

The Successful SUPERVISOR

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Tips from  LifeSolutions

"I spend a lot of time managing conflicts between employees. It isn't easy and, honestly, I don't think I am very good at it. Can you give me any tips to help me to be more effective?" Managers often feel ill-equipped when it comes to dealing with the inevitable disagreements and interpersonal tensions that occur in the workplace. In this issue, *The Successful Supervisor* addresses the topic of conflict management, clarifies the role of the manager, and reviews the essential components of successful conflict resolution. As always, we are interested in your feedback or questions. E-mail your questions and comments to EAP at ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com or contact an EAP account manager at 1.800.647.3327.

Debra Messer, MA, CEAP, LifeSolutions

At a recent workshop for managers, participants were asked if they believed it was the responsibility of leadership to resolve workplace conflict. All hands were raised in agreement. When asked if they found it stressful and "never wanted to do it again," almost as many hands shot up and chuckles of recognition were heard throughout the room. Managers are very aware of the damage that an unresolved conflict can have in the workplace and they acknowledge the need to address it. This awareness does not always translate into action, however, and managers, like everyone else, can be conflict avoidant or unsure of the steps to take to help their employees settle disagreements and move forward.

Conflict is normal and inevitable wherever people work together. It can be productive or non-productive, depending on how it is managed. Conflict can be a source of ongoing problems or it can be an opportunity for growth and engagement.

Conflict Management: Steps to Successful Intervention

Managers can set the stage for successful conflict intervention in the following ways:

- ◆ **Choose your spot and your people.** Avoid managing conflict out in the open. Find a private area so that employees do not have to worry about being overheard or feel compelled to perform for an audience. Do not involve anyone who is not directly related to the issue being discussed.
- ◆ **Take time to get the information you need.** An effective mediator needs to know all the details. Ask questions, assess the situation, and explore both overt and covert issues. Don't feel compelled to provide immediate resolution. Often an anxious manager will rush to a solution only to find out later that the real issues were completely missed. Your goal is to understand the facts as well as each person's viewpoint and needs. If people continue to focus on multiple issues or if their emotional responses seem excessive, there are likely hidden issues or feelings that are not being expressed.
- ◆ **Remain neutral and non-reactive at all times.** The manager must model open-mindedness, fairness, and objectivity at all times. All parties need to feel that they will be heard and given an equal opportunity to express their point of view.
- ◆ **Listen. Listen. Listen.** Pay attention not only to words and content, but also to non-verbal communication. Again, no matter how frustrated you may get, you need to model the behaviors you want your employees to embrace. Good listening includes making non-threatening eye contact, staying attentive, responding, and rephrasing.

- ◆ **Defuse when necessary.** People are often emotional and upset in conflict situations. One of your goals is to calm things down. Do this by slowing down the pace, speaking slowly and calmly, and taking your time.
- ◆ **Validate, acknowledge, and respect feelings** first before you attempt to problem-solve. People who are hurt or angry will not be able to listen to others or to discuss strategies to improve a situation until they feel listened to.
- ◆ **Manage the process.** It's your job to keep the meeting on track and safe for all participants. This may involve maintaining ground rules such as: one person talks at a time; we criticize ideas, not people; no yelling or threatening; etc. You need to step in if these rules are broken. If you don't, the meeting will likely deteriorate.
- ◆ **Recognize the contributions** made by all participants. Highlight and praise those who compromise. Allow all parties to leave feeling good about their part in the resolution. Remind participants of the benefits of reaching a solution.
- ◆ **End on a positive note.** Know that you won't always reach the perfect solution. Sometimes you have to "agree to disagree." If this happens, address it. Ask, "How will we move forward and work together even when we disagree? How can we make this work?" Always conclude with appreciation for efforts and contributions. Restate what was agreed upon, check for buy-in, and plan ahead to follow up on stated goals.

Next month we will address the topic of Coaching Employees. In the meantime, please contact LifeSolutions with your questions about Conflict Management.

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