

Employee Rivalry

Tips for Managing Dueling Staffers

By Barbara Jaurequi

Child psychiatrist David Levy introduced the term “sibling rivalry” in 1941. Self-explanatory in its terminology, the concept of sibling rivalry is easy to grasp. The mechanism of *employee rivalry* works essentially the same way, with employees in a competitive relationship, striving for greater approval from their employer or manager.

Many managers, in a desperate attempt to be perceived as “fair,” find themselves going crazy as they try to distribute praise evenly and acknowledge hard work equally. Moreover, when they are delivering criticism to one person, they feel compelled to deliver it to the other, whether he or she deserves it or not, so they aren’t accused of playing favorites.

Rivaling employees who are constantly trying to outdo each other don’t always deliver superior work because of their competition. In fact, the animosity they feel towards one another can stifle their creativity and cause them to deliberately undermine their “opponent’s” efforts. Furthermore, the tension between them can corrupt the attitudes of other employees and cause managers to lose objectivity regarding the rivalry.

Managers who recognize troublesome rivalries between two or more valuable staff members should seek to resolve these rivalries before they upset otherwise harmonious workplaces. The following is a list of tips that are easy to enact, *especially with the help of a neutral third party such as an employee assistance professional*. Consistent application of these suggestions is likely to eliminate or lessen the negative impact of employee rivalries.

1. Collect data. Managers should keep their eyes and ears open when milling among their staff. Observe the two rivaling staff members as

they interact with each other. Notice attitudes, body language, and temperament. Pay close attention to the things that trigger negativity. Write your observations down. See if you can identify patterns of behavior.

The important thing is for managers to recognize the symptoms of the problem such as arguing, gossiping and tattling on each other. Total resolution of employee rivalry may not be possible in certain circumstances; that’s when symptom management becomes the goal. Effective management of the symptoms of employee rivalry can significantly improve an otherwise hostile work environment for everyone concerned.

2. Be willing to “separate” (e.g. transfer) rivaling employees to reduce tension. This particular tip is a good way for managers to solve their rivalry problems with minimal managerial exertion. Consider, for example, that some personalities are very strong and, while not offensive to the majority of co-workers, may grate on the nerves of other employees. It is often like this with rivaling employees: *they just don’t like each other*. Their dislike for one another causes them to be overly observant about what the other is doing or not doing. They are too aware of the other’s responsibilities, deficiencies, and positive qualities (which are usually deeply resented).

Even the most brilliant conflict resolution specialist would not be able to overcome this sort of interpersonal problem because the problem is personality based and personality traits are enduring aspects of an individual. *In other words, they don’t change*. Therefore, managers’ willingness to transfer an employee to a different department in the company could help reduce the kind of tension that leads to declines in productivity and employee morale. It may also reduce

the number of “tattletale” sessions managers have to endure.

3. Know your limits. Managers need to decide how much energy they should spend on the problem of employee rivalry. If it has become a major disruption in the office, managers should address the problem with a plan for resolution in mind.

On the other hand, if “conflict resolution” meetings are nothing more than fodder for drama-loving gossipers, a simple, private discussion with each of the rivaling employees would be a better way to go. Specifically, don’t make a big deal out of a small matter that might correct itself in time, but don’t ignore a spreading cancer either.

4. Don’t strive for perfect fairness. Managers should not expect themselves to be perfectly fair, as per the opinions of rivaling employees. Rather, managers should strive to treat their employees impartially. (*Again, this is where a neutral third party like an EA professional can assist.*)

For example, if you decide that one employee should be given an extra week to complete a particular project for whatever reason you deem worthy of the extension, then do so. But be prepared to do the same for the other employee if and when that employee needs extra time.

However, don’t *automatically* extend the other employee’s deadline whether it’s needed or not just to be “fair”. Make your decisions on a case-by-case basis. If one employee comes to you crying “*Unfair!*” simply tell the employee that he or she does not have, nor is he or she privy to, all the information that went into your decision. Stick to your guns. Be unemotional, calm, deliberate, and firm. Managers should not explain certain decisions or they will open themselves up to an inappropriate debate with a subordinate.

