

Team Angst and Brokering Peace in the COVID-19 Era

When interpersonal conflict hurts your business

By Paul Falcone

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The COVID-19 pandemic continues to plague the world, the nation and the workplace. People are tired and anxious, and it's inevitable that those frustrations and fears will make their way into the workplace.

When tempers are short, staff members become impatient with one another, and workers may become less restrained about airing their political beliefs or—worse—bullies may start to pick on and badger other workers. It's time to step in. How you do so, though, can make all the difference.

Setting the Ground Rules

First, consider scheduling a team meeting to establish firm ground rules.

Give your employees a heads-up by e-mailing them with the date, time and location of a meeting to set these ground rules. You may want to include the following guidelines:

The purpose of this meeting is for us to have a safe place to discuss some of our fears and concerns openly, but all comments must remain positive, constructive and shared in the other party's best interests. There will be no mention of politics or religion. We will not discuss CDC policies, federal government interpretations or the like. This meeting is intended to give us a chance to truly hear and learn from one another. Disrespectful or challenging comments will not be acceptable in a meeting intended for healing and rebuilding.

A Group Exercise

A simple way to launch a team meeting like this is with a group exercise that helps everyone focus on what is working, what needs to be changed and what they'll commit to going forward.

"Note that this can work two ways," said Mary Vinette, global head of learning and development at Technicolor based in Los Angeles.

"Managers can create a completed start-stop-continue memo for employees as a starting point for discussion and amend it as the meeting continues, or managers can take a whiteboard approach with markers and ask employees to talk through creating the key elements that they believe are important to focus on. Those items can then be added to the board. What's important is that you codify the commitments that the group is making in terms of what they want to stop seeing and what they want to start doing going forward."

Here is how such an exercise might transpire:

First, Remind Workers of the Essentials

Remind your employees that they must:

- Assume that their colleagues have good intentions and demonstrate mutual respect.
- Create a friendly and inclusive working environment, treating everyone as they would like to be treated themselves.
- Assume partial responsibility for things gone wrong and praise others openly for things gone right.

- Put others' needs ahead of their own.

SHRM MEMBER-EXCLUSIVE RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Coronavirus and COVID-19 (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx)

Spell Out What's Unacceptable

Then, remind employees of unacceptable behavior, such as:

- Creating wedges between teams and inciting others to take sides.
- Making others feel uncomfortable by sharing your thoughts about how the nation is run, how the virus is "ruining everything," or how company communication or resources may be lacking.
- Gossiping, finger-pointing, talking negatively about others or speaking behind others' backs.
- Engaging in confrontational behavior, including raised voices, slammed doors, thrown equipment, turning your back on a co-worker or other aggressive behavior.
- Using foul language or threatening statements like "You're going to be written up" (which peers, of course, cannot do to one another).

Moving Forward

Finally, remind employees that these are their duties:

- Providing outstanding service to clients in terms of timeliness, product knowledge and creative problem-solving.
- Considering volunteering at community events that help local causes, whether donating blood or plasma, planting trees, helping the homeless, or engaging in other extracurricular activities that team members currently contribute to.
- Focusing on doing their best work, knowing that they're fortunate to still be employed when many of their peers, colleagues and relatives have lost jobs because of the pandemic.

At the bottom of the memo, once it's finalized, include:

Today's date, [DATE], is important because it's the day we welcome you all back to the organization with a fresh start. Our goals are the same: to ensure that you all feel welcome and included, to eliminate drama or unnecessary tension, and to strengthen our culture in terms of respect and teamwork. As the management team, we're here to help you in any way we can, and we all want you to feel comfortable helping one another. We're all in this together—staff, management and HR. Going forward, we should all be able to look forward to coming to work every day, and we're all part of the solution.

The Meeting Closer

As a manager, you have an opportunity to heal your workplace. Share your organization's values and reiterate your company's mission statement. Emphasize your team's successes—performance or tenure awards, academic certifications and degrees, or ways your organization has helped the community.

"You can't overcommunicate in times of crisis and bringing your team together with pre-established guidelines to discuss their career, professional development and personal needs can be an exceptionally healthy management intervention at a time when people may feel lost, vulnerable or unheard," Vinette said. "Interventions like this denote wise management, employee-focused leadership and role-model selflessness."

Paul Falcone (www.PaulFalconeHR.com (http://www.paulfalconehr.com/)) is CHRO at the Motion Picture & Television Fund in Los Angeles and a frequent contributor at SHRM.org. He is the author of many top-selling books, including 101 Tough Conversations to Have with Employees, 101 Sample Write-Ups for Documenting Employee Performance Problems, 96 Great Interview Questions to Ask Before You Hire, and 2600 Phrases for Effective Performance Reviews.

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