

Take Action to Deal with Conflict at Work

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



Picture today's workplace as a rope, with its threads unraveling. Unless managers are alert...and capable of intervening, the rope will most certainly snap.

The nation's persistent economic problems are taking their toll on families and workers. They are fueling and escalating workplace conflicts that are costly in both personal terms and business productivity.

While workplace conflicts are nothing new, they are increased by the stress being placed on workers and the businesses where they work.

The recent news that Kern County's unemployment rate jumped to over 17 percent in January should not have shocked any of us. We have read and heard about layoff notices being given to teachers in most local districts. A major credit union has announced the closure of branches and layoff of workers. The biggest job losses in January in Kern County occurred in construction, down 3,500 jobs year-over-year.

In 2007-2008, when we saw the first wave of layoffs, companies were shedding "excess workers." But despite people's hope that the economy would improve in 2010, statistics indicate otherwise. We are now in our second and third rounds of layoffs, with the job losses cutting into the muscle and bone of companies.

Those blessed enough to still be employed may have spouses who have lost their jobs, significantly reducing household incomes and increasing debt and concern. And the people remaining in reduced workforces have worries about their own job security, may have taken a cut in pay, and have likely seen their workloads increase.

My hope is not to be seen as a depressing naysayer, but rather as someone who is sounding a warning: These are the ingredients of a stressed workplace, where unproductive, costly and dangerous conflicts can get out of control unless managers are vigilant, proactive and trained in conflict resolution.

"Conflict" is a difference in wants, needs or expectations. It is not always bad. It can lead to innovation, creativity and collaboration. But not properly controlled and channeled, it can be disruptive and costly. It can range from a fist fight in the warehouse, to the circulation of malicious rumors. It can involve intimidation and bullying, or passive-aggressive behavior.

Supervisors and managers often ignore early warning signs, sparingly applying conflict resolution techniques as a last resort and often after problems have grown substantially.

The results of unresolved workplace conflict include stress, frustration, anxiety, loss of sleep, strained relationships, grievances and litigation, employee turnover, loss of productivity, customer complaints, sabotage, injury and accidents, disability claims, and increased absenteeism.

Managers must encourage open communications in the organization. They must foster the acceptance of different behavioral styles and perspectives. They must be alert to brewing conflicts, understanding that the formation of cliques is often a warning flag. In addition, those in charge need to worry less about everyone becoming friends, and more about everyone doing their job. They need to empower workers to resolve their conflicts by identifying the stressors they face, finding ways to become resilient, letting go of the “small stuff,” and taking care of themselves physically.

The road to resiliency requires ACTION:

A – Aware – Be aware of how you feel and react to pressure and demands.

C – Check – Check out perceptions.

T – Test – Test situations.

I – Implement – Implement healthy habits.

O – Optimism – Be optimistic.

N -- Never -- Never forget your ability to take control or let go.

Conflict is found in every workplace. Employees compete for pay and promotions. Bosses – all the way up to executive staffs and boards of directors – compete for funding to support their programs and departments. Conflict is a fact of life on the job.

But when conflict interferes with the jobs that employees are asked to do, and the company’s productivity, it must be resolved. Bringing in outside mediators or human resources consultants to intervene helps resolve conflicts and trains workers and supervisors that addressing conflict is a great step.

Wise company owners and managers who are concerned about the well-being of their workers, as well as their company’s bottom line, will be aware and train all levels of their staff to resolve conflict in the workplace.

This article written by Holly Culhane first appeared in The Bakersfield Californian on April 9, 2010. Holly Culhane is president of P.A.S. Associates, a Bakersfield human resources consulting firm. She can be contacted through her webpage at www.PASassociates.com or by phone at 631-2165.

P•A•S Associates has expertise in human resources and other areas involving employment issues. **P•A•S Associates**, in providing this website, does not represent that it is acting as an attorney or that it is giving any form of legal advice or legal opinion. **P•A•S Associates** recommends that before making any decision pertaining to human resource issues or employment issues, including the utilization of information contained on this website, the advice of legal counsel to determine the legal ramifications of the use of any such information be obtained.