

My two employees don't like each other. What do I do?

Q I have two employees who really dislike each other. I know I can't make everybody be friends, but their snippy comments and complaints about each other are detrimental to the office environment. Do you have any tips for me?

A At face value, these employees might seem unfit for a professional workplace. They've let unresolved conflicts fester and escalate and are behaving like junior high rivals.

Sit them down and identify specific complaints and help them reach a resolution. You be the judge and arbiter. Point them in a positive direction, but let them know their behavior is out of bounds. Then monitor their progress or regression.

If they're of goodwill, this approach should work. If they remain rigid, bitter and uncooperative, perhaps they have relinquished their right to work in a culture that demands respect and collegiality.

You've heard it said: Culture eats strategy for lunch. Invest in your culture and most everything else will fall into place.

Sadly, your current culture allows intolerable behavior. So, you have your work cut out for you.

First, decide what kind of culture you want to have. Identify three or four specific values you want to rule in your company (or department). Typical values include excellence, teamwork, respect, creativity and customer focus. Involve your employees in brainstorming and voting on their top values.

Second, print, post and proclaim them in the work environment – on the walls, desks, business cards and website.

Third, set a rhythm or pattern of focusing on them, and try to be systematic. For example, you could perhaps highlight one each month.

Fourth, talk about what behaviors reflect your values. These are the "Beauties." Ask employees to cite examples of their colleagues living them out. Let them honor one another. It does wonders for relationships.

Fifth, identify behaviors that violate your values. These are the "Beasts." Here's a relevant sample: respect, gossip, complaining, belittling, deception, stealing. These Beasts would violate any decent values you've adopted.

If you've got buy-in on the Beauties and the Beasts, you have the foundation for creating a healthy culture that will attract and retain good employees. It also will ensure an atmosphere of respect and tolerance that will even work to harmonize incompatible personalities.

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