

# Managing Workplace Conflict

## Overview

Workplace conflict is inevitable when employees of various backgrounds and different work styles are brought together for a shared business purpose. Conflict can—and should—be managed and resolved. With tensions and anxieties at an all-time high due to the current political divide and racial inequity discussions at work, the chances for workplace conflict have increased. This toolkit examines the causes and effects of workplace conflict and the reasons why employers should act to address conflict.

The first steps in handling workplace conflict belong, in most cases, to the employees who are at odds with one another. The employer's role—exercised by managers and HR professionals—is significant, however, and is grounded in the development of a workplace culture designed to prevent conflict among employees to the extent possible. The basis for such a culture is strong employee relations, namely, fairness, trust and mutual respect at all levels. This toolkit offers suggestions to create such an organizational climate and includes methods to deal with employee grievances and conflicts.

This toolkit also explores the various roles HR professionals play in managing workplace conflict, ways to communicate an organization's conflict-resolution procedures and how to measure the effectiveness of those procedures. The toolkit does not examine the details of procedures for settling conflicts.

## Background

Conflict can occur in any organization when employees with different backgrounds and priorities work together. Conflict can be expressed in numerous ways such as insults, noncooperation, bullying and anger. Its causes can range from personality clashes and misunderstood communication to organizational mismanagement. The negative effects of workplace conflict can include work disruptions, decreased productivity, project failure, absenteeism, turnover and termination. Emotional stress can be both a cause and an effect of workplace conflict.

A survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that four in 10 UK employees reported having experienced some form of interpersonal conflict at work in the last year. Most of that conflict is between an employee and his or her line manager. The survey also found that employees are more likely to report that they have experienced conflict with a staff member who is more senior to them.<sup>1</sup>

According to a SHRM survey ([www.shrm.org/about-shrm/press-room/press-releases/pages/shrm-survey-political-volatility-at-work-increases-while-more-than-half-of-organizations-are-offering-paid-time-off-to-vote.aspx?\\_ga=2.260550920.465805665.1610302034-1842983318.1606318853](http://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/press-room/press-releases/pages/shrm-survey-political-volatility-at-work-increases-while-more-than-half-of-organizations-are-offering-paid-time-off-to-vote.aspx?_ga=2.260550920.465805665.1610302034-1842983318.1606318853)), compared to previous years, 44 percent of HR professionals report intensified political volatility at work in 2020.

Experts offer several causes of workplace conflict, including:

- Personality differences.
- Workplace behaviors regarded by some co-workers as irritating.
- Unmet needs in the workplace.
- Perceived inequities of resources.
- Unclear roles in the workplace.
- Competing job duties or poor implementation of a job description—for example, placing a nonsupervisory employee in an unofficial position of "supervising" another employee.

- A systemic circumstance such as a workforce slowdown, a merger or acquisition, or a reduction in force.
- Mismanagement of organizational change and transition.
- Poor communication, including misunderstood remarks and comments taken out of context.
- Differences over work methods or goals or differences in perspectives attributable to age, sex or upbringing.

See [Bringing Political Civility into the Workplace](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/pages/bringing-political-civility-into-the-workplace.aspx) ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/pages/bringing-political-civility-into-the-workplace.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/pages/bringing-political-civility-into-the-workplace.aspx)) and [Addressing the Six Sources of Workplace Cultural Conflicts](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/pages/addressing-the-six-sources-of-workplace-cultural-conflicts.aspx) ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/pages/addressing-the-six-sources-of-workplace-cultural-conflicts.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/pages/addressing-the-six-sources-of-workplace-cultural-conflicts.aspx)).

Employers can manage workplace conflict by creating an organizational culture designed to preclude conflict as much as possible and by dealing promptly and equitably with conflict that employees cannot resolve among themselves. To manage conflict, employers should consider the following:

- Make certain that policies and communication are clear and consistent, and make the rationale for decisions transparent.
- Ensure that all employees—not just managers—are accountable for resolving conflict.
- Do not ignore conflict, and do not avoid taking steps to prevent it.
- Seek to understand the underlying emotions of the employees in conflict.
- Keep in mind that approaches to resolving conflict may depend on the circumstances of the conflict.

