**Strategies to resolve conflict in the workplace during COVID-19**

[Coronavirus (COVID-19) resource hub](https://www.zurichna.com/knowledge/topics/coronavirus) | Article |  By Alex Garrison, Zurich Services Risk Engineering Consultant  | October 14, 2020

**Understanding employee concerns and sensitivities is key to managing potential workplace conflicts surrounding measures to reduce the spread of coronavirus.**

* The shutdowns during the early months of the COVID-19 outbreak resulted in myriad challenges. Businesses adapted and continue to do so, but as some companies reopen their offices, new types of adaptation are required for the workplace as the pandemic remains a high risk, [especially in the U.S.](https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html)

New requirements for sanitizing offices or staggering shifts to allow social distancing might be the first things that come to mind in terms of adaptation. However, despite the obvious need for them, actions and guidelines enacted to help reduce the spread of the virus may also create workplace conflicts—whether between employees or between employees and management. Refusal to comply with rules on [face masks](https://www.zurichna.com/knowledge/articles/2020/06/face-masks-in-the-post-covid-19-workplace-video) or physical distancing might be the more obvious examples in this regard, but many other factors and underlying issues can create tension in the workplace.

Resolving conflict at work or hopefully preventing conflict from arising in the first place, employers need to make clear the need for these policies and the importance of adhering to them. However, they also need to be sensitive to the significant stress levels their employees may be under and bring an understanding of their concerns to conflict management and resolution. A workplace is safest when employees feel confident in cooperating with the measures their employer uses to help protect them.

People often carry the difficulties of their day-to-day lives with them into the workplace. Health, family and financial issues can weigh heavily on people even during the best of times and worries related to COVID-19 can exacerbate those concerns. At-home online schooling, added precautions in caring for elderly parents, or the hospitalization or loss of a loved one due to the coronavirus are just some of the pressures of life during this pandemic.

Combining proper, office-wide communication of company regulations and guidelines with more personal and direct communication with employees can help employers limit workplace conflicts and manage them more effectively.

Conflicts related to COVID-19 are likely to emerge from two causes: employees not following new guidelines or employers not responding quickly enough to employee concerns. Both causes can be addressed by strategizing to have office policies work hand-in-hand with maintaining good workplace relationships.

**Strategies to Resolve Conflict in the Workplace**

**Establish office ground rules**

This includes developing written guidelines related to new policies (physical-distancing requirements, when online meeting/communication alternatives need to be used, etc.), protocols for any health questionnaires or surveys used, and visitor policies (including contractors and delivery services).

**Verbal and nonverbal employee communication**

There are many ways to keep lines of communication open among employees and employers. Verbally, training is a great way to share information and get immediate feedback, so consider training sessions on topics that might be sources of frustration (e.g., face coverings or other respiratory protection availability). Creating committees to discuss and address disputes is another proactive step to putting employee feedback into action.

Nonverbal tools can include virtual training modules, posting easily seen signage detailing policies throughout the office, encouraging use of anonymous suggestion boxes, putting color-coded notes on doors to signify a space is occupied at capacity (or simply locking or closing off common areas).

**Physical controls in the office**

Creating physical controls can help limit or avoid disputes simply by letting employees know the company is taking steps to create a safer workplace. Having thoughtfully considered seating/desk arrangements for physical distancing, cleaning and disinfection plans, ventilation systems, hands-free access to doors and elevators, and keeping needed hygienic supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) on hand can all help reduce worries of being in an unsafe workplace.

**Approaches to conflict resolution management**

Even when following the steps mentioned, there still may be conflicts, so employers need to think about open lines of communication in response after a dispute emerges, as well as proactively. If not already in place, training office managers on conflict resolution should be done and with COVID-19 stresses added to more longstanding considerations. Virtual team-building exercises can also be a healthy way for employees to share disagreements and work together to settle them.

Management may need to look into alternative disinfectants if the ones used cause problems for employees with asthma or other conditions. And if a busy office is spurring arguments about workers not heeding physical-distancing rules or limited access restrictions, adding ropes or other obvious markers at cubicle or room entries can help reinforce guidelines.

Of course, when employees are not following established rules, employers will need to meet with them, determine why they are not adhering to regulations and take follow-up actions as needed.

**We’re all in this together**

As mentioned earlier, the emotional needs of employees need to be front and center as companies address disputes. This pandemic has been hard on everyone, and the underlying issues touched on above may affect a significant portion of your workforce.

Of course, the greatest stress related to COVID-19 is a death within an employee’s family or close circle of friends—whether the death was caused by the virus or funeral and memorial arrangements were impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. Employee assistance programs, grief counseling seminars, support groups and additional time off can all be invaluable during times of loss.

By providing needed information, support and clear communication, employers can help alleviate anxieties and frustrations among their employees and will be better equipped to successfully resolve disputes when they occur. These are indeed challenging times, but we can plan and adapt to meet those challenges and create a more harmonious workplace.

Download Zurich’s Risk Engineering report, “[COVID-19 considerations for the office: Managing office disputes](https://www.zurichna.com/-/media/project/zwp/zna/docs/kh/coronavirus/covid-19-considerations-for-the-office--managing-office-disputes.pdf?la=en&rev=af40c635384944099fa6ed475dd99f9b&hash=5A585168A19C375577D11BD52BD3EFF4). ”

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