



## Preventing, addressing team conflict

By Cynthia J. Young

Over the past 30 years, I've dealt with different personalities and disagreements on my teams. Some days, I would go to work and know what I was walking into, while other days I would get the blind courtesy copy on an email or hear passive-aggressive comments, knowing my team was getting ready to blow. While it made my day challenging, the team members who had to work with those having the conflict or disagreement had it worse.

Managers are responsible for preventing conflicts and creating a comfortable working environment for all. It's our job to find a middle ground, listen to all sides and do our best to prevent these conflicts while still teaching coping skills. Here are a few ways managers can address team conflicts.

**Establish expectations.** When starting a job, a manager may have spoken to the team on a group level as well as individually. If expectations are not understood at the beginning, this opens the team to conflicts and misunderstandings between members themselves and between the manager and team. Managers need to back the expectations of leadership, but also set and follow up on their own expectations.

**Walk the walk.** It's not enough to talk the talk – managers need to walk the walk, especially when it comes to safety of the team. As part of the expectations framework, managers need to know the required actions to take. Most are spelled out in human resource processes, but many can be learned from managers reaching out to their supervisors or mentors for guidance

based on their past experiences.

**Talk to the individuals.** Talk to the parties in question and, if necessary, to those who may have witnessed the conflict. Talk to the parties individually so they can fully express their sides of the conflict. This is not a time to berate anyone but to have them share what has occurred and what they want to get out of the discussion.

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**Facilitate a group discussion.** After speaking with the individuals, bring them in for a group discussion. Hold it in a conference room or closed-door office to prevent others from hearing the details and spreading gossip.

**Encourage compromise and discussion options for buy-in.** This can involve finding solutions that satisfy the needs of all parties involved. While this may not be entirely possible, it's worth working together to find common ground and to address conflicts.

**Provide support.** Managers will need to provide guidance and support to team members as they work through their conflicts and assist the rest of the team so sides aren't taken, which can cause further rifts. This could involve offering resources, providing coaching or mentoring.

**Follow up.** Managers must follow up with team members to check in with the individuals and find out how things are progressing. This can help to ensure that issues have been fully resolved and that everyone is comfortable moving forward.

No one, including the manager, is irreplaceable, especially when conflicts arise. If not addressed, conflicts can bleed into other areas, creating an undesirable work environment where the team is unhappy, work progress slows and the team starts to break apart. If the issues are not resolved, the manager may need to address problems through formal counseling.

Keeping the strength of the team and the work to be accomplished in mind may require only one discussion or as much as formal counseling. ❖

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