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Open the lines of communication when handling conflicts

Ask the Expert

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As strange as it may sound, conflicts can be a valuable tool. When employees are comfortable expressing different points of view, they can help to identify key issues, solve problems and even increase the overall level of engagement in the workplace.

The problems emerge when conflicts spiral out of control, lines are drawn, and someone feels they have been wronged. To compound matters, the owners or safety managers at small companies often need to deal with these situations without any formal training in the related skills.

The main role of a manager-as-mediator is to explore the root cause of the positions that lead to a conflict in the first place. As the third party in the room, this involves ensuring that everyone has an equal amount of time to express their opinions without falling into the postures of a “parent” or “child”. And it requires everyone to contribute an “adult” approach that focuses on the facts while setting emotions aside.

Consider the discussions around an Hours of Service (HOS) violation as an example of the way these postures can emerge. A driver who falls into the defensive role of a “child” would immediately begin to argue they were forced to work beyond the hours that the law allows. A dispatcher who assumes the domineering role of the “parent” will counter with comments about how customers are paying everyone’s salary.

The “adult” approach will recognize that most employees have good intentions and want to make the right decisions. They make their choices based on the information that they believe to be true. Exploring

the reasons behind each stance in the above HOS situation, a manager may find a driver who believes they would be penalized for failing to complete the trip at any cost. (“If I didn’t finish the load, I’d be left with trips into New York City for the rest of the month.”) The member of the operations team may think the trip had to continue because of pressure from an important customer. (“They were breathing down my neck for that load, and we can’t afford to lose their business.”)

Once information like this is out in the open, it becomes possible to clarify any misconceptions with a few facts. Ideally, the discussion around the HOS issue would involve a clear description of the fleet’s commitment to the related regulations and the dispatcher could be informed about the best ways to convey these rules to a time-strapped customer. The driver, meanwhile, should understand that they need to do everything they can to meet the customer’s needs but only within the context of the rules—there would be no penalty for doing the right thing.

Of course, these need to be more than empty words. The best solutions to any conflict are based on the realities of the business, acting in the best interest of the company and its future.

Any hope of reducing conflicts like this in the future will also require everyone involved to understand what would be considered a success, how they can work together to reach that goal, and a clear deadline for related steps.

Granted, the underlying issues behind a conflict may have nothing to do with the workplace. Even a good employee can let their performance suffer if they are distracted by a personal issue such as a sick spouse or financial problems. By establishing and maintaining a level of trust with employees, a manager will have the opportunity to identify these types of issues and even help to guide people to available solutions—like Employee Assistance Programs, for example.

Ultimately a little compassion and understanding will always go a long way.

There are several tools that can help managers prepare for their roles. Colleges, for example, all offer training for those in any supervisory role, whether it comes in the form of a certificate program or a one-day seminar. Solutions and approaches can even emerge from peers when managers are able to find the time to attend association meetings and networking events.

Every source will contribute a number of important details, but managers who are committed to the process of addressing conflicts will quickly recognize a common thread that ties together the entire strategy.

The best solutions to any conflict will emerge when the lines of communication are as open as they can be.

This month's experts are Diane Hozjan and Dave Roth. Diane is the Manager of Human Resources for Markel Insurance Company of Canada and has more than 10 years experience. Dave is the Ontario Regional Manager of Safety and Training Services for Markel Insurance Company of Canada and has more than 20 years experience in managing safety and operations in the trucking industry.

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