

Managing Workplace

Maximize results by minimizing bickering, pettiness and backstabbing

Conflict

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Highlights:

TRAINING INSERT

Employees who will hardly make a photocopy without consulting with you first are a significant drain on your time — not to mention your patience. Use this month's training guide to teach your staff the fine art of self-reliance.Insert

EMPLOYMENT LAW

Documenting everything you do isn't likely to protect you in court, says attorney David M. Curtis, but watching what you say and how you say it may.3

DISPUTE RESOLUTION

The natural reaction to being yelled at is to yell back, resulting in a wound to the relationship that may not heal. Learn how to control someone else's emotions.6

Also in this issue:

LEADERSHIP

Given the rash of corporate mergers, downsizings and meltdowns, managers need to improve their organizations to keep their jobs, say researchers. But what can you do to keep your career and company thriving?2

COMMUNICATION

When supervisors misinterpret the latest company news, the misinformation spreads like wildfire and has devastating effects. Here's a way to prevent it from ever happening again.5

LEGAL BEAT.8

Customer relations

Internal conflict jeopardizes external service

By Pamela Mills-Senn

Conflict within your four walls can be troublesome enough, but when arguments spill out of the company confines and over to clients, customers or vendors, the impact to the organization's image and bottom line can be considerable.

If managers will often react too slowly to internal conflict, or ignore it altogether, they al-

most guarantee that this spillover will become an issue.

Depending upon the type of business, conflict spillover can run the gamut from bickering and exchanging dirty looks in front of customers or vendors, to more serious transgressions such as failing to adequately help clients, stonewalling important projects, or speaking disparagingly about the company or its employees.

(See SPILLOVER on page 4)

Watch out for spillover

Types of internal conflicts likely to spill over into employee interactions with customers include:

- Disputes over the content of work or management relations.
- Competing ideas over the organization's mission.
- Conflicting behavioral styles. ■

Employees are working longer hours, but are they getting more done?

Long hours strain the delicate balance of work and life demands, which can lead to aggravated, tired and harried workers. And the benefit of greater productivity may not even be a reality, according to a new study by Xerox Corporation and research firm Harris Interactive.

The nationwide survey of more than 450 office workers revealed that nearly half of office workers are putting in nine to 10 hours a day, but are only working at peak productivity for about half that time. ■

How many hours a day do you work at peak productivity?

38% work at peak productivity for 6 or more hours a day.



62% work at peak productivity for 5 hours or less a day.

Source: Workplace Productivity Study, Xerox Corporation, Harris Interactive.

SPILLOVER (continued from page 1)

Although such behavior is common, many managers are nevertheless surprised when they discover internal conflict has become uncomfortably public, says **Kristin Anderson**, coauthor of *Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Customer Service* and founder of **Say What? Consulting**, a Minneapolis-based company.

"When it comes to spillover, managers are often the last to know, in the way that parents are the last to know their teenager has been binge-drinking," says Anderson. "When they look back, the signs are there. The problem for managers is that they're often very focused on the job, on getting the paperwork done, attending meetings, and the like. They have less time for walking around and keeping in touch with their staff." This, she explains, can keep managers out of the loop until the conflict has mushroomed like a toxic cloud, enveloping outsiders.

But not all managers are oblivious, says **Paul Glen**, author of *Healing Client Relationships: A Professional's Guide to Managing Client Conflict*, and principal of **Marina Del Ray, Calif.-based C2 Consulting**.

"I'd lump managers into two categories," says Glen. "Those who are really focused on customer service are probably aware of how conflict can spill over. Those who are more task-oriented, or whose attention is more focused on operations, might not be."

But there's little reason for any manager to be caught unaware and for spillover to begin its evil ooze. It's essentially a matter of managers understanding that they must swiftly react to and resolve internal conflict, and of knowing the circumstances likely to spark problem behavior, say both experts.

Basically, says Anderson, anytime there is an organizational change that results in employees feeling anxious, taken advantage of, or as if they have no control, the likelihood of internal conflict increases, as does the chance for spillover.

Glen offers three general types of conflict that managers need to be attuned to. These involve conflict over:

1. **The content of work or management relations.** This includes labor disputes, contract negotiations, conflict about raises or assignments.

2. **Values.** Competing ideas over the organization's mission are present.

3. **Behavioral style.** People rubbing each other the wrong way or personality clashes are examples of conflicts arising out of differences in behavioral style. In frontline work, spillover most often comes from this, says Glen.

Preventing spillover means anticipating that in the above situations, conflict will undoubtedly occur, he explains.

"Managers shouldn't expect that in times of change or crisis that employees will not respond by turning their attention inward," says Glen, who adds that this inward focus, which diverts attention away from outside stakeholders, is one of the biggest dangers.

"In times of disturbance, managers should act as change managers," he continues. "Be honest about what's going on, acknowledge feelings, and offer strategies for staying externally focused."

Anderson concurs, and suggests that managers also thwart spillover with these tips:

- **Develop trust.** If employees feel safe bringing problems to your attention, you're going to find out about them faster.
- **Remain impartial.** Don't take sides in a conflict. Remain a neutral investigator.
- **Focus on behavior not feelings.** You can't force employees to respect each other, but you can require that they behave respectfully. Develop standards of behavior, and insist that all employees follow them. Tip: Including employees in the development of these standards improves understanding and buy-in.
- **Provide scripts to employees when necessary.** In some cases, spillover happens simply because employees don't know what to say in response to a customer complaint or problem.
- **Have a plan.** Decide how you'll communicate about the change or event, and how to handle any resultant conflict. Remember that the message you give employees is what they'll carry to outside stakeholders. ■

Sources: *Kristin Anderson*. Visit www.kristinanderson.com. *Paul Glen*. Visit www.c2-consulting.com.

Play conflict detective

Covert conflict can be even more deadly than overt. By the time managers tune into it, outside relationships could have been seriously compromised. Pay attention to body language and attitudes, says **Paul Glen**, author of *Healing Client Relationships: A Professional's Guide to Managing Client Conflict*.

Do employees make snide remarks? Are there hostile factions or competing visions about what the organization can do? If these issues are present, assume that conflict is, too, and that spillover is already, or shortly will be, a problem. ■

Repair relationships

If spillover has negatively impacted a customer or vendor, **Kristin Anderson**, coauthor of *Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Customer Service* suggests that managers:

- Acknowledge the situation to the aggrieved party.
- Express that you want to correct it.
- Make specific promises about what you'll do. ■