Turn the Heat Down on Conflict Before it Boils Over

Safety Talk

What Can Go Wrong
In our fast-paced world, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and frustrated, especially at work. Your co-workers likely feel the same, so it's no surprise that the workplace can be a prime place for conflict.

What's the Danger?
When conflict is not properly managed, what starts out a minor difference of opinions, disagreement or misunderstanding, can escalate into a violent workplace incident. Conflict in the workplace can also lead to stress, anxiety and job dissatisfaction. These factors can lead to a decrease in productivity and an increase in absences as workers try to avoid the conflict.

Here are some common workplace scenarios likely to cause conflict:

- Production pressures and deadlines that seem unrealistic.
- Unclear communication, expectations, and directions.
- Bullying, harassment and discrimination.
- Differing opinions on how to perform a task or what equipment to use.
- Sudden or constant organizational changes.
- Economic issues threatening the future of the organization.

How to Protect Yourself

First, realize conflict is going to happen and it's not always a negative thing. If handled well, it can lead to a better understanding of a person, issue, or process. Next, remember that resolving conflict isn't about winning or losing. If you "win," all that means is the other person "loses" and the conflict is unresolved and will boil up again at some point. So rather than trying to win, you want to work to resolve the conflict.

Here are some tips for resolving conflict:

- Address the conflict sooner rather than later. The sooner you can address the conflict, the easier it will be to resolve it.

- Be nice and ask questions to help you gain clarification and understanding of an issue. For example, “I was curious why you said “x” in the meeting today. What did you mean?”
- Take time and talk with the person rather than emailing back and forth. It can be easy to misinterpret tone and context in an email.
- Don’t make assumptions, either in thought or in words. Don’t assume the worst and don’t say things that assume something about the other person like, “Why do you have such a problem listening to my ideas?”
- Accept responsibility for your part in the conflict. A thoughtful apology goes a long way towards defusing a tense situation.
- Work to define a common outcome that both sides can agree on and be happy with.
- Outline the benefits of resolving the conflict for all involved.
- Finally, ask for help from a supervisor or someone in HR if a resolution can’t be reached. In extreme cases, mediation and legal intervention may be necessary.

FINAL WORD

Conflict doesn’t have to end in anger, hostility or violence. Staying calm, being respectful and working to resolve conflict early can make all the difference.