5. Conduct an honest self-appraisal of behaviors that could be perceived as favoritism. It’s important for managers to be aware of how their behaviors and attitudes may be perceived by the employees they supervise. It’s only natural

for managers to have preferences when it comes to personalities and work habits. You may have a particular affinity for an employee who has, for example, a similar sense of humor as yours. Unintentionally, you may be favoring that person to a degree that is obvious and offensive to your favored employee’s rival.

Consider if a preference for one employee over another is based on personality *or* is that employee truly superior in terms of quality of work? If favoritism is fueled by the former, it

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would be wise to check that! It’s better to make some behavioral changes than to lose a valuable employee who legitimately views your management style as inequitable.

6. Do some research about best practices before launching into a process with which



you are totally unfamiliar. Better yet, get some hands-on direction about how to proceed. *It bears repeating: An EA professional can be most useful in areas such as these.*

You will gain indispensable knowledge about how to handle similar situations in the future. Any consulting fees you may pay for such training (*such as through an EA professional who may specialize in conflict resolution*) would be money well spent. You will learn where, when and how to conduct resolution sessions. You will learn how to be objective, judicial, and specific when laying out your directives and expectations and you won't be blindsided by new cases of employee rivalry in the future as you are sure to encounter them as long as you are managing people.

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Try These Role-playing Tips

The following tips will demonstrate how managers, with the assistance of an EA professional, can turn their next meeting with dualling employees into a productive conversation.

❖ **Start with an icebreaker.** Most people will be ready to debate or argue at the beginning of any conflict-based conversation. They have marshaled their most compelling arguments and are ready for "battle." However, if managers dive in immediately on the topic of controversy, most people will quickly get stuck in defending their positions and attacking their opponents.

An icebreaker is not just a light introductory activity. They are ways to; in a non-confrontational manner initiate a conversation about a difficult issue like employee rivalry. An ideal icebreaker asks for a person's own take on

something that's both work-related and positive. For example, if the conflict involves two employees involved in the same project, you might break the ice by asking each of them how they became involved in the project and what they hoped to achieve.

Exercise: *Help participants come up with an icebreaker that will "get the ball rolling" on a specific conflict between the two competing employees.*

❖ **Really listen.** Conflict resolution is tricky because too many managers ignore the fact that sometimes what they *aren't* saying is more important than what they are saying. Often the best resolutions come from listening carefully to what the other person has to say. Being an active listener sends the message that you are genuinely concerned about him or her and the dispute. Plain and simple, it's the best way to get good information.

Ask an open-ended question. It can be something as simple as, "*So, tell me, just what is going on?*" Then listen carefully to that person's side of the story. You'll know it's time to insert yourself into the conversation when the discussion turns negative. You can acknowledge someone's opinions without seeming like you are taking his or her side. When there's a conflict, you're treading on new ground and showing that person you are willing to see his or her side of the story is how you will set the foundation toward a solution.

However, also be clear to each competing employee that while you are willing to objectively listen to each of them, calmly and firmly emphasize that your decisions need to be based on the good of the company, and may or may not be considered "fair" to each of them. (**Editor's note:** See the "Don't strive for perfect fairness" suggestions in the previous article for additional ideas.)

Exercise: *Have participants come up with an "open-ended" question tailored especially for them as part of the listening stage.*

Source: National Conflict Resolution Center.

Work Toward SMART Solutions

Sustainable solutions to workplace conflicts are SMART solutions. That means they're:

Specific: Be clear about what each employee will do, when, where, and how.

Measurable: Be clear about how all of you (manager and the employees embroiled in conflict) will be able to tell that something has been done, achieved or completed.

Achievable: Make sure that whatever solutions you agree on fits the situation; that it complies with both the law and organizational policy; that everyone involved has the ability and opportunity to do what is required of them. Don't set up anyone to fail.

Realistic: Check calendar dates for holidays and vacations; look at past performance to predict

future actions; allow extra time for glitches and delays; don't assume that the best-case scenario will come true.

Timed: Create reasonable deadlines or target dates; include a few ideas about what to do if something unexpected occurs; be willing to adjust and set new dates if necessary.

Summary

Disputes, full of emotional complexities and interpersonal histories, are the headaches of the workplace. They're always going to pop up, even in the most cordial of workplace environments. The good news is that when managers are armed with the tools they need to work toward productive resolutions – *resources that an employee assistance professional can help provide* – managers can use them to strengthen an organization rather than harm it.

Source: National Conflict Resolution Center.

