

# Workplace conflict: resolving staff disputes

From daily office politics to serious and long-lasting grievances, conflict between staff can drain time, morale and productivity from your business. Here are some tips for resolving employee disputes before they become unmanageable.

Dealing with conflicts between employees is a frequent headache for business owners – and it can cost real time and money. One recent study by employment research company CPP found that, on average, each employee spends 2.1 hours every week either involved in a disagreement themselves or trying to manage a conflict between co-workers. That's equivalent to each employee losing one working day a month to workplace disputes.

For managers and business-owners, handling staff whose working relationship has broken down can be stressful and time-consuming, so it is always best to try to solve the problem as soon as possible. Here are some simple steps to take if you're faced with a workplace dispute.

## Pre-empt problems with clear company guidelines

Many conflicts arise in grey areas, such as arguments about people's place in the chain of command, or which responsibilities fall within which job descriptions. Clear, written company guidelines – along with a staff handbook detailing behavioural expectations, dress codes and so on – will help pre-empt problems and can enable swift resolutions by providing an authoritative source to refer to.

## Acknowledge problems and be proactive

It can be tempting to try to pretend an ongoing conflict between employees isn't happening, but even minor disputes can escalate when allowed to fester – ending up in accusations of workplace bullying or, in worst case scenarios, legal tribunals. It is usually fairly obvious when colleagues are clashing. Acting quickly can minimise the effect on your workplace.

## Hold a meeting in confidence

Rather than tackling a confrontation publicly, hold a private meeting with the relevant parties, either separately or both together as appropriate. You should spend the best part of the meeting listening and allowing your staff to present their side of the story. In many cases, the mere act of airing a grievance provides its own solution, and employees will clear up misunderstandings or find a way of working around a problem themselves.

You should also take care to be even-handed in such meetings, and discuss solutions in terms of what's best for the team and the business, rather than making it about an individual.

## Resolve specific problems with specific solutions

There is always a danger that employees who don't see eye to eye will just generally complain about each other's personalities and traits. When trying to resolve a problem, it's best to avoid character-based discussion and instead focus on specific instances, offering practical guidance about how you expect staff to behave in those circumstances.

When you have reached a conclusion, ensure that all parties accept it and agree to move on accordingly.

## Take legal advice in serious cases

Most disputes can be resolved informally – which is usually the best way of doing things and certainly the least expensive. However, in more serious cases there can be no option but to follow formal proceedings. Document instances of disputes boiling over, aggressive emails and so on, and if necessary take professional advice. Even bringing in professional mediators could be a better and less costly solution than arbitration – which could be bad news for all parties, not least your business.

**Conflicts are inevitable in any organisation, but there are steps you can take to minimise the effect on your business. Acting promptly and carefully can ensure you resolve disputes before they get out of control.**

