

Features

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Resolving Conflicts

Katie Elzer-Peters

From deciding where to eat dinner to arranging an endcap display—at home and at work—conflict is unavoidable. Addressing conflict head on—working through it and moving forward are essential for the bottom line.

Suzanne Kludt, director of human resources at Al's Garden Centers & Greenhouses in Portland, Oregon, and founder of HireHorticulture.com says, "As garden centers, we are destinations with luxury items. You don't have to go to the garden center like you have to go to the grocery. As such, we have to deliver world-class customer service." Conflict, and unhappy employees, get in the way of that.

Suzanne finds that conflict is at its highest when the garden centers aren't busy, as that's when people have more time to stand around and gossip. When the business is busy, everyone's tolerance is lower. "It's a physically demanding job, and when your body feels physically tired, your tolerance level goes down." Here's how to tackle conflict, even when tempers are high.

Resolution Via Mediation and Negotiation

Suzanne says that conflict resolution through mediation or arbitration is a bit on the trendy side, but that it works. "We put it in our handbook at Al's that before you escalate you have to mediate." She says that mediation has been an effective way to deal with conflict because it empowers the employees to come up with their own solutions.

Employees talk about issues together in a safe environment with ground rules. The mediator acts as a facilitator. Mediation is voluntary—both employees have to agree to participate, which increases the success rate, because the parties are willing participants.

The end result is a mediated settlement agreement that both parties sign. Suzanne says, "The agreement can change. What the agreement says is that, 'We're going to try this for the next 30 days. If that doesn't work, we'll have another mediation session to go over what's working and what's not working.'" She says there's something about writing down the agreement and signing it that contributes to the success rate. "People feel, 'I'm honorable and I'm going to stick by my word.' Ninety-nine percent of the time the agreements work."

At Al's, they use mediation for employee/employee and employee/manager conflicts. Suzanne, through Hire

Horticulture, has led mediations over the phone for far-flung clients.

DIY Conflict Resolution

So how do you do this at your workplace? Suzanne recommends taking a class or workshop on conflict resolution. There are always classes and workshops—online and in person, so look around and find what's near you. A little bit of training goes a long way.

Another fantastic resource is the book “Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In,” by Roger Fisher, William L. Ury and Bruce Patton (from Harvard's Program on Negotiation). If you've never been exposed to non-adversarial negotiating, this book is a great book to start. Katherine Shonk, the editor of Negotiation Briefings, a newsletter published by the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School, outlined some techniques from the book that echoed Suzanne's sentiments while discussing managing employee conflict. Here's the nitty gritty of sitting down with staff.

Set the Stage for Discussion

First everyone has to calm down. “Don't try to problem-solve when tempers are still high. If possible, try to give people time to cool off before you start trying to resolve the conflict—wait until after a break or until the next day,” says Katherine. “You might need to meet with individuals privately to listen to them and help them calm down. Let negotiators air their emotions before trying to discuss the substance of the conflict.”

Once it's time for mediation, bring the parties to a neutral and comfortable private space. “Remind those involved that your discussion is confidential,” Katherine says. “To encourage collaboration, sit on the same side of a table or at a round table.” Have a pencil and paper for note taking and a white board for collaborating on ideas.

Encourage Empathy and Reflection

That sounds very “Kumbaya,” but the truth of the matter is, “Researchers have found that our interpretations of others' behavior and beliefs are highly self-interested,” says Katherine. “As a result, we tend to blame others for problems that may not be their fault. But focusing on assigning blame usually won't fix the conflict and could make things worse.

“Managers need to redirect employees away from blaming each other [and] toward problem-solving. So you might say to employees who are caught in a cycle of blame, ‘I want us to focus on coming up with ideas for avoiding this type of problem in the future—without blaming each other for what just happened. This is a shared problem and it's up to us to solve it together.’”

Suzanne says she asks people to examine themselves first. “I invite them to ask themselves the question, ‘What is the payoff?’ When you're being rude to someone there has to be something in it for you. Some reason to come to work and not like your coworkers,” she adds, saying they have to examine why they're feeding an unpleasant situation. “Someone might realize, ‘I'm having issues in my personal life, so I'm taking it out on a person who doesn't like me anyway.’” Once they realize that they're part of the problem, the emotion goes down.

Practice Active Listening

For all of this to actually work, the involved parties have to receive and absorb what's being said. Beyond absorbing, says Katherine, "Active listening also involves paraphrasing what someone just said to make sure you understood her accurately and fully. For example, you might say, 'I hear you saying that you think your teammates aren't taking their responsibilities seriously enough and the burden is falling on you. Is that right?'"

She says, "Active listening also means asking open-ended questions, expressed sincerely, aimed at clarifying the reasoning behind someone's positions, beliefs and demands. You might say, 'How do you think your coworkers would react to that characterization?' and 'If it's true they've been goofing off, why do you think they have been able to get away with doing so?'"

"Finally, active listening requires us to listen to the feelings underlying someone's message and acknowledging them: 'It sounds as if you feel you're being taken for granted here. Is that right? What else are you feeling about this situation?' Active listening can feel contrived when you first try it, but it really is effective at getting at the root of a problem and putting you in a good position to resolve conflict."

To sum up: The best conflict resolution activities are undertaken with buy-in from both sides, in a private, comfortable environment, with an active goal to collaboratively decide ways to improve a situation.

"Sometimes it just starts with saying good morning to each other," says Suzanne. "Anything that will help, we write it down."

Diffusing Customer Conflicts

Suzanne Kludt of HireHorticulture.com offers these tips for quickly de-escalating a situation with a customer.

1. Assess the situation and the personality of the customer. Try to figure out whether there's another manager or lead person on the floor who would identify well with the upset customer and get them. (Suzanne says some employees are so conflict averse that they can't diffuse the situation by themselves and can potentially make it worse.)
2. Approach the angry customer with completely open body language. The customer might have a red face, their hands on their hips, arms crossed or may be gesturing wildly. When approaching the angry customer, have your hands at your side or approach by extending a hand to shake a hand. Stand parallel to the customer and avoid placing the hands on the hips or anything that could be seen as threatening.
3. Allow the customer to tell their story. By bringing in a fresh person to handle the situation, it naturally opens the door to allow the customer to voice their thoughts. Transitioning the conflict to another manager can also quickly calm the situation just by taking the focus off of one person and putting it on another.
4. Kill them with kindness. Suzanne says, "If you keep being kind and accommodating, eventually the person's anger will diffuse. Human nature will not allow someone to keep being mean to someone being kind to them." **GP**

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