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Look for the Opportunity in All of Your Difficulties

Innovation and creativity flourish when people challenge one another within good working relationships. When you face challenges with people, keep in mind that in every adversity is the seed of an equal or greater benefit. Whether you call them problems, challenges, difficulties, or differences, it is in working through these interpersonal issues that you, your organization, and your team members may be forced to better understand one another. You recognize previously overlooked strengths, abilities, and insights each person has to offer. You will also find that in resolving these difficulties, you can find the greatest opportunities to grow.

Some problems with people are preventable, but due to differences among people – perceptions, cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and more – some difficulties simply cannot be avoided. You and your team members may not agree on everything, but when you can agree on the overall goals, sometimes how you get there is not so important. By measuring results, not necessarily activity, you can continue to monitor progress and take corrective action when needed, yet at the same time, set an example of tolerating differences in the way people approach their work. A productive, effective organization can usually accommodate individual differences among team members when you, as manager, have clearly defined the overall goals and requirements of your organization. Rather than being a source of conflict, differences can be transformed into a wellspring of team creativity.

Productive Handling of Problems

Whether you are handling an informal complaint or a formal grievance, on a one-to-one basis or with a group, use these basic techniques:

- Be a good listener. Never interrupt while team members are talking, even if you disagree with the opinions expressed. Complaints often dissolve when people simply have a chance to talk about them.
- Ask questions. Your questions indicate interest and a desire for more information. You may uncover underlying causes or related problems. Open-ended questions like, "Why do you think we have this problem?" or "What do you think the solution might be?" accomplish more than closed questions that elicit only a "yes" or "no." Through asking good questions, you communicate that you do not unfairly prejudice people or situations.
- Do not argue. Present any information you have in a persuasive manner rather than an argumentative one. Arguing builds resistance and makes employees become determined to have their way regardless of facts. Asking questions can be an effective tool for disarming a potential argument. Your point of view is more persuasive when you demonstrate that you can see the bigger picture and that you refuse to be drawn into an argument.
- Make sure you understand. Some people have difficulty expressing themselves, so you must use all your questioning and listening skills to make sure you understand their position. If they go away convinced you do not see their point, you have not helped them resolve the issue. Restate, summarize, and ask additional questions to make sure you understand their point of view.
- Treat employees with respect. Ridicule or comments that minimize a person's concern are powerful and devastating and have no place in management. If you attempt to make someone else feel foolish, you destroy the lines of communication and trust. Let others save face and retreat gracefully.
- Let the person know when to expect a response from you. Your commitment to give an answer shows that you are taking the problem seriously and will investigate. Many times, the problem can be settled on the spot, and the sooner the better.
- Gather the facts. If you cannot make a decision during the meeting, check the team member's story, refer to employment agreements or other important documents, and – if appropriate – consult with higher management before making a final decision.

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- Make a decision. Once you make a decision, stick to it firmly – even if it is unpopular – unless new evidence that deserves consideration is presented.
- Explain your decision. If your decision is distasteful to the team member, explain it and answer questions. Team members may not agree and may appeal your decision, but they will respect you for your stand.

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