

HPN EAP Newsletter for Employees



Problems with a Co-worker

Developing a Plan to Resolve Conflict

Are conflicts with a co-worker creating unreasonable stress and frustration for you? This all-too-common experience can build to a point where a person does not want to come to work in the morning. The conflict can affect your life outside of work if the preoccupation, irritability or resentment stays with you beyond the office doors. In the extreme, whole working systems and teams may begin to make operational decisions based upon the fact that employees are not getting along.

Co-Worker Conflicts Can be Difficult to Manage for Several Reasons:

Because you are "only" working together, people may feel they shouldn't have to talk about relationships, just job tasks. "I'm just here to do a job."

Most people need their job and don't feel that they have much of a choice who they work with. There may be a tendency to avoid attempts to resolve problems for fear of making the conflict worse and potentially looking bad to supervisors (a possible weakening of job security).

Another issue is time - often, there is not time or privacy available at work to really sit down and talk with someone uninterrupted.

A general issue worldwide is that changing markets are demanding different kinds of working teams and new teamwork communication skills, which most people have never had to practice before. You may not have ever had to work on a relationship of this nature before.

Managing relationships and conflict, for yourself and as part of your work team, is one of the most important aspects of most jobs. Individuals and teams continually move through a process of (a) forming, (b) storming, (c) norming, (d) performing and back again. (HPN provides a variety of training involving this process).

It is part of every job description (overtly or implied) to get along with co-workers and to overcome conflict. The occurrence of conflict is a necessary part of a dynamic, creative and competitive working environment. Employees and organizations either challenge themselves to embrace the process and build new skills - or risk diminishing their market competitiveness.

Here Are Some Tips to Help Resolve Conflict with Co-Workers:

Embrace the idea that maintaining healthy cooperative work relationships is an important part of your job description.

Speak politely. Give specific positive feedback and respect, and ask for feedback from others. Communication is not a 50-50 endeavor. Responsibility for being heard accurately is 100% yours. Don't just focus on job tasks, but observe how the other person is responding to your behavior. If something seems to be unclear, ask for and offer clarification.

When conflict does arise, start by evaluating your own response (behaviors and thoughts). What is it about the other person or the situation that is bringing out strong feelings in you? Workplace conflict can be a powerful teacher. Are there personal patterns for you to look at: fear of conflict, lack of assertiveness, vulnerable self-esteem, perfectionism, aggression, care taking? Your willingness to grow and add new skills is a strength.

Talk to a friend or mentor about the conflict, but only for help in clarifying the best approach to speaking with the person directly. Talking to others as the only course of action will rarely resolve a conflict. Avoid exchange of gossip, which inevitably sabotages the morale of your work environment.

When you are calm, try talking directly to the person in private, allowing enough time and privacy. Focus not on trying to change the other person, but on learning about each other, so that you can better understand your differences and needs.

Win-win outcomes are usually the only viable way to resolve workplace conflict. Focus on specific behaviors rather than attitudes or perceived intentions. Stay away from generalizing about the other person. Generate an agreed upon plan for resolving conflict as it arises in the future and follow-up; "How are we doing with our plan?". Trust is built by consistent adherence to clear agreements and maintaining ongoing communication.

Call Health Promotion Northwest at 360-788-6565 for more information and services.