See [How to Resolve Conflict at Work](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/how-to-resolve-conflict-at-work.aspx) ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/how-to-resolve-conflict-at-work.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/how-to-resolve-conflict-at-work.aspx)) and [How to Deal with Conflict at Work as a Manager](https://blog.shrm.org/blog/how-to-deal-with-conflict-at-work-as-a-manager) (<https://blog.shrm.org/blog/how-to-deal-with-conflict-at-work-as-a-manager>).

Many experts maintain that although conflict is generally regarded as having a negative effect in the workplace, a degree of properly managed conflict can be beneficial for an organization. See [Why Workplace Conflict Can Be Healthy](http://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0517/pages/why-workplace-conflict-can-be-healthy.aspx) ([www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0517/pages/why-workplace-conflict-can-be-healthy.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0517/pages/why-workplace-conflict-can-be-healthy.aspx)).

## HOW TO TALK ABOUT RACE AT WORK

Workplace leaders need to agree and lead on the right conversations about race in the workplace—and the right ways to engage in those conversations. Increasing empathy, psychological safety and the time taken to address this will create more allies and bridge current race-based disconnects. HR professionals are experts on many of the tools and techniques for tackling racial inequity in the workplace, but HR needs all co-workers to increase their competency levels for proper change. Some proven techniques for effectiveness from HR experts include:

- **LISTEN, AND DON'T CONFLATE, COMPARE OR CONTRAST.** When an individual aggrieved by overt or aversive racism describes his or her experiences, listeners have a natural tendency to be defensive or to find parallels with their own experiences. This is conflation, the most common mistake made by those guilty of inadvertent racism. We must listen to others with an open mind, hearing their story without injecting ourselves into it. All workers, leaders and HR professionals must make listening a top priority.
- **DISCUSS, DON'T DEBATE.** When driving open and honest dialogue, emphasize that the purpose of getting together is to discuss, not to debate or disagree. Setting up discussion rules is important so conversations don't take a turn for the worse. Discussing matters too

deeply can result in feelings of indignation and invalidation, which is not acceptable. The best course is listening to people's varying perspectives and finding ways to shape future actions.

- **SET GOALS AND HONOR FEEDBACK.** Treat open discussions about race as you would discussions of job performance. This means avoiding blame or attribution and focusing on behaviors. Consistent measurement is key, as with all other feedback. Psychologists have argued for the use of goal-setting theory in social instances for years; in today's climate, organizations must set the goal of eradicating racial discrimination. The goal is zero tolerance for racism.

*For more information on creating diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace, see **SHRM Together Forward @Work** (<https://togetherforwardatwork.shrm.org/>).*

## Business Case

A well-functioning work environment is one in which employees communicate with respectful, inoffensive language; show tolerance and acceptance of differences among each other; and demonstrate respect for all individuals in the organization regardless of position, status or tenure.

If an employer has mechanisms in place to resolve conflict at its early stages, employees will generally see their employer as fair in their dealings with them and will likely be more satisfied with their jobs. Reductions in employee conflict can lead to increased employee productivity, greater motivation and loyalty, lower medical costs, fewer workers' compensation claims, and reduced litigation costs.

Unresolved issues of interpersonal tension and conflict can create emotional stress for employees, politicize the workplace and divert attention from the organization's mission. If employers do not act, conflicts will escalate into larger problems, discrimination and harassment complaints may increase, and the employer's reputation could be damaged. Other possible consequences of failing to manage workplace conflict include:

- **Absenteeism.** Unscheduled absences drive up employers' costs through benefits outlays, the use of replacement workers, higher stress levels among employees and a decrease in overall employee performance.
- **Turnover.** When employees mistrust management or perceive the organization as acting unfairly, turnover may increase. This can lead to recruiting and training expenses for new hires and the costs attributable to a slippage of performance until new employees become fully proficient in their jobs.
- **Unionization.** When employees perceive their employers as unfair, they are more inclined to seek outside resources such as a union to help protect them and to negotiate on their behalf on matters such as employment, compensation and benefits.
- **Litigation.** An employee who cannot achieve a resolution of a workplace conflict may seek outside legal help, which can cause an organization to mount a costly defense or agree to an expensive settlement. Lawsuits resolved in an employee's favor can result in significant financial penalties for the employer and can even produce criminal or civil sanctions.

