



Managing Workplace Conflict

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FACTSHEET - Managing Workplace Conflict.

Overview

Workplace conflict is inevitable when employees of various backgrounds and different work styles are brought together for a shared business purpose. Conflict can—and should—be managed and resolved.

The first steps in handling workplace conflict belong, in most cases, to the employees who are at odds with one another. The employer's role—exercised by managers and HR professionals—is significant, however, and is grounded in the development of a workplace culture designed to prevent conflict among employees to the extent possible. The basis for such a culture is strong employee relations, namely, fairness, trust and mutual respect at all levels. This toolkit offers suggestions to create such an organizational climate and includes methods to deal with employee grievances and conflicts.

Background

Conflict can occur in any organisation when employees with different backgrounds and priorities work together. Conflict can be expressed in numerous ways such as insults, non-cooperation, bullying and anger. Its causes can range from personality clashes and misunderstood communication to organizational mismanagement.

The negative effects of workplace conflict can include work disruptions, decreased productivity, project failure, absenteeism, turnover and termination. Emotional stress can be both a cause and an effect of workplace conflict.

Employers can manage workplace conflict by creating an organisational culture designed to preclude conflict as much as possible and by dealing promptly and equitably with conflict that employees cannot resolve among themselves. To manage conflict, employers should consider the following:

A well-functioning work environment is one in which employees communicate with respectful, inoffensive language; show tolerance and acceptance of differences among each other; and demonstrate respect for all individuals in the organization regardless of position, status or tenure.

If an employer has mechanisms in place to resolve conflict at its early stages, employees will generally see their employer as fair in their dealings with them and



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will likely be more satisfied with their jobs. Reductions in employee conflict can lead to increased employee productivity, greater motivation and loyalty, lower medical costs, fewer workers' compensation claims, and reduced litigation costs.

Unresolved issues of interpersonal tension and conflict can create emotional stress for employees, politicise the workplace and divert attention from the organisation's mission.

If employers do not act, conflicts will escalate into larger problems, discrimination and harassment complaints may increase, and the employer's reputation could be damaged. Other possible consequences of failing to manage workplace conflict include:

- **Absenteeism.**
- **Turnover.**
- **Unionisation.**
- **Litigation.**

Employers should also take steps to manage the growing trends of incivility and bullying in the workplace. Employers are well-advised to treat such types of power conflicts seriously and to seek to address them proactively.

The Role of Human Resources (where applicable)

The human resource team has a leadership responsibility to develop and implement workplace conflict policies and procedures and to create and manage conflict-resolution programs. HR professionals often become involved in settling workplace conflicts, particularly if the employees and their supervisors cannot achieve a resolution.

The Role of Employees

Employees who have complaints about co-workers should be advised to try to work out their differences directly with those co-workers before asking a supervisor or a manager to step in. Resolving workplace conflicts does not require top-down interventions, It may be time-consuming for managers to coach employees on how to resolve conflicts, but in the long term it will create a work environment where conflict management is seen as everyone's obligation, not just the managers'.



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Developing Strong Employee Relations

When it occurs, conflict must be resolved equitably and quickly. It is also important, though, to try to prevent it—that is, to create an environment in which corrosive conflict is less likely to occur in the first place. The foundation of such a culture is employee relations, the process of building strong relationships between managers and employees based on fairness, trust and mutual respect. It takes time, effort and money to create such a work environment, but a good employee relations climate supports motivation, loyalty and high performance among employees, and it encourages them to try to achieve the best results possible for their organisation.

A Framework to Minimize Conflict

There is no single strategy to create a positive workplace climate, there are, however, several essential tools companies can use to create a positive workplace climate.

- **Written rules, policies and agreements**
- **Effective management**
- **Careful hiring**
- **Fair grievance processes**
- **Open-door policy.**
- **Management review**
- **Peer review.**
- **Facilitation.**
- **Mediation**
- **Arbitration.**

Training for managers

HR must ensure that effective management training is provided regularly in the organisation. Managers should also know how to spot issues and seek counsel from specialists before responding to a problem by using the skills and training in several additional areas, including:

- **Conflict resolution.**
- **Organisation rules and expectations.**
- **Laws and regulations.**
- **Professionalism.**
- **Communication.**



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- Work assignments.
- *Performance management and feedback*

Fair termination processes

Most workplace litigation arises because individuals feel they were not taken seriously or did not receive a fair hearing. This perception of fairness can also help minimize emotions and disruptions by other employees when a co-worker must be terminated.

Communication

Supervisors and managers should be well-informed about all the organisation's dispute resolution systems. They should know the rationale for each system and be able to explain how each works in practice.