

# Solutions for Supervisors

from your

## Affiliated Employee Assistance Program

1.800.769.9819  
[www.affiliatedeap.com](http://www.affiliatedeap.com)

A publication provided by your organization/s EAP (Employee Assistance Program) to help you with common employee dilemmas and/or problems.

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### QUESTION:

**How can I get employees to handle their disagreements or issues directly and effectively instead of running to me to fix things or complaining to other employees and making the conflict worse?**

### ANSWER:

This is a common problem if you are a supervisor. Conflict in the workplace can impact everyone as other employees “take sides”, work time is spent gossiping or complaining, and supervisory time is eaten up with trying to manage the situation. At the same time, disagreement and conflict are a natural consequence of having a group of people working together. The goal is not to eliminate conflict but to create a culture and teach the skills that support effective problem resolution.

#### Self-assessment

The first question you want to ask yourself is: do I model effective problem-solving skills for the group? If you are direct, honest, and appropriate in the way you approach conflict resolution then you are displaying helpful skills in the workplace. However, if you tend to avoid addressing issues, complain to people who have no power to resolve or alleviate the problem, or hold grudges long after someone has disagreed with you or done something you didn't like then you are contributing to maintaining the behavior you want changed. You won't be able to coach employees to handle these kinds of situations better if you aren't doing it yourself. You have much more credibility as a supervisor if you do what you want others to do.

#### Promoting the change you want to see

We accuse others, and excuse ourselves.  
- Unknown

It's an interesting fact that the majority of employees say that if a co-worker has an issue with them they would much rather that employee try to address it with them directly first **BUT** *most employees do the opposite of this when they encounter something they don't like*. There are a lot of reasons for this including discomfort with difficult conversations, fear of

Remember that EAP is here to help in any way that we can - call on us for consultation and assistance anytime!

**Call 1-800-769-9819**

### Educational Programs for Supervisors

Affiliated EAP offers many educational programs designed to help leaders become more effective in supervising your staff. For a complete course listing or to schedule training contact Liz Ashe, Director of Training at **1-800-648-2727** or visit our website at [www.affiliatedeap.com](http://www.affiliatedeap.com)



For more information about how to best handle employee work performance problems call your EAP at:

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# Solutions

continued



what will happen, concern about the relationship, a culture that tolerates gossip and complaining, lack of skills, etc. However, in many situations a non-direct approach is a miss-step in what could potentially be a relatively quickly resolved conflict.

There are several important steps to creating a positive conflict resolution work environment:

- 1) Set the expectation that disagreements and conflicts will happen at times and that it's just part of being in the workplace.
- 2) Educate employees around what your specific workplace expectations are for handling conflict. For example, the expectation might be that the employee appropriately address the issue directly first with the co-worker unless there is a compelling reason why they don't believe they can do that.
- 3) **Provide training for employees on the skills needed to have these assertive, appropriate conversations AND normalize relationships after difficulties.** It is not reasonable to ask employees to do something they don't know how to do and you can't assume that they have the skills naturally. However, if you have provided sufficient training it is reasonable to ask them for the desired behavior.
- 4) Gently re-direct them if they come to you first and don't have a good reason for not addressing it with the co-worker. Coach them on what to say and how to say it if necessary.
- 5) Hold everyone, including yourself, consistently and fairly accountable for the expectations.

It's important that you remember that this will be an ongoing conversation with employees. However, if you have a workplace where employees generally handle conflict proactively and effectively situations will get resolved relatively quickly and everyone will be able to focus more on the work at hand. Your comfort level and skills in conflict resolution will set the stage for the rest of the group.

There is help available to you and your employees through EAP in the form of consultation, coaching, counseling, and training. It's estimated that the lag time between the onset of damaging conflict and a call for help ranges between 18 months and 2 years because supervisors hope it will resolve itself. Think of all the resources that are wasted in that amount of time as the conflict worsens and more collective workplace energy goes towards it.

*If I'm not part of the problem, there is no solution.*  
- Bathroom graffiti

With help from *How to Reduce Workplace Conflict and Stress* by Anna Maravelas



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