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## (1) Challenge of the Day - Cubicle Clashes, Part I

Everyone enjoys those cartoon strips featuring the antics of adorable cubicle-sharing characters that manage to make workplace frustrations seem so amusing. But it may feel like the joke is on you if you are one of the millions of Americans who must share cubicles or other common workspaces.

When space is cramped and people work in close proximity, privacy, interruptions, loud voices, temperature, and even choice of fragrances can become focal points for conflict. Sometimes, simply facilitating a collaborative and productive work environment can become quite a challenge for leadership. In this and the next edition of Leadership Today, we'll illustrate ways that you can help resolve minor struggles and disputes within your work group.

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## (2) Exploring the Issue - Helping Individual Employees Negotiate Their Needs

**Q.** Much of our workforce is in cubicles and it feels like there's been a constant struggle over one or more issues of daily life. Someone is always grumbling. I spend too much time dealing with employees complaining about one irritation or another. I know that with people working this closely together, minor irritations become major issues until bad feelings spring up and get in the way of people working together. How can I help our employees get along better and do their work, while leaving me with the time to do mine?

- A. When employees spend hours in close proximity, minor irritations can become major conflicts over time. While individuals can usually work out mutual agreements with their co-workers, at times managers may need to step in and help employees who are unable to come to an agreement themselves.

When agencies utilize an open workspace, it's recommended that they head off problems by establishing ground rules and expectations regarding daily courtesies and behavior. This can be reinforced by offering training in effective communication and respectful conflict resolution. This combination of policy and training lays the foundation for a cooperative organizational culture. Establishing expectations will provide a standard and common ground for employees to work from when they decide to come to mutual understandings. This can avoid a multitude of problems and misunderstandings.

Also, since noise and privacy are the two major complaints when employees work in open environments, you may want to provide specific training that covers how best to address each other respectfully, resolve issues like loud voices, and deal with interruptions and distractions. The goal is to build the workgroup's ability to resolve differences and work together.

Sometimes, when employees cannot cooperatively resolve a conflict or when office disagreements become disruptive, managers may need to intervene. First, be sensitive to how the disputing employees, as well as the office will react to managerial involvement. As long as the situation has not escalated seriously and no one's safety is in question, supervisors should help employees come to a solution through voluntary collaboration and compromise. Resist the temptation to step in and solve the problem too quickly and take care to avoid giving the appearance of taking sides.

Some typical "cubicle rules" include:

- Don't speak to people over dividers
- Treat cubicles as if there is a door; knock
- Don't treat a chair as if it is an inbox
- Don't just enter a co-worker's cubicle; wait to be invited
- If a co-worker is on a call, don't hang around their cubicle waiting until they're finished
- When someone is in your cubicle, don't answer a ringing telephone without first alerting the visitor of your intention
- Don't eavesdrop on your co-worker's conversations
- Music, if allowed at your worksite, should be just audible enough so you can hear it

Obviously, there are some issues that are serious and non-negotiable including highly inappropriate or illegal activities such as any form of harassment, threats, violence, substance abuse, or theft. You have a number of resources for dealing with conflicts and for coaching staff on resolving differences. At a minimum, these include your own supervisor, human resources (HR) staff, and the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). In some situations, you will also benefit from consulting with Labor Relations.

Additionally, some workplaces have access to Organizational Development (OD) services. OD consultants are particularly helpful at analyzing workplace issues and facilitating cooperative and productive work environments. OD services are also valuable when relatively problem-free organizations want to build, maintain, and train groups and teams to enhance effectiveness.

Finally, if you have any concerns that your particular situation may give rise to legal issues, you will certainly want to consult with HR before taking any action. HR staff can answer any questions you may have regarding applicable personnel policies and procedures. You can also rely on the EAP to offer practical suggestions related to human behavior, communication, and interpersonal interaction. If the overall situation doesn't improve or if serious conflicts persist between two or more employees, these same resources will be a support to you in recommending a next step.

See how the situation below might be facilitated:

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### (3) Play it Out – When Conflicts Occur

#### The Dynamics

Startled by a loud voice, you think that this marks the fifth time today that your concentration has been broken by office noise.

You are aware that Louise, who occupies the cubicle nearest Sharon's, is playing the radio in her work area. Resist the urge to jump in and arbitrate. Instead, take this opportunity to explore with Sharon how she might resolve this issue with her co-worker.

Note that if you have provided the staff with ground rules that include guidelines about music, you may have set the standard that music is to be played at a low volume.

She doesn't want to gamble with the goodwill of her colleague.

Find out how they have related in the past. Have they had any other similar issues? In what situations have their encounters gone well? This is to determine if any unresolved problems or serious bad feelings exist that could impair their ability to sit together and talk productively.

She may give one of two possible answers – (A) They *do have a cordial relationship* with *no or very limited* unpleasant moments or, (B) There *have been serious difficulties* (such as loud, or emotionally hurtful encounters).

#### The Action

You hear a loud male voice rise over the normal office hum. "Who took my stapler again? Every time I really need it, it's not here!" Shortly thereafter, you glance up to see one of your subordinates, Sharon, approach you with a frustrated look on her face, "I've had it! Some people are playing their music so loud that I can't hear my own phone conversations. I can't even concentrate to get my work done. What can you do to help me?"

"Hi, Sharon. Come in and sit down? Have you mentioned to your neighbor that you can hear her music and that you're having difficulty concentrating?"

"No I didn't. I don't want to make her mad. It might not do any good anyway. I'm afraid if I make her mad she'll stop helping me with my projects when I really need her."

