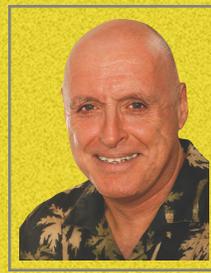


THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



1485 Can Managers Repair Broken Workplace Relationships?

If you're a manager for any length of time, sooner or later you will have to deal with two workers who just don't like each other. You might not know when the problem started between them, but you know it's real. Maybe it's snarky comments in meetings, or maybe they ignore each other and refuse to even acknowledge the other's presence, unless it's absolutely necessary — then silence again. Dislike can be seen in many forms. I'm Jerry Roberts and I'll toss out a couple of ideas on what's a manager to do, if faced with this type of situation, next on The Extra Point.

In any workplace, healthy communication and collaboration are vital if you're going to have a well functioning team. When coworkers experience a broken relationship and refuse to play nice unless necessary, it can create a toxic atmosphere and hinder productivity.

The most extreme example of this I've found was when I was talking with leaders of a government agency many years ago, about their interest in a course we offer, *Dealing With Difficult People*. They told a story that made the hair I didn't have curl up in surprise.

There were two workers who had once been close, and now hadn't spoken to each other or had anything to do with each, for — are you ready — 13 years.

I asked how that was even possible. In an office environment, how do you avoid someone for 13 years? Apparently, they used other workers as go-betweens. "Oh, Joe, would you tell that person over there (referring to Ray), that this has to be a priority."

Apparently, both were good performers and other than the issue they had with each other, didn't cause trouble, so management didn't feel it was worth the effort to move out one or both if it meant going up against the civil service commission. They did move them around the office to separate the two, but that was it. It was a problem that just lingered on, and on, and on.

What finally happened? Did our training serve to magically solve this 13 year-old spat between two workers? No. They opted to do another course, so I don't know how things ended up. Maybe both workers retired, still without any direct connection.

As a manager, you may never face anything so unique as this situation, but battling coworkers is likely to be an issue at some point. Here are some thoughts on how to handle it:

1. Hold private meetings with the individuals involved in the relationship and just listen without judgment. If you've built a supportive environment and workers feel safe with you, there's a good chance you'll get answers and a direction to proceed.
2. If so, mediate a conversation between the parties. Each person can present their issues and perspective, without interruption. Make sure the tone of the meeting is respectful.
3. Establish clear expectations. Emphasize the importance of everyone on the team getting along and working together. Reinforce the idea that individuals must put personal differences aside for the sake of the collective goals and the overall success of the organization.

Understand that this is likely not what either worker was hoping to hear. One or both likely hoped you would take their side over the other and they would come out on top.

4. What's the strategy? In that meeting, you say you're going to step out for a few moments, and they are to use that time to come up with a plan to work together productively. Give them 5-10 minutes, then come back in and hear them out.

Another thing you can do is assign joint tasks or projects that require them to work with each other in cooperation, allowing for the gradual rebuilding of their working relationship.

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If, after those measures, the problem still exists, then conflict resolution training could be next.

If that doesn't work, then the road gets a bit more challenging. That being said, there are things you can do to avoid the problem going on for, say, another 13 years.

A caring manager can play a pivotal role in repairing relationships. It may not happen immediately, but with consistent effort and support, you can come out of this with a stronger, more cohesive, more resilient team.

One other thing. Understand that whatever you do with these two workers who aren't getting along, everybody else is watching your every move and decision.

Whatever happens, this will tell them how things will go if they ever have a similar issue. That is worth remembering.

That's the Extra Point. Be responsible and make something good happen today. For 93.3FM, the Ray Gibson Show, and First Hawaiian Bank, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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