Employers should also take steps to manage the growing trends of incivility and bullying in the workplace. Employers are well-advised to treat such types of power conflicts seriously and to seek to address them proactively. See *How to Create a Culture of Civility* ([www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0417/pages/how-to-create-a-culture-of-civility.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0417/pages/how-to-create-a-culture-of-civility.aspx)).

## The Role of Human Resources

The human resource team has a leadership responsibility to develop and implement workplace conflict policies and procedures and to create and manage conflict-resolution programs. HR also initiates employee communication on conflict and tracks the metrics and costs of conflict-resolution efforts. Many HR professionals receive conflict-resolution training, often as part of their professional development, and many are accustomed to conducting such training or enlisting outside training resources for supervisors and managers.

HR professionals often become involved in settling workplace conflicts, particularly if the employees and their supervisors cannot achieve a resolution. If HR cannot resolve a conflict, an outside specialist may be needed to work out a settlement. See [Viewpoint: The Art and Science of Conflict Management \(www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/viewpoint-the-art-and-science-of-conflict-management.aspx\)](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/viewpoint-the-art-and-science-of-conflict-management.aspx).

In many instances, however, HR does not learn of workplace conflict until differences have escalated. HR professionals must be made aware of workplace tensions before they grow into larger problems, and managers should act as HR's "warning system." HR must always be informed about certain types of workplace conflicts, such as those that may involve harassment, discrimination, illegal activities, or other matters that could lead to lawsuits or involvement of law enforcement. See [Questions and Answers on Employment Issues During External Protests \(www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-qa/pages/questions-and-answers-on-employment-issues-during-external-protests.aspx\)](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-qa/pages/questions-and-answers-on-employment-issues-during-external-protests.aspx) and [6 Ways HR Can Prepare for Workplace Issues Arising from External Protests \(www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/6-ways-hr-can-prepare-for-workplace-issues-arising-from-external-protests-.aspx\)](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/6-ways-hr-can-prepare-for-workplace-issues-arising-from-external-protests-.aspx).

## The Role of Employees

Although supervisors and managers have a major responsibility to ensure that workplace conflicts are resolved, several experts say that the first steps to settling differences should be taken by employees themselves.

Employees who have complaints about co-workers should be advised to try to work out their differences directly with those co-workers before asking a supervisor or a manager to step in, says Kelly Mollica, a consultant for the Centre Group, a human asset management firm in Memphis, Tenn. That approach, she says, may not only reduce interruptions for managers but may also help employees develop their own conflict-resolution skills.

Resolving workplace conflicts does not require top-down interventions, Mollica says. A manager who approaches one employee with another's complaints may be seen as taking sides. If that happens often, it can be interpreted as bias in favor of certain employees, thereby undermining the manager's authority. Moreover, employees should not be overly dependent on their managers. Organizations need people who can handle day-to-day issues on their own, think independently, analyze problems, come up with solutions and take steps to implement them. This includes both task-related and people-related problems.

It may be time-consuming for managers to coach employees on how to resolve conflicts, but in the long term it will create a work environment where conflict management is seen as everyone's obligation, not just the managers'. Below are Mollica's suggestions for supervisors and managers:

- Set specific guidelines regarding what employees should do if they experience conflict.
- Let employees know that they are expected to attempt to resolve conflicts before approaching a manager for help.
- Do not put employees' "urgent" issues at the top of your priority list. Listen to and support employees with conflicts, but do not automatically take ownership of those problems.

