

## Introduction

When you were a rank-and-file employee, a quarrel among your coworkers wasn't necessarily a serious problem—you could usually stay aloof and still do your job. Things are different now that you're a manager. Now you're responsible for making sure that employee conflicts don't impede your group's work or drive people right out of your organization.

Fortunately, the rewards for helping your workers resolve conflicts go beyond simply eliminating a problem. Conflicts aren't all bad—they're also opportunities. New information, fresh ideas, and useful truths emerge from the fray. Workers who care enough to stand up for themselves and their ideas escape from apathy and stretch their potential. Employees who learn to survive the ordeal of conflict gain self-confidence, and managers who solve conflicts earn their employees' respect and trust. Conflict resolution isn't easy, but it's truly worthwhile.

## Facing the Problem

Unfortunately, the range of conflicts that can flare up in your workplace is overwhelming. Sometimes it may seem as though almost anything can set individuals or groups at each others' throats. For example, all of the following factors can act alone or in combination to disrupt your workplace:

- **Personal issues.** Edgy personalities are at the root of many conflicts. Anyone who's competitive, cynical, abrasive, or authoritarian can usually find someone to quarrel with. A snide sense of humor, sensitivity due to conflicts at home, nagging health problems, or unmet needs for recognition, independence, or compensation can also trigger conflicts among workers.
- **Social issues.** Politics, religion, race, nationality, and other cultural issues can create conflicts among workers. So can employees' work habits. Anything from a raucous laugh, to playing the radio, to excessive neatness or clutter in a shared cubicle can poison the social atmosphere.
- **Organizational issues.** Jobs or work processes that aren't well-defined or are patently unnecessary, redundant, or uninteresting can set workers at odds. Managers themselves can inadvertently cause conflicts through poor instructions, lack of feedback, favoritism, or ill-advised incentives or compensation plans that put workers in head-to-head competition. And large-scale events such as layoffs or reorganizations raise the level of anxiety and thus conflict.

As this list of typical causes suggests, navigating these clashes can be tricky for a new manager because workplace conflicts aren't all just about the work. Emotions and a spectrum of personal issues fuel worker conflicts as much as do poorly detailed assignments or insufficient resources. Resolving conflicts means dealing with this complex—and exhausting—knot of human experience.

The stakes are also high. Conflicts that aren't resolved go right on pulling down productivity, product quality, customer service, and employee satisfaction. And the opposite problem is also often true: Employees who aren't doing their jobs well are more likely to get into conflicts with others. Afraid for their jobs, they become defensive and resentful about being criticized, making matters worse. Both situations are recipes for conflict, with you in the middle.

The good news, however, is that there are proven techniques for recognizing, analyzing, and resolving employee conflicts that will work on a wide variety of disputes, and this book will describe many of them. Let's begin with ways to identify the conflicts you face.