

Q. When employees are in conflict, it can disrupt workflow and group harmony, but should supervisors intervene in every instance? Can you offer guidelines for deciding when to take control of a situation and step in?



A. Most supervisors know conflict is normal in the workplace, and responding to conflict is part of a supervisor's job, but there are important guidelines. It is not necessary to intervene in every conflict; on the contrary, it is usually better to leave employees alone and let them work it out. If supervisors involved themselves in every conflict, they would likely create more of them because it would send a message that employees need not cooperate, compromise, or work out power struggles with each other and instead let you work it out. These are relationship skills that can be undermined by the authority possessed by a manager. A better tactic is monitoring what is taking place. So, when should you intervene? Intervene when the issues pose some sort of larger risk to the organization, as in the case of harassment, discrimination, or potential for violence. Hold employees responsible for resolving conflicts. Never let them perpetuate. The EAP can be a resource for supervisors when conflicts remain unresolved and you decide to speed up resolution by referring employees for additional help.

Q. When counseling employees, what are the most common mistakes that supervisors make that undermine their goal of getting above-satisfactory performance from employees?

A. Managers often forget the importance of effective communication and remaining proactive. These are the fundamental mistakes. This is the starting point for preventing performance problems. Poor communication typically leads to late interventions, after a crisis of performance already exists. Good communication means periodically reviewing and clarifying expectations and discussing performance problems. Beyond these things, many supervisors do not have employees communicate their own understanding of what precisely must be done to meet acceptable standards. And, supervisors often do not discuss what outstanding performance looks like and how it is measured. When outstanding performance is clearly outlined, most employees will keep it mind, and if they don't seek this level of performance, are inspired to perform well above standard. Busy supervisors sometimes step in too late, whereas acting early would save them enormous stress. Late intervention may find that the relationship with the employee has deteriorated, and this further compounds the difficulty of correcting performance.

Q. I have an open-door policy. I let my employees know they can come to me at any time to share concerns or problems. I rarely get visitors; so, this is a sign everything is going well, correct?

A. Well, maybe. An open-door policy encouraging workers to visit and discuss issues and concerns requires more than simply a door swung open. You must also have a psychologically safe workplace. A psychologically safe workplace naturally encourages employees to stick their necks out, approach you, and take advantage of what you are offering. They do so because they are confident they will not be rejected or punished for admitting a mistake, bringing a complaint, asking a question, or offering a new idea. Help employees feel respected, accepted, and comfortable at all times. Model this to others. The bottom line is: How you interact with employees outside your office will determine whether they will walk through your open door later.

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