

Diagnosing conflicts between direct reports: Should you act?

No response is occasionally the best response when direct reports squabble — especially if the issue is inconsequential. For example, does it really make sense to intervene in a tiff over the volume of someone's headphones? Your direct reports need to learn how to sort out minor problems without regularly forcing you into the role of adjudicator.



At the same time, managers who perpetually look the other way — or refuse to get involved if their direct reports really are struggling and ill-equipped to cope — risk hurting the team's morale, productivity, and effectiveness.

How, then, do you decide when to act (and when not to)?

Note: This article doesn't cover illegal behaviors related to conflict (i.e., discrimination and harassment). See HR if you have questions or concerns about your legal responsibilities as a manager.

7 key questions

A few minutes of reflection could help you make the right choice. Consider these questions:

1. What's the nature of the conflict — do you really know what's going on?

Sometimes managers are shielded from the true nature and extent of a conflict, because their direct reports don't trust them enough to explain what's really going on, don't want to complain about a colleague (often a taboo at work), or have learned to hide conflicts because their past managers responded to conflict negatively. If you simply don't have enough information to decide whether to act, you should probably start by asking more questions in each person's next 1-on-1. You won't be able to determine the best course of action until you properly diagnose the situation.

For example, maybe you ask each person how they've been dividing work on a project and learn one hasn't been doing his or her share. Since your second direct report doesn't have the authority to say or do anything about it, that's a situation only you can handle.

2. Have they tried to resolve it themselves, and if so, how?

Ask. Maybe they've only relied on a poorly written email exchange, and it ended up making things worse instead of better. Maybe it's a relatively minor tiff over something like music volume or desk cleanliness. It's not unreasonable to expect direct reports to handle conflicts in cases like these. However, you may need to provide some coaching on how to do it; keep in mind that individual contributors typically don't receive training or get as much experience navigating difficult conversations as managers do.

3. How might your personal views toward conflict affect your response?

Everyone defines and reacts to conflict differently. For example, let's say conflict makes you really uncomfortable — so uncomfortable you tend to rationalize a hands-off approach. Maybe you need to overcome this and learn to step in more frequently. Or perhaps you enjoy being in the middle of debates and a little drama, or like being viewed as the “fixer” by your direct reports. In that case, you may need to hold yourself back a bit.

4. Who's involved?

A serious conflict involving one or more high performers — or people who rarely complain, which could signal that the situation is legit — could present a threat. You don't want your stars to get so upset they leave. But a conflict involving low performers or chronic complainers is probably less concerning (unless, of course, it's disrupting the entire team — sometimes conflicts cause collateral damage). That may sound harsh, but management is ultimately about performance.

5. What are the likely short- and long-term effects?

Is everyone wasting time gossiping about the conflict? Is it holding up progress on an important project? Is it draining energy instead of spurring new ideas? If the conflict is threatening productivity and morale, don't stand idly by hoping it blows over.

6. How might the work environment (that includes you!) be contributing to the conflict?

Is it possible that a lack of resources, a highly competitive team culture, a stressful event like layoffs or even something you're doing as a manager — such as showing favoritism, failing to set clear expectations or goals, or delegating haphazardly and unfairly — is creating or intensifying the conflict between your two direct reports? If so, your best course of action might be to change a policy or deadline, be more transparent about criteria and roles, or take some other steps that could help create a productive, collaborative environment. See our [Motivating Your Team](#) topic for tips galore.

7. How protracted and intense is the conflict?

Are we talking about a spirited clash of opinions (e.g., Ruby versus Python), or a nasty exchange of insults (e.g., “You're a complete joke as a developer!”)? Generally speaking, the more protracted and intense the conflict gets, the more critical it is that you do something.

When in doubt, it's usually better to take action. But how? For more on that, see our related article [Defusing conflicts between direct reports: 3 dos and don'ts](#).