Managing People at Work

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Tried-and-true tips for reducing conflict

No matter how talented a manager you are, you'll find yourself in tense situations with employees. Here are some tried-and-true tips for reducing tension and conflict:

Seek a solution. The worst thing you can do is nothing. Avoiding employees with whom you're in conflict does little to end the dispute; don't assume everything will just "blow over" with time. Avoiding conflict also sends undesirable messages—that you're weak or uncertain under pressure—to everyone on the team, and to your own peers and leaders in the workplace.

> "Never assume everything will just "blow over" with time."

Set ground rules. Establish what you and the employee are trying to accomplish—a mutually agreeable solution to a problem. It's OK to express emotions, including anger, honestly. (Though, of course, displaying anger may involve more risk for a manager than it does for an employee.) But keep conflicts from spiraling out of control by keeping the need for a solution in mind.

Communication style. Some basic tips: Don't interrupt, keep your attention focused on your employee, maintain a respectful attitude and avoid distractions. If you don't understand where the worker is coming from, ask questions. Restate your understanding to make sure it's accurate. It's crucial that each side in a conflict has as much time and attention as necessary to fully state their position and confirm that it's understood.

Self-awareness. Your goal is to see things from the other person's point of view—which requires being attuned to your own. Be honest about your feelings and positions—including the fact that they're your feelings, not the gospel truth just because you're the manager. And, of course, be willing to admit that you may be wrong. Trying to win at all costs is a good way to make manageable conflicts into unmanageable ones.

Focus on needs. To find that solution, ask yourself and the employee what each would need—as opposed to what you want or would like—to be satisfied. You may find that your needs are actually compatible, and that it's relatively easy to resolve your dispute in a mutually agreeable way. Once you've made that assessment, it never hurts to be willing to make the first move and come up with a creative solution.

Does disciplining make you uneasy?

Many managers dislike having to discipline their workers. And the employees who fail to produce acceptable work are rarely the easiest ones with whom to talk. They may be prickly, snide or cryptic.

To discipline them:

Make it spontaneous. If you say, "Please see me at 4 p.m.," anxiety will mount for both you and the employee. Instead, find the right moment to call the individual into your office.

Get to the point. Open the meeting by saying, "You probably know I haven't been happy with your work." Then pause. Some employees might blurt out, "Yeah, you've been picking on me a lot," or otherwise try to take the offensive. Don't fall for the bait.

Stay "on message" by connecting whatever the person says to the need for improvement. *Example:* "I don't mean to pick on you. But I have growing concerns with your work, and that's what I want to discuss with you."

Look ahead. Emphasize what the person must do to bring performance to an acceptable level. By reinforcing the specific job responsibilities and your needs and expectations, you prevent the conversation from becoming punitive. If the employee cries or argues, say, "Let's put things in perspective. You need to improve, so let's discuss that."

Flextime, without the chaos

Flextime sounded like a good idea at the time, right? Has it become a headache for you to keep track of—let alone supervise—your employees with flexible schedules? Has your flexibility turned into a free-for-all? Here's some advice on how to make flextime work:

Mandate core hours. Establish a window of time during the day—say, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.—when it's mandatory for people to either be in the office or, when necessary and appropriate, out in the field. If you have telecommuters who don't come into the office at all on certain days, ask them to be sure they're reachable by phone during these hours. Schedule meetings (or conference calls) within this window, and make a habit of checking in with employees near the end of this "core time" each day, to make sure projects are moving along and tasks are accomplished.

Don't succumb to peer pressure. Just because Joe had flexible hours at his last job is no reason for you to go along with bad habits. Yes, flextime is a benefit that a lot of enterprises have found valuable for keeping employees happy. No, that doesn't mean it's always going to work for your team and your workload.

Focus on productivity. An attitude of "I don't care when you're here, as long as you get your work done" is only effective when people are getting work done. Make sure your expectations for productivity are being shaped by the work that could be getting done. If people can afford to slack off and turn flextime into part-time work, then give them more challenging assignments.

What's in it for you?

Many talented employees seek employers that offer flextime. By offering such arrangements, you can keep your stars from leaving and attract top candidates when you need to fill an open position.

Urgent info? Deliver it right

When you have extremely urgent information to share, ensure that your listeners understand your message and can respond accordingly. Use these tips to convey a clear message when it matters most:

- **Plan your statements.** If you communicate in the heat of the moment when your emotions are high, you could alarm employees.
- **Be open and honest.** Now is not the time to sugarcoat a situation or hide information. Provide them with all the information they need to act.
- **Take your time.** You may be tempted to rush through your statement and quickly send employees back to work. However, don't rush. Provide plenty of details and make time for them to ask questions and provide insight. However …
- **Get to the point.** Don't send mixed messages by starting a conversation with small talk. Reveal the urgency of the situation by immediately describing the issue and the severity of the situation.
- **Don't discuss other topics.** Instead, limit your discussion to this one high-priority issue. If meeting attendees bring up another topic, say, "We can discuss that at another time."

Lessons from the Courts

When filling positions, do not stereotype. A group of white line cooks at a Mexican restaurant filed a reverse discrimination lawsuit, claiming they were fired because of their race. They allege management preferred Mexican cooks because they "work hard" and "don't complain about wages." *(Stepan et al. v. Bloomington Burrito Group LLC, et al.)*

The takeaway: Employers cannot segregate positions by race, ethnicity, national origin or any other protected class.

No talk of pregnancy during the interview. When April's employer found out she was pregnant after only two weeks on the job, it fired her. When she asked why she was being terminated, the employer allegedly told her she deceived the company by not disclosing her pregnancy during the interview. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) filed a lawsuit on the employee's behalf.

