

How to prevent and resolve disputes at work

SmartBlog on Workforce
Arte Nathan on December 7, 2010

Many companies struggle with trying to resolve disputes between management and employees, and between employees. I managed large union and non-union workforces for more than three decades, and I never had a formal grievance or arbitration. Here are a few of the important lessons I learned along the way to keep everyone working together effectively:

Explain why. Early in my career, I was taught that managers should always be expected, and required, to explain their requests. If they couldn't, or wouldn't, then employees should be allowed to just say no. This potential for insubordination forced managers to think, plan and communicate. This simple policy became one of the cornerstones of an employee relations philosophy and company culture that set our company apart.



Show that you care. Explaining “why” is consistent with a complimentary philosophy: “People don’t often care what you ask them to do as long as they know that you care.” This creates a more trusting and respectful environment. It’s not that they question any less, but the amount of information available to them, their ability to process it at their own pace, and the opportunity to better understand and get comfortable with what’s going on around them makes employees more flexible and agreeable.

Listen before you speak. How often have you said or done something, and then noticed that it was neither well understood nor followed? We often continue policies because “we’ve always done it that way,” and then fail to notice that things (people, practices or acceptable norms) have changed. Ask your employees what they think, ask follow-up questions, and listen carefully for truths or inconsistencies within the answers. And once you’ve found the answers that work, thank and praise those who participated in the dialogue.

Say what you mean and mean what you say. Employees are fed up with half-truths and spin, which are so prevalent that people automatically discount the accuracy of what they’re told. This ultimately leads to the assumption that playing fast and loose with the truth is acceptable. Well, it’s not, and companies need to stand for accuracy, honesty, openness and transparency. This raises the bar on management’s behaviors and employees’ expectations, and ultimately it changes everyone’s behavior. If employees believe that everyone around them is being honest, then trust will grow. People who trust one another have fewer disputes.

Be fair. The magic word in many HR departments is consistency. Saying the same things to everyone, treating everyone exactly the same, deciding the same question the same way — all of the time — irrespective of the circumstances. When was the last time you found the issues and circumstances to be identical in two different disputes? I’ll bet never. People are different, backgrounds are different, and the circumstances that led up to whatever precipitated the dispute were different. Where was it written that common sense and judgment were to be abandoned? If employees know that someone is going to listen, assess the relative value of things and seek to find a consensus, then they’re more apt to be willing and open to discuss the issues and consider the

options.

Engage and encourage people to come up with their own solutions. Everyone is talking about the power of engagement, but is there any consensus on what employees should be engaged in? The answer is most likely in finding ways to improve productivity and profitability and defining ways to get people to work together more effectively. If they can do that — by improving communications, decision-making and interactions — then there will be fewer disputes to resolve. Leading companies start this dialogue during the interview stage, continue it during orientation, and provide classes for managers and employees. It comes down to communications — the better your managers are at facilitating that, the better your company will run.

Promote this: “You have the right to disagree, but you should never be disagreeable.” It’s good to have opinions, and it’s better to be encouraged to speak your mind. Companies that promote this concept have provided safety valves to release the pressure of pent-up concerns and confusion. Not every decision is going to be popular, but if people have a chance to voice their concerns, listen to others and their views, and to process both sides of an issue, then they just might be more accepting of decisions that are made. In life – home, work, play and community — people should be encouraged to participate in the discourse. Once a decision is made, everyone should be encouraged to support it.

At the end of the day, it’s all about how companies promote communications. Employees will smell a lie, they’ll sense confusion and they’ll reject anything that’s insincere. Remember that you need each other to be successful. Value and honor that thinking and see if you can reduce the number and intensity of your company’s disputes.