"How is your overall relationship with this person? How have you worked well together in the past?"

**(Possibility A)**

If Sharon says that they have had good relations, encourage her to approach her colleague in a good-natured way and make her request. The goal is to help Sharon ask for reasonable behaviors from Louise that will help her perform her work. If she needs help, coach her on ways to articulate her needs while respecting the other's feelings. If she is unsure how to approach this, you may suggest role-playing with her to help her formulate her approach.

Advise her not to speak with Louise with blame or anger or to characterize her or her music negatively, but to focus on what she (Sharon) is experiencing and on her request for a new arrangement to resolve the issue.

Sharon reports to you later that Louise seemed surprised, but said she understood and would bring in headphones to use. You commend Sharon for having successfully communicated her needs and let her know that your door is still open to her.

Several weeks following Sharon and Louise's discussion, be sure to follow up to see if the arrangement is still working.

**(Possibility B)**

If Sharon tells you there have been serious difficulties in the past between Louise and her, don't recommend that she approach her colleague. Instead, consider alternative approaches. Consult your EAP and other workplace resource staff about the best approach to take with these two individuals.

If you have already established baseline expectations for employees in open workspaces, resolving this issue will not pose a serious management issue since you can review the existing standards with Louise and all staff. If Sharon is especially stressed by these workplace difficulties, offer her the EAP for support and advice on human behavior and workplace interaction.

**(Possibility A)**

"If others are within earshot, approach your neighbor and ask if you can talk with her privately, away from the work area. Otherwise, respectfully tell her that you are having some problems and wanted to ask her help. Explain that you are having a hard time concentrating in your cubicle. You don't have to exaggerate, just tell her that you are having difficulty concentrating. Tell her that when you can't hear your telephone conversations, it's especially stressful for you. Ask her if she would help out by turning the music lower or wearing earphones when listening to her music."

"I'm so glad that you tried this approach and that your co-worker responded positively. Keep me posted on how things go over the next month."

**(Possibility B)**

"We have outlined some ground rules about cubical etiquette and I will review the workplace noise issues with staff and take action as necessary.

Also, you are describing ongoing, strong tension between Louise and you that could affect the workplace environment. This ongoing tension can be stressful. If you would like help addressing workplace stresses, the EAP can lend support and assistance. Here is a brochure for you with the EAP toll-free number.

If Sharon is unable to address the problem successfully, some of your other options include the following:

- Speak privately to the employee playing music. Talk in terms of what you have noticed, rather than referencing Sharon. Request that she keep the music audible only to her or use headphones for the sake of the group's productivity. (Beforehand, be sure to review any existing work rules with your supervisor and HR. Consult with Labor Relations as appropriate.)
- You can also address the issue in the next staff meeting in a general way, without naming anyone, and discuss various ways of resolving it. If you haven't established ground rules for cubicle etiquette, this may be a good time to begin.
- You can set up a staff meeting to let them raise a number of cubicle or worksite issues and come up with solutions themselves. *(More details on this approach will be in the next edition of this e-magazine.)*

"Hi Louise, is this a good time for you to talk a minute? I noticed that you had your music on." *(You will tailor this request according to your particular organizational work rules.)*  
 "While some enjoy the music, some could have trouble concentrating if the sound carries into their cubicles.

Because of the need to help people stay focused, I'd like to ask that you turn the music down so only you can hear it or use headphones.

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#### **(4) Tip of the Day**

Helping employees to resolve their workday disputes often works best if you maintain an "open door" policy and stay in contact with your employees so you can stay informed. The nature and extent of the dispute, as well as the resources available to you, will help you determine the level of your involvement. Once you have ruled out serious conflict or situations that can lead to violence or legal concerns, encourage and coach individuals to resolve their own everyday disputes. This process includes helping individuals tactfully make requests of their co-workers. However, setting initial standards will take the guesswork out of "common sense" issues. Throughout this process, you'll want to seek early and continuous consultation from your supervisor, HR, and the EAP.

- Where feasible, coach employees to resolve routine issues with co-workers by building on past positive relationships and common workplace goals.
- In approaching their co-workers, employees should express themselves without blame or criticism - they should describe what they are experiencing and request another behavior in place of what is occurring.
- Use your workplace resources, listed above, to help you screen for serious discord or behavior that is inappropriate or illegal. When disputes between employees are too serious, frequent, or complex for individual resolution, rely on your supervisor, HR, and the EAP to help you determine the best resolution.

Ultimately, it's about fostering collaborative relationships. A friendly, supportive supervisor is a powerful, positive role model. When the supervisor remains open and responsive, yet careful about direct involvement, this encourages employees to deal amicably with minor everyday issues. However, it is important to have standards and expectations for professional behavior and to assure employees that, while you respect their ability to successfully resolve their issues, you will intervene if situations compromise safety or productivity.

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## **(5) About this Ezine**

Federal Occupational Health (FOH) has a range of programs to improve the health, safety and productivity of the Federal workforce. These programs include Employee Assistance/Member and Family Support, Work/Life Solutions, Clinical Health Services, Environmental Services, and other special programs. The FOH EAP provides assessment, counseling, referral, training and consultation to *Federal employees and agencies worldwide. The goal of this e-magazine is to help Federal leaders address their workplace relationship concerns. For further information about FOH and its programs, call us at 1 800 457-9808 or visit our web site at [www.foh.dhhs.gov](http://www.foh.dhhs.gov).*

*The articles that appear in Leadership today are published as background information and, as such, do not address specific human resource management concerns. For guidance on handling issues arise in your workplace, please consult your employee assistance and/or human resources professional.*

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