- Provide ongoing employee training in conflict resolution. Such training often starts with self-assessments so employees can understand their own conflict-management styles and the pros and cons of using a particular style. (See the section "Training to Handle Conflict," below.)
- Employers should create a workplace culture in which managing conflict is viewed as a core job competency regardless of the employee's role in the organization. HR professionals can ask behavioral questions during job interviews to assess an applicant's previous experience in dealing with conflict. For example, the HR professional can ask a job candidate to describe a time that he or she had a conflict with a co-worker and to discuss what happened to cause the conflict and what the job candidate did to resolve it. Observable and measurable criteria based on guidelines or protocols for resolving conflict can be incorporated into job descriptions and performance reviews. Employees who successfully resolve conflicts on their own should be recognized and praised.
- Employees should be continually reminded that when addressing conflicts, they should focus on behaviors and the consequences of the behavior, not on personalities.
- Employers should bear in mind that if employees are not using an open-door policy to inform them of conflicts, conflicts may still be present. It may mean that employees think they are no longer supposed to discuss conflicts with their managers or supervisors. HR professionals should make sure employees know HR is available to coach them on how to work through specific situations.
- Know where to draw the line. Do not expect employees to handle every problem on their own; it could send a message that management is willing to ignore inappropriate or potentially illegal behavior. Make sure employees know that managers must be notified of and involved in certain types of conflicts, particularly if there are indications of physical violence, harassment, theft, or possession or use of illegal substances. Nonmanagement employees should never be expected to confront violations of the law or to enforce company policy without management's knowledge.

See Viewpoint: Caught in the Middle ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/viewpoint-caught-in-the-middle.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/viewpoint-caught-in-the-middle.aspx)).

### Conflict Management Training

To curb or prevent the effects of conflict, some managers and HR specialists are turning to conflict management training. This kind of training takes many forms and covers many topics. It can be provided through one-day workshops, small-group facilitations and one-on-one sessions. HR professionals should select an approach based on the type of workplace conflict that needs to be addressed. See **How to Resolve Conflict in the Real World** ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/how-to-resolve-conflict-in-the-real-world.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/how-to-resolve-conflict-in-the-real-world.aspx)).

Conflict management training can be helpful for employees exhibiting passive-aggressive behavior, experts say, and for intensely angry employees—those continually in conflict, often facing disciplinary action and causing complaints by co-workers. Angry employees may use inappropriate language in meetings and issue scathing remarks in e-mails. If they are managers, their employees may have unusually high rates of absenteeism and turnover.

If employees' behavior involves harm or the threat of harm to anyone, however, they may require more help than training can provide. In cases in which an employee shows signs of passionate anger, such as throwing chairs or banging fists, employers should refer to their workplace violence prevention program for security prevention and intervention strategies. Procedures for detecting, investigating, managing, and addressing threatening behavior or violent episodes that occur in a workplace should be in place.

See Conflict Resolution Training ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/presentations/pages/conflictresolutiontraining.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/presentations/pages/conflictresolutiontraining.aspx)).

### Developing Strong Employee Relations

When it occurs, conflict must be resolved equitably and quickly. It is also important, though, to try to prevent it—that is, to create an environment in which corrosive conflict is less likely to occur in the first place. The foundation of such a culture is employee relations, the process of building strong relationships between managers and employees based on fairness, trust and mutual respect. It takes time, effort and money to create such a work environment, but a good employee relations climate supports motivation, loyalty and high performance among employees, and it encourages them to try to achieve the best results possible for their organization. See *Developing and Sustaining Employee Engagement*. ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/Pages/sustainingemployeeengagement.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/Pages/sustainingemployeeengagement.aspx))

HR and other organizational leaders can use the following ingredients to create a strong employee relations strategy:

