

Addressing management issues

How to handle staff squabbles

Q What is the best way to deal with conflicts between employees?

A Unfortunately, conflict is an inevitable part of management, especially in today's lab where the workload has grown and lean staffing has required employees to work more for less. This creates a stressful environment where conflicts can arise over trivial matters and misunderstandings. Peacekeeping is often a huge part of the manager's job description, because open warfare is bad for team morale. When there is excessive quarreling or absolute animosity between a couple of co-workers, other employees can become distracted and pay less attention to their job duties.

If the bickering between employees leads to less-than-adequate job performances, it is time to act. Keep in mind your job is *not* to transform Hatfield and McCoy into best buddies, but to secure good job performances *is* your responsibility.

At times, you may feel as if you are being forced to play the role of "mom," but before you declare you are going to "stop this car" until they can behave themselves, invite the quarrelling employees to your office (if you have one) or a conference room away from the lab. Tell them the purpose of the meeting is to discuss their disagreement, and make sure each party clearly understands the viewpoint of the other. Often, simply having each employee say her problems aloud to the other (rather than sharing surreptitious snide comments with co-workers) forces each of them to clearly see her own role in the conflict. Allow each party to express her point of view. (Make clear that respect for all co-workers is required.) Explore and discuss potential solutions and alternatives. Agree on a plan that meets the needs of all parties. Monitor the situation and follow up.

Also keep in mind that many conflicts arise because employees' roles and responsibilities have not been clearly defined. Make sure every employee has a job description and has a regularly scheduled performance review.

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A Squabbles between co-workers are inevitable. Put a group of people together in a busy lab for more than 40 hours a week and hostilities over a can of Coke missing from the refrigerator or constant cellphone chatter are bound to flare up.

Usually minor disagreements blow over with little or no intervention by the supervisor. But sometimes a slight disagreement can spiral out of control, so be aware of the situation at all times. When the argument affects job performance, it is time to step in. Two employees at odds can affect the entire department. Productivity drops, co-workers take sides, teamwork is hampered, and morale falls, so it is important to address the issue before it influences the entire team.

Your facility may have a policy in place through the human resources (HR) department that addresses this type of issue, so HR is a logical first point of contact. Depending on the outcome of the inquiry to HR, you may need to address the issue with the two employees within your department.

First, arrange a meeting with the two employees away from the rest of the staff. Explain that you have called them together to resolve the conflict, because it is having an adverse affect on others in the department. Tell the employees that they must work together to create solutions. Have each person explain his perspective and then listen to the other person's perspective on the situation. Ask what it would take to resolve the

conflict and what each employee is willing to contribute. Once each has offered some reasonable solutions, you should officially record (in writing or in some electronic format) the plan of action and the desirable outcome; then hold them accountable.

Change may not happen overnight, but revisit the issue with each employee periodically to make sure each is following through on the conflict-resolution action plan. If you do not see progress in a reasonable period of time, your next step may call for formal disciplinary action.

Many people in supervisory positions have had little training in managing conflict, so dealing with these situations can be daunting. But the worst thing you can do is ignore disruptive disagreements, because these kind of unresolved conflicts tend to escalate. For supervisors who find themselves excessively uncomfortable with these types of situations, it may be beneficial to invest in conflict-control courses or using a mediator.

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Bottom line: When dealing with employee conflicts, make sure to do as the experts suggest above. In addition, be careful not to show favoritism due to personal friendships. Such actions can ruin a manager's reputation. As supervisors mature off the bench into management positions, staff may test the allegiance of a new manager. □



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