

E A L E A D E R P

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Managing Friction Between Employees

A perennial problem for managers and supervisors is the all too familiar scenario of coworkers who do not get along. This friction can affect the entire workgroup and create time consuming distraction and discomfort for managers feeling caught in the middle.

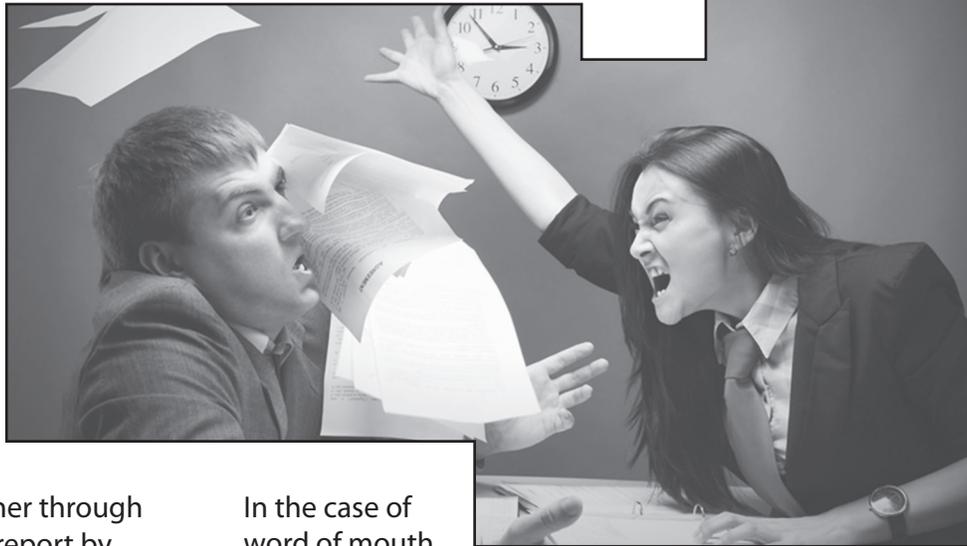
Don't ignore the problem; the risks are too great. While the best managers do encourage employees to work out their differences, close monitoring is required in order to prevent larger problems.

When you become aware that two of your workers are not getting along, either through direct observation or report by another employee, begin to watch and supervise more frequently. If you have observed problems, privately bring these up with the employees in separate, individual meetings.

If you are only aware through another staffer's report, your actions may depend on the seriousness of the tension described. Vague, non-specific hearsay ("*Bill and Rob are at*

it again."; "*Jane and Sue can't stand each other!*") alone may not seem enough to warrant a sit-down, but if rumors are flying, productivity is at risk. Read on to learn how to deal with employee friction.

Reports of Trouble and How to Respond



In the case of word of mouth alerts of a standoff in progress, there are still effective ways to intervene.

• **Increase your involvement and visibility with your employees.** You may end up defusing through your presence, or possibly be in a better position to witness behaviors first hand.

• **Remind all staff about behavioral expectations.** At a staff meeting or in a newsletter article, promote positive interaction and clearly outline the collaboration and communication you expect your team members to demonstrate.

• **If it is clear that productivity has taken a hit, let staff know you are aware something has changed.** Even if the causes are murky, communicate to your staff that there are problems to be addressed and that you plan to address them.

• **One by one, talk to your staff.** Getting to the bottom of what's going on need not be a witch-hunt. Instead, positively engage your employees to seek their thoughts on what has changed and what role they might play to get back on track. You may learn of a specific employee drama impacting the whole group, or you may find that the employee drama is a symptom of a larger concern to the collective.

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• **If you learn of a serious problem, talk to your next level supervisor, HR, or EAP.** Depending on your workplace policies, there may be specific guidelines to follow. HR can help. If you feel an EAP referral, Management Consultation, or Facilitated Discussion could be helpful, call INVEST EAP.

Observed Friction and How to Respond

When the tension between employees is witnessed, you must respond. There are two key issues to clarify and communicate:

1) **What is the reason for/history of the tension?** Each employee may have a different answer; hear them out to gain understanding.

2) **What is your (manager's) expectation of the involved employees?** While you as manager want to understand the origins of tension, you will not let the tension continue to impact productivity. Be prepared to clearly tell the employees what behavior must stop, and schedule a follow up check-in date to assess progress. You may also want to offer the employees the EAP program as a free, confidential resource that can help them plan a strategy for dealing with the situation.

Keep a record of your conversations with staff and a timeline of the situation and your interventions. Depending on the severity, you may want to let HR know about the issue and how you are addressing it.

When it's More than Just Bickering

More complex tension - such as that involving a romantic relationship or other past/present personal history, allegations of improper or illicit conduct, or palpable dislike between two employees - warrants a strong response. HR should definitely be involved, and managers should think about whether it makes sense to somehow separate the employees while determining short- and long-term approaches to the situation.



Formal referral to EAP may be warranted; to initiate, managers can contact INVEST EAP and request a Management Consultation. After processing the situation with an EAP Management Specialist, managers may be directed to formally refer the employees

involved in order for them to work on individualized plans to address the problematic behaviors. This approach should also include managers establishing a follow-up meeting date.

Remember that the rest of the team may be suffering too. Increase one-to-one check-ins with staff to be sure they are managing all right. Informally offer EAP for their own use if they are struggling or distressed. Utilize EAP yourself as well for supervisory brainstorming and support.

While it is impossible to force people to like each other, getting along with colleagues and maintaining professionalism is a fundamental requirement for staff in any workplace. Ultimately, with the help of managers, employees must try to find a way to make the situation work. In some cases, employers may be able to separate workers as a way to address the tension. In others, that will not be possible and therefore employee performance and efforts to get along will need to be monitored for appropriate action. Remember that EAP is here to help managers and employees alike, and your calls are welcome 24/7.

Resources

Article: *When to step in if employees are fighting.* TechRepublic
<http://www.techrepublic.com/article/when-to-step-in-if-employees-are-fighting/>

Article: *How to Deal With Employees Who Don't Get Along.* Insperity <http://www.insperity.com/blog/how-to-deal-with-employees-who-dont-get-along/>



EAP SERVICES

EAP is here to help. For more information about articles in this newsletter, or any other EAP-related topic, please call one of our trained counselors at our toll-free number:

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