- **Interactive communication.** Communication that is clear and two-way can help build trust between employees and their managers.
- **Trust.** The absence of trust among employees and managers can compromise communication in either or both directions.
- **Ethics.** If employees do not perceive their manager as having good business ethics, they will indirectly question the manager's motives, which may cause stress and reduce performance.
- **Fairness.** All employees should be treated in a consistent manner under the same circumstances. Superior performance, however, should still be recognized and rewarded.
- **Empathy.** Managers need to be alert and sensitive to their employees' feelings, and showing empathy and awareness is central to establishing a trusting relationship with employees.
- **Perceptions and beliefs.** Perceptions can be essential in employee relations. Employees respond positively when they believe the organization's policies and practices are fair and its communication is truthful. Frequent, honest communication helps ensure that employees' beliefs and perceptions are consistent with reality in the workplace.
- **Clear expectations.** Employees need to know what to expect from their managers. No one likes to be surprised with new or conflicting requirements, which can cause stress and distract employees from the job at hand.
- **Conflict resolution.** Although conflicts arise in every organization, the methods to handle them vary. Employers must deal with issues head-on and resolve disputes fairly and quickly.

If an organization is large enough to support an employee relations position, this can send a positive message to the workforce about the value the employer places on maintaining positive employee relationships. HR professionals are often trained to handle workplace conflict and to resolve problems among employees; however, a specialist in employee relations or an ombudsman dedicated to working with employees experiencing conflict or other dissatisfaction in the workplace can eliminate many issues before they escalate. See *Don't Be Silent: Expert Tips to Defuse Workplace Tensions* ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/dont-be-silent-expert-tips-to-defuse-workplace-tensions.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/dont-be-silent-expert-tips-to-defuse-workplace-tensions.aspx)) and *How to Manage Intergenerational Conflict in the Workplace* ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/how-to-manage-intergenerational-conflict-in-the-workplace.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/how-to-manage-intergenerational-conflict-in-the-workplace.aspx)).

#### A Framework to Minimize Conflict

There is no single strategy to create a positive workplace climate. A number of tools are used in various combinations to stimulate employee engagement and to minimize conflict. There are, however, several essential tools HR professionals can use to create a positive workplace climate.

##### ***Written rules, policies and agreements***

Employees should understand how workplace conflicts will be resolved. An organization communicates its expectations typically via an employee handbook, HR policies, and written contracts and agreements with certain high-level individuals.

Written HR policies are essential to provide guidance to managers and employees on how conflicts and other issues should be handled. Such policies include any formal mechanisms in place to help employees resolve differences and provisions to prohibit retaliation against employees who raise concerns.

Agreements and contracts with key executives are designed to ensure a common understanding about the employment relationship. Such contracts may include a requirement that binding arbitration—rather than potentially costlier litigation—be used for resolving employment-related disputes.

### ***Effective management***

Conflicts have a better chance of being managed quickly and successfully when an organization has a strong leadership team in place. Leaders that allow poor behavior from employees or ignore workplace bullies will certainly experience damaged employee relations. An effective management team is imperative in preventing slippage in employee morale and increases in turnover.

### ***Careful hiring***

A key strategy to avoid employee relations problems is to make sure the organization's hiring process embodies good interviewing skills and selection procedures and pre-employment screening, including a background investigation.

Just as the requisite experience and education are key in hiring, so are demeanor and communication style, which can suggest whether a job candidate would be a "good fit" for the organization. A company's culture can have a significant impact on whether a candidate is likely to succeed within the organization. See *Want to Really Get to Know Your Candidates? Interview for Emotional Intelligence* ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/want-to-really-get-to-know-your-candidates-interview-for-emotional-intelligence.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/want-to-really-get-to-know-your-candidates-interview-for-emotional-intelligence.aspx)).

### ***Fair grievance processes***

Organizations should have written policies and definitions pertaining to dispute mechanisms available in the organization that provide clear guidance for the employer and the employees. The policy should state the scope and limitations of each mechanism and spell out each method's terms, such as eligibility, frequency, decision process, and required sign-off and approvals for settling a matter.

