. Simply stop the conversation as soon as one of the participants begins speaking about the other in the third person. Ask the individual to speak directly to the other person as if you weren't there.

Encourage them to use the phrases "This is how I feel" and "Can you understand why I would feel that way?" Feelings aren't right or wrong; they just exist. Each individual needs to sensitize the other to perceptions that have developed over time.

Once the employees are talking to each other, have agreed that they have a problem and have demonstrated a willingness to fix it, it's time to end the meeting. Tell them that you don't expect them to be friends, but you do expect open communication in the future.

Your last two questions should focus on the future. Ask each of your warriors what behaviors they are willing to change to avoid future confrontation and how they expect you to react if the situation reoccurs. Now that the combatants have had their “day in court,” you want to end the meeting on a constructive note in which both agree to change their behavior.

At the same time, you are putting them on notice that if the problem resurfaces, it will be met with a more formal management response—most likely in the form of progressive discipline. By treating your warring parties as adults, you hold them accountable for fixing the problem—or at least burying the hatchet.

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