The takeaway: Pregnancy is not up for discussion at any time during the interview process.

OK to deny permanent job to temp worker. A marketing temp who wasn't doing a good job was turned down for a permanent job, She sued, claiming race and national-origin discrimination. The court tossed her claim, reasoning that the employer was within its rights to reject an applicant it deemed not qualified. *(Yue v. McGrath, et al.)*

The takeaway: You don't have to accept an application from someone who has proven to be a poor worker.

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Mother knows best

Working moms offer tips to achieve a great work/life balance

Combining leadership duties at work with parenting responsibilities at home is no easy feat, and there's no magic formula that guarantees success and satisfaction in both areas. With effort, however, strides can be made.

In honor of Mother's Day, we asked working moms for their best tips on achieving a work-life balance. Here's what they had to say:

■ **"Treat your kids like your clients.** Figure out a schedule that works for your family and then stick to it.

"Just like you wouldn't cancel a client meeting because your child wanted to meet with you, don't cancel time with your kids because a client wants to meet with you. ... I even tell people 'I have these really demanding clients and I have to meet with them every day at 3 p.m.'"

— Kristen Rampe, owner, Kristen Rampe Consulting

■ **"My husband and I set aside time on Sunday morning to talk about logistics** for the upcoming week.

"That way we have the week planned out and aren't spending Sunday night, the last of our weekend time together, talking about the impending workweek."

— Lynn Perkins, CEO & founder, UrbanSitter

■ **"Take a few minutes at the beginning or end of each day to make a short list** of 'must do' items for work—the things that are crucial to success on that particular day. In an ideal 'work' world, you'll accomplish much more than what's on that list.

"But for the times when 'life' pops up and your workday goes out the window, you still have your list.

"When you find yourself with a spare pocket of 20 minutes or so throughout the day, you can fill it with one of your must-do items."

— Denise Stern, president & CEO, Let Mommy Sleep

> "Your home and work to-do list should be interchangeable. Keeping them on the same priority list helps plan for work, and family life, more effectively."
> —Michelle Brammer

• **"Be where your feet are.** For me, work-life balance is all about being completely present in the moment. When I'm in the office, I focus on being as productive as possible.

"I work as hard as I can and make the most of valuable face time with my employees. That way, when I go home, I can give 100% of my attention to my daughters."

— Caitlin Gould, co-founder & head of strategy, Yashi

■ **"Mom things will come up**—doctor's appointments to be made, registration for dance or soccer, a recital. These should appear on your to-do list at work, too.

"In fact, your home and work to-do lists should be interchangeable.

"Keeping them on the same priority list helps plan for work, and family life, more effectively."

— Michelle Brammer, marketing & PR manager, eZanga.com

■ **"I've realized that sometimes I have to hand over the reins** to loved ones who would love to help and want to be there for me and my kids—instead of having to be in control and in charge of everything myself."

— Lisa Batra, founder & CEO, My Kid's Threads

■ **"Dedicate a couple of hours each day to your kids WITHOUT your smartphone.** For me, those hours are between when I come home from work and bedtime.

"This works best if I just don't take my phone out of my purse when I come in the door, so I don't see its blinking light and hear every notification buzz.

"If you set this up initially and get all your team members on board right away, you CAN be unavailable from 5-8 (or whenever this works best for you)."

— Wendy Kirwan, manager of online marketing, Kars4Kids

■ **"If it can be delivered, get it delivered!** Everything from groceries and light bulbs to diapers and dinner can be delivered to your door. Running errands is a huge waste of time and energy, and in our modern world there's just no need.

"Amazon Prime is almost as good as having a personal assistant!"

— Ashley Kubiszyn, marketing & communications director, TicketCity

Q&A

How can I perk up staff meetings?

Q I'm getting less and less feedback at our weekly staff meetings. Any suggestions on how to shake some life into my team? — B.R., California

A Here are three:

1. Rotate moderators. Just because you're the boss, doesn't mean you have to chair every meeting. Work with others to prepare agendas and run the show—it'll help you to identify leaders, too.

2. Reset routines. Pull employees out of their comfort zones by having them switch seats every week, rearranging the chair configuration (e.g., U-shaped, circle, classroom style), or choosing a different venue, like the neighborhood park.

3. Activate their senses. Pass around samples of new products or other exhibits. Prod them with "What do you think?" questions at random.

What can I do about a rebel on staff?

Q One of my employees is a good producer, but often skirts our rules and resists change. How should I handle him? — T.W., Michigan

A If his behavior rises to the level of insubordination, you must take action.

Failure to do so will send the wrong message to others who will see you as a weak leader and may start bending rules themselves.

You need to enforce all the rules fairly, so you're going to need to sit this rebel down to communicate your expectations and the consequences he'll face for not meeting them. If you see no improvement, it might be time to pull the plug on this employee.

What good is a good producer if the end result is lower morale throughout the rest of the workplace, or worse yet, an employee who has undermined your authority?

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The Breakroom

Make your commute ... longer? It might be worth a shot. *The longer it is, the more likely you are to reach a state of calm and truly unwind; more miles and more time put valuable psychic distance between you and the things weighing down on you on either end of the trip. The key is that those miles need to be free of distracting competition, so back roads beat highway every time.*

Those people on the second floor want to use YOUR employee on THEIR project. *How should you handle this? If the worker seems interested, with a giant green light if at all possible. Your true legacy as a boss will be how you got people to expand their abilities and career horizons, and let them investigate even the smallest open door. Miserable are those remembered by their employees for thwarting opportunity.*