Employers that implement a system through which parties can resolve conflict within the company create incentives for employees to avoid engaging in costly and time-consuming external litigation. Organizations typically have multiple ways for employees to work out interpersonal or organizational differences. The existence of a grievance system may also improve employee morale because employees feel they have options for pursuing conflict resolution. See *Don't Just Quash Conflict -- Resolve It* ([www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/1117/pages/dont-just-quash-conflict-resolve-it.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/1117/pages/dont-just-quash-conflict-resolve-it.aspx)) and *Verbal Aikido Takes the Fight Out of Confrontations* ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/verbal-aikido-takes-the-fight-out-of-confrontations.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/verbal-aikido-takes-the-fight-out-of-confrontations.aspx)).

Here are common steps to resolve workplace disputes:

**Open-door policy.** This is a first step. It encourages employees to meet with their immediate supervisor to discuss and resolve work-related issues. Employees should know that there will be no negative repercussions for voicing a complaint.

**Management review.** If the open-door approach does not resolve the conflict, the next step is to have the issue reviewed by the next-higher level of management.

**Peer review.** The aggrieved employee presents his or her side of a dispute to a small panel of employees and supervisors selected from a pool of employees trained in dispute resolution. This method often succeeds because employees participate in decisions that affect them. Depending on the organization, a peer review may be binding on both parties. If it is not binding and the resolution is not satisfactory to the employee, the dispute may be submitted to mediation or arbitration.

The following are types of conflict resolution techniques available to organizations:

**Facilitation.** A neutral employee in the organization—often an employee relations manager—acts as a facilitator, not to judge the merits of the dispute or to render a final decision, but to help both sides decide the best way to settle the dispute.

**Mediation.** A mediator is a neutral third party who helps the conflicting parties explore innovative solutions to their dispute. Mediators can be internal employees trained in conflict management and mediation, or they can be trained external professionals who have no perceived conflict of interest with the employer. Resolving a dispute through mediation should be voluntary.

**Arbitration.** This is typically the most formal, costly and time-consuming method of resolving disputes. Witnesses may be presented and cross-examined, and an arbitrator issues a binding decision.

See Q&A with Daniel Shapiro on Negotiating the Nonnegotiable ([www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/pages/qa-with-daniel-shapiro.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/pages/qa-with-daniel-shapiro.aspx))

### ***Training for managers***

HR must ensure that effective management training is provided regularly in the organization. Managers should also know how to spot issues and seek counsel from specialists before responding to a problem. This can ensure fair treatment of subordinates and can also protect the employer from being inadvertently exposed to legal issues. See *Conflict Resolution Training for Supervisors* ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/presentations/Pages/conflictresolutiontraining.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/presentations/Pages/conflictresolutiontraining.aspx)).

HR must ensure that managers have skills and training in several additional areas, including:

- **Conflict resolution.** Managers should be trained to recognize problems, ask questions and devise solutions before the issues become time-wasters and legal risks.
- **Organization rules and expectations.** Managers should understand what is expected of them, and they should know the organization's rules and policies. If a manager does not know how to enforce the rules, the result can be confusion and conflict.
- **Laws and regulations.** Managers must understand the basic laws and regulations of the employment relationship so they have at least a general knowledge of their employees' rights.
- **Professionalism.** Managers who commit themselves to high standards of professionalism and who follow stringent business ethics gain employees' respect, whereas managers who bend the rules are viewed with skepticism. Employees respect and do their best work for managers who are committed to doing what is right regardless of possible repercussions.
- **Communication.** A manager's ability to communicate effectively with staff is critical for building good relationships. Managers should be trained in how to give complete, specific assignments; listen carefully; provide constructive feedback; respond to employee suggestions; and deal with conflict. They should also know how to share information with employees—and how much to share—based on the organization's philosophy and preferences for sharing.
- **Work assignments.** Managers should be trained in how to assess their employees' abilities and to understand their employees' strengths and weaknesses to determine what assignments are reasonable for each employee. Employees are most productive when they feel that their work is significant and valued by management.

