

How to Resolve Co-Worker Conflicts over Coping with COVID-19

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Employees come to work with diverse views about the world, and their approaches to coping with the COVID-19 pandemic might clash. So what should employers do when co-workers have different viewpoints and practices related to the pandemic? Here's what workplace experts had to say.

Recognize Potential Conflicts

"Now that many workplaces have reopened, we are finding that they are becoming an unexpected battleground for COVID conflicts and confrontations between employees," said Philippe Weiss, president of consultancy for Seyfarth at Work in Chicago. HR professionals are facing tensions between employees due to disagreements about properly wearing masks, sanitizing workstations and maintaining a safe physical distance from others.

"Employees are voicing anger when others lower their face coverings—either below the nose or to 'chin strap' level—especially when the boss or customers walk away," Weiss said.

Co-workers may also be upset when others are not willing to respect the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) recommended "6-foot safety zone" in hallways, breakrooms or elevators. "Employees have also taken matters into their own hands, in some cases, and hung 'do not enter' signs or paper-clip chains to keep colleagues out of their cubicles and designated work areas," Weiss noted.

"On the opposite end of the COVID-safety continuum," he said, "employees are complaining that some co-workers' near-constant sanitizing and spraying is creating a nuisance and breathing hazard."

Sharon Perley Masling, an attorney with Morgan Lewis in Washington, D.C., said employers should have strong COVID-19-prevention protocols in place, regular communications with employees about their obligations, consistent application of COVID-19-related policies and consistent responses when employees complain.

"It also helps to be transparent regarding why certain protocols are being put in place and how they are being enforced," she said.

Ask employees to be mindful that people may have different personal views on the measures being taken, she suggested, and let them know that the company has taken all of that into consideration to determine what works best for the company.

Update Policies for the Pandemic

Employers should communicate why they are implementing certain measures—whether because of legal requirements or recommendations from public health authorities. "They should stress that these inconveniences are temporary and that it is important to get behind the efforts fully because 'We're all in this together,'" Masling said.

The specific steps employers take may depend on the work environment. The safety measures taken in an office environment, for example, may be different from those taken in a manufacturing setting, noted Traci McCready, managing director of Alvarez & Marsal's corporate performance improvement group in Houston.

Manufacturing employees are less likely to be able to work from home, so employers may arrange for staggered work schedules or other measures to reduce contact.

Some companies are using technology, such as vicinity bracelets that vibrate when workers come within a certain distance of each other. "They serve as a reminder to back up, to help keep some social distancing in place where it becomes more difficult to do so," McCready said.

Employers should also have strong policies in place to ensure workers don't come to the worksite when they are feeling ill, have symptoms of COVID-19 or have potentially been exposed to the virus. After updating policies and procedures for COVID-19 considerations, employers should have workers sign an acknowledgment similar to what they sign when handbooks are updated, McCready suggested. "Let them know what the repercussions are for refusing to comply."

Manage Workplace Relationships

Employers should let workers know who to contact if they have concerns about the new measures or co-workers who may not be following policies, Masling said.

Weiss recommended that leaders take the following steps to mitigate COVID-19 conflicts:

- **Inform workers of the "why."** Communicating why each coronavirus safety protocol matters can result in less interpersonal conflict and more adherence.
- **Invoke your history.** When explaining the rules, leaders should talk about past business successes in changing times and how everyone at the organization has adjusted to new realities and expectations in prior years.
- **Introduce mantras.** Training should focus on giving employees simple, nonconfrontational language to use, so they know exactly what to say to comfortably address others who may stray from standards, such as "Let's Steer Clear!" or "Gotta Watch Our Steps!"
- **Invest in masks and supplies.** In addition to providing personal protective equipment (PPE), giving team members extra supplies, such as personal staplers, can reduce arguments about contamination risks.
- **Invite comments.** Stress that all at-home and onsite team members should bring up any concerns to management. Sincerely welcoming any question or concern can help employees focus better on their work.

Address Legal Risks

Employers will want to develop robust COVID-19-related policies and follow them consistently to mitigate co-worker conflicts and reduce the risk of related lawsuits.

"Employees' fear of contracting COVID-19 has spawned litigation challenging employers' plans to keep workplaces open or reopen them, and these lawsuits have appeared as common law tort claims, such as negligence and wrongful death," noted Jim Swartz, an attorney with Seyfarth Shaw in Atlanta. Common allegations include failure to provide workers with adequate PPE and failure to implement customer or visitor policies—such as mandatory temperature checks or masks—to protect employees.

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"Employers need to stay ahead of the curve," said Angelo Filippi, an attorney with Kelley Kronenberg in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. The CDC, the Department of Labor, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and state and local agencies have been periodically updating guidance to address evolving workplace challenges presented by the pandemic.

Employees could complain to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration about exposure to workplace hazards when co-workers are not following rules and employers are not enforcing them, Filippi noted. Managers should walk around and ensure employees are properly wearing masks and socially distancing.

Leaders should set an example, he said. "Supervisors, crew leaders and managers can show by their own actions that they are taking the pandemic seriously and expect everyone to follow the rules."

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