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Five Steps to Solve Gripes and Conflicts

From Steven H. Carney, the Workplace Guy:

Surveys show that 42 percent of employees (about 45 million) experience yelling and verbal abuse and 60 percent (more than 60 million) have conflicts that range from weekly to monthly. If you are having these problems, you're not alone! You might avoid raising legitimate concerns because they fear having a confrontation. However, relaying your genuine concerns doesn't have to be a confrontation if you handle the steps appropriately.

Have you been ridiculed or mistreated by a co-worker, boss, or colleague who didn't apologize? Have you been blamed for something you didn't do? When treated badly, do you feel frustration, anger, or resentment and try to avoid the instigator?

Solving gripes and problems is necessary for maintaining constructive workplace and resolving them early is easier than waiting until they grow into larger conflicts. Think of stones becoming boulders on the path to success—they are harder to move with as they grow larger. Here are some suggested steps for handling gripes and conflicts:

1. Lay the groundwork.

Have co-workers and managers agree to keep the "air" clear of gripes and conflict when there isn't a problem. ("Let's agree to deal with problems as they come up because they will adversely affect our teamwork and productivity.") When there is a problem, allow any anger to cool and plan to talk through the issues in a more relaxed environment, such as going for coffee or sharing a meal.

2. Begin with a tactful, non-confrontational opener.

"I have a concern and I was wondering if we could talk," or
"Do you have some time? I'd like to discuss a situation with you," or
"I'd like to clear the air with you about something."

(These approaches are more effective than making an accusation against the other person. Continue when they agree to discuss the situation with you.)

3. Own your position.

"I'm uncomfortable with what happened," or
"I'm frustrated about our lack of communication," or
"I could have been more clear about the problem," etc.

(Avoid saying things like, "You make me so mad!" because you're blaming them for how you feel)

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Five Steps to Solve Gripes and Conflicts (Cont.)

4. Acknowledge the other person's position.

Listen without arguing or debating and focus on their intentions. Try to find out what he or she was after—what did they want or need? Rephrase their position if needed: “What you are saying is . . . “

5. Finish with a plan to solve the problem and move forward.

What specific things do you want or need from your co-workers or teammate(s) to move forward again? (Focus on a few specific things and follow through for resolution and closure—even a trial run for a few weeks can be a great step forward.)

Remember, this doesn't have to be a perfect process. Different situations might require some different steps. For example, if you're not clear about what the other person is saying or wanting, ask them for a clarification:

“I'm not clear about what you mean,” or make a suggestion, such as

“I think I know what you're trying to do and I'm wondering if this approach might be helpful.”

As indicated by the initial steps, it's best to catch gripes or problems early. Putting them off will not solve anything and the problem will tend to grow. Time can easily slip away—in a few weeks, who will remember the details of what happened? I suggest raising genuine concerns as soon as possible.

Use a tactful, cooperative approach and focus on solutions. Think and act in ways to build agreement and consensus. See www.powerofwe.com and The Teamwork Chronicles for more information and tips on this and related problems.