### ***Performance management and feedback***

Performance reviews typically occur at least once a year; some are more frequent. During such reviews, goals and objectives are determined and agreed on, and managers can give candid feedback to employees. Managers who constructively and frankly communicate such information to employees tend to establish stronger workgroups and foster better individual performers. Without feedback, employees are left to wonder how they are doing and what their manager really thinks about them, which in turn can lead to dissatisfaction, misunderstandings and conflict. See *Managing Employee Performance* ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/Pages/managingemployeeperformance.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/Pages/managingemployeeperformance.aspx)).



**Fair termination processes**

Most workplace litigation arises because individuals feel they were not taken seriously or did not receive a fair hearing. HR should review disciplinary policies and procedures to ensure there is a fair process that protects employees from impulsive or ill-considered reactions by management. Employees are more likely to view a dispute-resolution system as fair and equitable if it allows them to correct problematic behavior before termination is considered. This perception of fairness can also help minimize emotions and disruptions by other employees when a co-worker must be terminated.

**Communication**

Supervisors and managers should be well-informed about all the organization's dispute resolution systems. They should know the rationale for each system and be able to explain how each works in practice. An HR professional's decision about how to communicate a dispute-resolution system's details to employees will depend on the culture of the organization and the various types of media that are available and that are most effective within the workforce. Such media may include training, staff meetings, policy and procedure manuals, organization intranet, e-mail, newsletters, flyers, new-employee orientation training materials, and individual letters to employees. HR should regularly remind managers and supervisors about the importance of dealing with conflict early and about the options available to them to resolve such matters.

**Metrics and Reporting**

Experts suggest five employee relations metrics that HR should consider monitoring:

- Number of grievances per given period—month, quarter or year—using a constant measure, such as the number of grievances per 100 or 1,000 employees. This information can then be viewed according to manager, department, region or facility.
- Cost of grievances by calculating the time spent by managers, HR professionals and legal counsel in the investigation and resolution of complaints, the cost of lost productivity, and legal expenses.
- Root causes of grievances, such as supervisor errors, unclear policies and procedures, lack of management training, and poor hiring decisions.
- Average close time—similar to the time-to-fill measure used in recruiting. This is a measure of the efficiency of the grievance resolution process. It is based on how many days it takes to resolve an issue from the day it is identified as a problem.
- Return on investment (ROI) to determine how much money the employee relations program has saved the organization. For example, revenue per employee and profit per employee can be monitored to see if the implementation of an effective grievance resolution process has made any impact.

**Templates and Tools****Samples**

Problem Resolution and Peer Review Procedures ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/policies/Pages/cms\\_000515.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/policies/Pages/cms_000515.aspx))

Conflict Resolution Policy ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/policies/Pages/cms\\_000517.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/policies/Pages/cms_000517.aspx))

Conflict Resolution Rules and Steps ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/Pages/1cms\\_012552.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/Pages/1cms_012552.aspx))

Incident Report ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/Pages/incidentconcernrequest.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/Pages/incidentconcernrequest.aspx))

Agreement: Mediation and Arbitration Agreement ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/mediationandarbitrationagreement.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/mediationandarbitrationagreement.aspx))

Sample ADR Recommendation Memo ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/cms\\_012036.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/cms_012036.aspx))

Grievance Procedures: Non-Union ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/grievance-procedures.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/policies/pages/grievance-procedures.aspx))

### **SHRMStore Resources**

Conflict Resolution ([https://store.shrm.org/books-resources/hr-topics/employee-relations/conflict-resolution.html?\\_ga=2.128609285.846343057.1643472603-507160668.1643472603](https://store.shrm.org/books-resources/hr-topics/employee-relations/conflict-resolution.html?_ga=2.128609285.846343057.1643472603-507160668.1643472603))

### **Endnote**

1 Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development. (2015). *Getting under the skin of workplace conflict: Tracing the experiences of employees*. Retrieved from [http://www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/getting-under-skin-workplace-conflict\\_2015-tracing-experiences-employees.pdf](http://www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/getting-under-skin-workplace-conflict_2015-tracing-experiences-employees.pdf)

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