Controlling conflict

Conflict issues between employees should not be dismissed as personal squabbles best left outside the manager's door. Instead, businesses should address them as soon as possible to avoid further complications down the road. **John Hearne** reports

If you've got a workplace, you're highly likely to get conflict. "Where there are people, there are going to be things they don't agree on," says conflict resolution expert Therese Ryan of Renewal Consultants. "It's a natural part of group relationships. The question isn't: does it exist or does it not exist? The question for an organisation is: do you have a system to deal with it and do your managers have the skill to manage it?"

As Ryan points out, we're not a particularly conflict-positive culture. A manager confronted by conflict between co-workers tends to look for the broom and the carpet. It can be seen as peripheral rather than bottom-line; as personal rather than business-related. This is a dangerous attitude.

A survey conducted by the Small Firms Association last year found that absenteeism costs small business around €692m per annum. Stress is identified as the main driver here, and nothing is as stressful as conflict. "Undermanaged conflict decreases performance and productivity, it causes low morale and increases both labour costs and the risk of accident," says Ryan. Moreover, unresolved conflict tends to spread. "What happens is that because it's pushed aside or left for someone else to deal with, a very small thing grows and you get a ripple effect."

The first step in establishing a policy to deal with workplace conflict is risk assessment. This process should determine exactly what it is that's likely to trigger conflict within an organisation. Once the risk areas have been identified, training is essential to ensure that employees are aware both of those risks and of how to deal with conflict when it arises. "There's an assumption made that because you've been able to climb the ranks of industry — you're a competent engineer or accountant or whatever — resolving conflict is

THE BROOM AND CARPET APPROACH: Not the way to deal with conflict in the workplace. Managing it properly requires a skillset that many Irish companies lack, says Therese Ryan of Renewal Consultants

something that you can do. However, the truth is many people don't actually have this skill. We need to learn it and it's a skill that very definitely can be taught." As with any other corporate policy, it must be an active, living document, communicated to all levels of staff. It must also be directly relevant to their working lives and fully and continually endorsed by management.

How to deal with it

So what do you do when an employee comes to you with a conflict issue? The first piece of advice? Stay calm. "Handle the feelings," says Ryan. "Be aware that the emotions are those of the person that's coming to you, they're not yours. Lots of people engage in the emotion and that triggers other reactions. It's important

not to get drawn into the argument."

In this initial approach, the employee experiencing the difficulty is invariably in the grip of high emotion. "When someone has the courage to actually say something, they've all this energy in them. It's really important that you give them time to vent. Maybe the first 10 minutes you're just listening. Be aware of your body language and make sure you're actively listening," advises Ryan.

To advance the process, schedule a second, more formal meeting, in which the specifics of the problem are enumerated with greater detachment. At this stage, it's important not to promise anything that you cannot deliver. "Often a person will come to you with loads of

things they want you to do, which might not be realistic, so it's important to reality test. The manager doesn't have to be able to produce the flying pig!"

Nor does the manager have to have all the answers. The more the responsibility for resolving an issue is shared, the stronger the resolution. "What you often find is that when people are engaged in problem-solving, they take ownership of it. Secondly, it empowers them and they start trying to resolve their own problems. You'll find they actually implement change because they were part of the process."

Specialised training is essential in the process of bringing two conflicting parties together. As a means to this end, Ryan favours independent

mediation. It's a process seldom used in an Irish context, but one which she believes offers one of the best methods of containing a conflict otherwise heading for the courts.

While large organisations will have mediation experts on the payroll, independent mediation services are available to those without in-house resources. "The most important thing at the end of mediation is that when you go back to the workplace, both parties communicate the same thing. It stops the spread of rumours and, over time, you don't get the ripple effect of negativity."

Thereafter, it's vital that whatever has been agreed is properly formalised. "Once you have identified what has happened and you've broken it down and found a solution,

it's very important at the end of those meetings that there is an implementation plan — 'this is what you've agreed to do, this is what I've agreed to do.'" Any failure to implement can then be met with existing disciplinary procedures.

In this way, the party who has upheld his or her side of the bargain is protected, and the organisation's vulnerability to litigation by either party is reduced. Without formal follow-up procedures, a resolved conflict can quickly unravel. Ryan says: "It's important that organisations realise the benefit of managing conflict. Organisations that deal with conflict well are more competitive, they're more productive and their overall business performance is better."