

TIP SHEET 9

Managing relationships and work-related stress

Work colleagues can be important sources of support, but they can also be sources of stress. Relationships with bosses, peers and subordinates can positively or negatively affect the way a worker feels. Wherever groups of people work together, it's likely that some conflict will arise from time to time.

Conflict only becomes a stressor if it remains unresolved, if it becomes particularly intense or if it becomes workplace bullying. It is important that a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) takes proactive steps towards preventing or minimising conflict as early as possible.

Possible solutions

Decisions need to be made about what practical solutions (control measures) will be used in the workplace to prevent, eliminate or minimise the effect of work-related stressors on worker health.

At the organisational level, controls target the work itself and focus on job design, work environment and working conditions.

For the risk factor 'poorly managed relationships', organisational level solutions should address ensuring workers have clearly defined roles, encouraging communication, educating workers on appropriate workplace behaviours and training workers to diffuse difficult interpersonal situations.

Task conflict

Task conflict arises over resources, procedures and policies or disagreements about facts. Modest levels of task conflict can encourage creative thinking and problem solving. High levels of conflict may limit workers' ability to focus on the task at hand. Ways to manage task conflict include:

Role clarity

- Provide all workers with a corporate induction and ensure they are aware of their role in their immediate work team or unit, program area and the broader organisation.
- Encourage workers to talk to their supervisor or manager early if they are unclear about the scope and/or responsibilities of their role.
- Ensure workers have an up to date role or position description, which includes the role purpose, reporting relationships and the key duties expected of them.

- Assist workers to develop personal work plans that clearly define task objectives and expected outputs.
- Ensure systems are in place to enable workers to raise concerns about any conflicts they have within their role and responsibilities. For example, hold regular team meetings to enable workers to discuss any potential task conflict.

Communication

- Encourage workers to have input into procedures and tasks. Wherever possible, involve workers in the decision-making processes which will impact on their job tasks.
- Hold regular team meetings to discuss the pressures and challenges within the work unit. Encourage workers to come up with practical solutions for any task-related issues.
- Provide regular feedback on task performance. Praise workers whenever tasks have been done well and be specific about what was done well. Give workers practical advice and guidance on areas that need improving.
- Coach workers in communication skills to increase their awareness of other people's points of view and how to negotiate solutions to resolve task conflict.

Relationship conflict

Relationship conflict amongst workers can be harmful to both individuals and the organisation. It should be minimised or prevented as early as possible. Relationship conflict can present itself in various ways, including animosity, social conflict and abusive supervisory styles.

Ways to manage relationship conflict may include:

- Train workers in the code of conduct at induction so that they are aware of appropriate work behaviours. Ensure these standards are implemented to demonstrate that there are consequences for poor behaviour.
- Provide conflict management training to all workers to teach them how to diffuse difficult or confronting situations.

- Provide training to managers that shows them how to identify a conflict situation and resolve it early.
- Show commitment to workers by being willing to confront people issues and manage their resolution.
- Encourage workers to share their concerns about work-related conflict at an early stage by supporting open communication. This will enable workers to feel comfortable when discussing interpersonal conflict.
- Develop formal and informal confidential complaint handling processes to enable the reporting of inappropriate behaviour.

- Provide rewards that reinforce teamwork (for example, a team dinner or a team trip). Ensure that the reward is equitable and accessible to all team members who contributed to the project or task.

Prolonged and unresolved relationship conflict may result in more extreme forms of conflict known as workplace bullying. As workplace bullying may harm the health and safety of workers, all PCBUs have an obligation to manage exposure to risks of workplace bullying under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011*.

At the individual level, solutions are aimed at assisting individuals to cope or build resilience. Appropriate activities and assistance to be considered at this level of intervention include:

- corporate induction programs
- access to employee assistance programs
- training about resilience
- health and wellbeing programs
- counselling/therapy for people experiencing distress from sources both in and outside of the workplace.

Refer to Tip Sheet 12 – Organisational justice.

Team work

- Promote a team culture in which workers assist each other and provide support when required.
- Promote that differences in workers' ideas and opinions is a positive.
- Create a culture where colleagues trust and encourage each other to perform at their best.
- Encourage good, honest, open communication at all levels in work teams.
- Look for design issues that may negatively affect team communication. For example, minimise isolated work groups and if this is unavoidable, provide additional support to these groups.
- Give group rewards based on the performance of a team or unit rather than any one individual. This can be achieved by linking rewards to the performance of a group as a whole and will both enhance teamwork and avoid potential conflict between workers.

This tip sheet is one of 12 that refer to work-related stress. For more detail, go to workcover.nsw.gov.au

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This document was developed by Workplace Health & Safety QLD, Department of Justice and Attorney General worksafe.qld.gov.au

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