

## Principals Kit – Inter-staff Conflict

Inter-staff conflict affects not only morale but also the efficiency and smooth operation of your school. It can also lead to strained relationships, grievances, litigation, absenteeism, and employee turnover.

Inter-staff conflict is a relatively common occurrence, but if you handle incidents promptly and effectively, you can foster a deeper understanding, mutual respect and a sense of bonding between your employees.

### **Do not allow the conflict to fester**

Doing nothing and hoping the situation resolves itself is seldom a successful strategy. As soon as you become aware of conflict between staff, you should intervene to prevent the relationship between those staff members from deteriorating further.

### **Allow your employees to share their viewpoint**

When employees fail to listen to each other and/or feel unheard, this often leads to conflict. Your first job is to allow your staff members to tell their story as fully and completely as possible. In the first instance, speak to each of them separately. One of the first rules of employee conflict resolution is that you must allow both parties to vent their frustration in order for them to feel as if they have told their side of the story and communicated and expressed the issues that led to the conflict.

### **Communicate Your Empathy**

Resolving conflict in the school isn't just about letting employees vent. You must also **practice active listening**. Your staff don't simply want to express their frustrations, they also want to feel that you understand their feelings and actions and that you aren't taking one person's side over the other. To communicate your empathy, you should remain neutral during the initial sit-down and use phrases such as "I understand what you're saying," and "That must have been difficult."

These phrases encourage honesty from your staff members and prevent any of the people involved from accusing you of choosing one person over the other.

### **Direct Focus Back to the Big Picture**

Conflict in the school can divert your employees' attention away from the big picture of how their disagreement is affecting the school and you need to make them aware of this. For example, if two of your teachers are constantly bickering and tearing each other down, remind them that their conflict is impacting negatively

on all staff in the school and, in all likelihood, on students.

### **Identify the Real Source of the Conflict**

In many instances, employee conflict resolution is based on **identifying the real source of the disagreement**, which may or may not involve an actual work process issue. As a leader, you must be able to distinguish between conflict that has arisen due to a structural or workplace process issue or a disagreement that is entirely based on personalities. For example, two teachers may be fighting because one believes the other doesn't follow school policy around managing student behaviour in the playground. This is a structural disagreement that you can resolve by asking the teacher to adhere to school policy.

However, two employees may be fighting because one employee believes the other is rude and overbearing to colleagues. This is a personality issue that is more difficult to resolve because it involves character quirks that an employee may have built up over years.

### **Develop an Action Plan**

Employee conflict resolution works best when you include each party in the problem-solving stage. As a leader, your job is to ensure that you lay out the **options to help resolve the issues** between your employees. By presenting them with options, you give your employees the opportunity to decide which path to take. This will likely require both parties to give up something in order to arrive at a resolution. As part of your resolution action plan, summarise the statements of both parties as well as useful suggestions as to how they can avoid future conflict. Record and ask each involved employee to sign off the resolution action plan you that has been agreed.