



UNDERSTANDING POWER IN WORKPLACE CONFLICTS

Power

Resolving workplace conflicts — or even exacerbating them — lies in the balance of power and how it's used. The most easily understood indication of power in the workplace is title or hierarchy. The CEO, the owner, the HR director, the boss, or the manager are common representations of the traditional view of power. Beyond title or position within the organization, power comes from other sources:

- **Physical attributes**, such as gender, appearance, and age
- **Mental attributes**, such as aptitudes, language, and problem solving
- **Skills**, such as industry-specific skills, verbal or written communication skills, and interpersonal skills
- **Experience**, such as knowledge of the field and years with the company
- **Status**, such as money, education, and social or professional networks

Don't kid yourself and think that power only rests at the top. In one way or another, every single person in your organisation has some power because power is crucial to accomplishing work. Clout associated with job skills and performance has a significant impact on the quality and quantity of work that gets done. Sources of power that relate to job performance, like the ability to persuade or the ability to track complicated details, are critical. Employees who constructively use their power are invaluable members of teams.

Power becomes problematic, however, when it isn't balanced. When a person or group has too much or too little power, team dynamics suffer and conflict is likely to arise.

Too much power

Be aware when power starts to become destructive — especially if you have a power-seeking group. Unchecked power coupled with a complete disregard for others is never a good combination. So before someone on your team successfully builds her army of doom, take a few minutes to consider these power-balancing techniques:

- Be a good role model.
- Be aware of emerging power imbalances in the office.
- Help your employees use their power for good, not evil. Point out the personal benefit in achieving group accomplishments in addition to individual accomplishments.
- If you can pinpoint a leader, focus your energy on getting her to work with you.
- Encourage participation from everyone, and make sure those seeking power don't take over.

Too little power

Just as excessive power can be problematic, so can a lack of power. Employees who feel as though they have no control over their situation can easily become disengaged and unhappy. A lack of power to change or affect a situation significantly diminishes motivation, causes poor job performance, increases sick leave, and potentially increases employee turnover.

When employees lose power or control over a situation, try the following:

- Give your employees a forum to vent their frustration, like a private meeting.
- Help them find things they can control.
- Provide support and look for resources if needed, like a conflict coach or EAP counseling service.

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