

# Handling Workplace Conflict

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## **By Adam Stone**

For employers, the recession comes with more than just fiscal woes. An economic slowdown brings the ever-present danger of employee conflict to the fore.

"Any time stress is increased, conflict is more likely to sharpen and to escalate more quickly," said Carolyn Penny, director of the UC Davis Extension program Common Ground: Center for Cooperative Solutions.

Workplace conflict is a real, and costly, problem for employers. In 2008, American businesses spent more than 2.8 hours per week managing conflict, or \$359 billion paid hours, based on average hourly earnings of \$17.95 for seasonally adjusted, nonfarm workers as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in May 2008, according to the report "Workplace Conflict and How Businesses can Harvest it to Thrive."

Conducted by research firm CPP, Inc., the October 2008 study found that 85 percent of all workers say they deal with workplace conflict, yet only 22 percent of employees say their managers deal well with conflict. CPP was founded in 1956 as Consulting Psychologists Press, and created the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator instrument.

In times of stress, employees may stoke the workplace furnace through their uncertainty ("Will this place be here tomorrow?") or through an effort to secure their place ("If one of us is going down, it may as well be you.")

But employers themselves are just as likely to fan the flames, according to Jessica Hawthorne, CalChamber employment law counsel. "If you are saying, 'Oh, you are lucky you have a job,' either by your actions or your words, it breeds resentment. It builds anger."

## **Open Airwaves**

Even in the best of times, it takes very little to spark a workplace conflagration.

"It can be something as simple as a very annoying ringtone," Hawthorne said. "Over time people start to get very annoyed, and they may get angry. They complain, and it contributes to a conflicted environment."

Here's where the boss tends to flub it. "Management tends to ignore things like that, because they may seem trivial. But often they are indicative of bigger things," Hawthorne said. "The biggest mistake people make is in ignoring personality conflicts, ignoring these seemingly minor problems."

Within the HR community, it is almost universally understood that ignoring office conflict is just about the worst thing you can do. Whatever the sore point may be between two individuals, whether related directly to work or else driven by personality or other factors, it falls to the business owner or manager to bring all sides to the table.

That's the general rule, and the present hour of uncertainty gives it special emphasis. Data shows American workers primed to speculate in the absence of hard information. In October 2008, for example, global communications firm Weber Shandwick revealed survey results showing that 70 percent of workers "expect" the economic slump will have a negative impact on their companies. Of those, 26 percent "believe" their companies will have to lay off employees.

Clearly this is the kind of speculation management will want to quash before full-scale panic erupts.

Employers may find themselves in a bind, however. Though workers may stir themselves up out of real or imagined fears, a business owner in a bumpy economy may not be free to disclose the whole truth about the company's positions or plans. Full disclosure may be impossible, but communication is still achievable.

Though employers can't address some issues, either because they don't have the authority or because they don't know all the answers yet, employers can at least allay fears by being forthright with whatever information they are able to share.

Often it will make sense to deliver that message to a broad group, rather than one on one.

"I would pull everybody into the room and sort through all the issues and the concerns that are occurring," said Amelya Stevenson, president of e-VentExe, an HR consulting firm based in Roseville, Calif., and part of the CalChamber's HR Consultant Program. "You want to let people openly share their concerns about the situation. That's how you minimize all that talk at the water cooler, by getting it out in the open."

## Why We Snipe

Workplace conflict didn't start with the recession. People have always rubbed each other the wrong way, in big or little ways. In recent years, though, a few particular forms of social irritant have risen to the fore.

First there is the commonly cited generational question. It's been said that aging Baby Boomers and today's 20- and 30-somethings come from different and often conflicting worlds. The old idea of fidelity to a single employer is defunct, creating a gap between how these different sets of workers think about loyalty.

Today's younger set of workers also loves to multitask. It's nothing for a 28-year-old employee to casually scan messages on a handheld device while in the middle of a meeting. But this conduct does create some friction.

"That glance over at the Blackberry can be perceived as a gesture of disrespect," Penny said of older employees' perceptions of younger employees' penchant for multitasking.

Another pressure has come from what is broadly dubbed the multicultural phenomenon, a broadening of the workplace ethnic mix.

Diversity "increases the opportunities for misunderstanding, for conflict, for misinterpretation, because of all the unstated assumptions we have about what is right and how to go about something," Penny said. Employers have to make an effort in such an environment to ensure that lines of communication remain open.

Office conflict is no longer confined to the merely interpersonal relationships between two people. Operating units can bump heads just as vigorously as can office-mates. Take the traditional rift between those who work in the office and those in the field. In a common scenario, the accounting department is asking everyone to generate numbers, fill out financial forms on an ongoing basis. For accounting it's vital to document the digits. For the sales force and others outside the office, it's just paperwork.

When inter-departmental strife is the issue, management has a clear mandate to spell out the how's and why's on all sides. This comes down to the communication imperative, once again. For all hands to pull together, each has to know what the other is doing.

## Liability Looms

What is the toll of discord? What are the possible ramifications of conflict that is allowed to go unchecked? More to the point, should you have your lawyer on standby? As a general rule, yes.

Certainly the lowest level of interpersonal squabbling does not pose a legal threat, at least not initially. "If someone complains because someone else is eating too loud, is there a liability issue that comes out of that? Very rarely," Hawthorne said.

Trivial complaints evolve, though. Here's a phrase worth knowing: "Constructive discharge." That's where someone is effectively harassed into quitting. Allow that to happen and you will indeed be dialing your attorney.

Or a problem may escalate in another, darker, direction. Conflict often arises out of "anger and resentment," Hawthorne said, "and that can easily become a workplace violence issue." Some may assert that the employer bears some liability for that situation, for failing to ensure employees' safety.

Perhaps the greatest risk, from a liability point of view, concerns discord that forms a discernable pattern. "If a female manager starts to treat all the women a certain way, and if all the women are complaining, then you have to look at that," Hawthorne said. "Is this person trying to make life more difficult for a certain group? Or is this person just obnoxious?" If office friction shows a pattern, that should be a high-priority item.

Ultimately, when interpersonal issues go unresolved in the workplace, the specter of litigation always looms. Sooner or later somebody goes away mad, "and when you have unhappy people leave your employment, those are the people who sue you," Hawthorne said.

There is a potential up side to all this, at least according to the CPP study, which showed a possibility that strife may offer a learning opportunity. The study found that 81 percent of U.S. workers have seen positive outcomes from workplace conflict. Nearly half of those surveyed said workplace conflict had given them a better understanding of others, while 33 percent report improved working relationships, and 29 percent found better solutions to problems. Twenty-one percent saw higher performance in their team in the wake of a conflict.

Cheering as those numbers may be, experts say we'll have to slog through the bad to get to the good, and that means getting a firm handle on the workplace clashes and quarrels that likely will arise in the coming months of financial uncertainty.

"When people are laid off or their hours are reduced, the business still must go on, and those left behind are under a lot of stress to maintain the workplace," said e-VentExe's Stevenson. "There is the anxiety of wondering whether they are next, and that is the time when key leaders need to be honest and truthful so that people can know just where they stand."

Full disclosure may not douse the fire entirely, but it will help get the flames under control.