

Coach Employees To Solve Their Own Conflicts with Co-Workers

By Kelly Mollica

If your employees routinely come to you with complaints about each other—and you think it’s your job to resolve their conflicts—it may be time to “push back.” When you tell them to quit bellyaching and deal with interpersonal conflicts on their own before they come to you, you have more time to focus on your work—and you help them develop the ability to handle workplace conflicts.

Managers who don’t push back falsely assume that problem solving calls for a top-down approach or intervention. It doesn’t. You can assert your authority by refusing to let them unload their conflicts on you. Additionally, if you confront one employee with another’s complaints, you’ll be seen as “taking sides,” and if you take sides often enough, you’ll be perceived as biased in favor of certain employees, which undermines your authority. And even more important, by pushing back, you help them improve their own problem-solving skills, instead of encouraging their dependence on you.

There’s no question that coaching employees to solve their own problems will initially take more time and energy than handling the conflict yourself. But in the long term, you’ll create a work environment where conflict management is seen as everyone’s obligation, not just your problem. Here are eight tips to get you started.

1. Don’t put your employees’ “urgent” issues at the top of your priority list. Many managers spend too much time dealing with issues that are urgent but not important, says Stephen Covey in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Free Press, 1990). Covey defines “urgent” as something needing immediate attention, while “importance” is the extent to which an issue affects results, such as contributing to a company’s mission or goals. If you’ve routinely allowed yourself to get drawn into employee problems, changing your ways might take some work, and you might meet with resistance from employees accustomed to dropping *their* “urgent” problems in *your* lap.

2. Train employees in conflict-resolution skills. Start with self-assessments so employees can understand their own conflict-management styles and the pros and cons of using a particular style.

3. Communicate clear expectations. At Delta Faucet in Jackson, Tenn., employees are trained in conflict management and required to follow a specific course of action when conflicts arise among team members. It’s understood that team leaders should not be involved in refereeing petty disagreements on the team because it takes time away from their more important tasks.

4. Set specific guidelines. At Delta Faucet, if an employee’s behavior is creating a problem within a team, the team is expected to work it out without involving the team leader. Two team members meet with the “problem” team member and work toward a resolution. If this is unsuccessful, the whole team meets and confronts the issue. If necessary, the team leader can be brought in to make a decision.

5. Create a culture that values conflict management. Managing conflict should be viewed as a core job competency for all employees. Behavioral questions can help assess prior experience in dealing with conflict during job interviews. For example, ask a job

candidate to “describe a time you had a conflict with a co-worker. What happened to bring about the conflict, and what did you do to resolve it?” Observable and measurable criteria, based on guidelines or protocols for resolving conflict, can be incorporated into job descriptions and performance reviews as well. For example, performance criteria should require that employees “confront interpersonal conflict in a constructive and timely manner using the company’s three-step approach and involve the supervisor only when necessary.” And don’t forget to recognize and praise employees who successfully resolve conflicts on their own.

6. Remind employees to focus on behaviors, not personalities. Many employees understandably will be hesitant to confront their co-workers, especially those with whom they interact frequently. Remind employees to focus on the other person’s behavior and the consequences of that behavior—not on personalities or subjective judgments.

7. Have an open-door policy—and stick to it. Let employees know that you’re still available to coach them on how to work through specific situations. One way to do this is to schedule follow-up meetings regarding specific problems. Employees also need to know that if they try and fail to resolve a conflict, you’re available for follow-up guidance. But be firm in letting employees know that an “open door” does not mean the same thing as an “open dumping ground.”

8. Know where to draw the line. Expecting employees to handle every problem on their own, regardless of how serious the problem may be, could send the message that management is willing to turn a blind eye to inappropriate or potentially illegal behaviors. Clearly communicate that management must always be notified and involved in certain types of conflicts, especially where there are indications of physical violence, harassment, theft, or illegal substance use or possession. Nonmanagerial employees should never be expected to confront violations of the law or to enforce company policy without management’s knowledge.

None of these tips will lead to a workplace totally devoid of conflict. That’s both impossible and undesirable because conflict is a natural occurrence in any work environment in which employees who have varying priorities, ideas and behaviors work together toward a common goal. Instead, by gently “pushing back,” you’ll enable your employees to learn valuable workplace skills while you reclaim and protect your own time.

Kelly Mollica, Ph.D., SPHR, is a leadership development specialist with The Centre Group, a human asset management firm in Memphis, Tenn. She is also an associate professor of business at Bethel College.

Terms of Use: Copyright 2005 Society for Human Resource Management. Members of SHRM are authorized to distribute copies, excerpts or e-mails of this information for educational purposes internally within their organizations. No other republication or external use is allowed without permission of SHRM. The information is not intended to serve as a substitute for legal advice.