7 Tips for Creating a Restorative Practice Environment

1. Promote open communication at all levels
Leaders should strive to promote healthy discussion within their teams. That doesn't mean everyone will agree on everything 100 percent of the time. Make sure your team members know it's okay to have differences of opinion.

When you create and encourage a culture of openness, people feel comfortable saying what they need to say – within professional terms, of course.

This way, ideas and thoughts are expressed in a way that can minimize conflict that might otherwise arise if team members had not had the opportunity to express their minds.

In fact, when managed right, team member conflict can help lay the foundation for more critical thinking and creative problem-solving.

2. Empower team members to talk it out first
To avoid having a situation get contentious right off the bat, encourage team members to first talk about their issues among themselves instead of heading to the manager's office at the first sign of tension.

In many cases, one person may think something is a conflict while the other person may not. Or, a team member may have a problem with their co-worker, but that co-worker may not know the other person has a problem with them.

Plus, if a team member finds out another team member went to a superior about them, their first reaction might be, "What did I do?" When this happens, things can get ugly fast and the environment can become tense. Sometimes, just a simple conversation can smooth things out.

3. Encourage team members to alert superiors as needed
There are situations when two (or more) team members cannot work the conflict out on their own. If a team member is still having trouble with a co-worker after trying to resolve it among themselves, they should alert their supervisor to the problem. Managers can often facilitate a workable solution by helping team members in conflict focus on shared goals and objectives.

If the issue is not with a co-worker, but with the supervisor, the team member can schedule time to speak with the supervisor to discuss their concerns.

4. Know when to get HR involved
If talking doesn't work and the supervisor fails to help provide a resolution, let team members know they can – and should – go to human resources (HR). Team members should be prepared to talk about their issues, so HR can mediate the conversation and allow each team member to see things from a more neutral perspective. Once the meeting is complete, team members should be equipped with the tools, guidance and a plan of action to move forward.

To ensure ongoing support, HR should have a protocol in place for following up with team members at a scheduled later date. Also, depending on the severity of the situation (such as harassment, bullying, violence, etc.), an in-depth investigation may be needed. Be sure your workplace conflict resolution policy outlines in detail any disciplinary action that may result if a team member is found at fault, including suspension or even termination.

5. Address team member conflict – even when it's not reported
It's a good rule of thumb to be proactive when dealing with conflict in the workplace. Managers should never assume that, just because a team member hasn't said anything, there isn't an issue that needs to be addressed.

Are co-workers that usually go to lunch together not going anymore? Could you cut the tension with a knife whenever certain team members get in the room together?

"Reading the room" is a simple but powerful technique for staying aware of the mood in your office. If you notice changes in behavior or obvious frustration, address it before it blows up – and encourage your managers to do the same.

Not addressing it almost always leads to bigger problems down the road. For instance, team members who have nothing to do with the situation may be affected by the stressful environment. You don't want your team members to feel like they're in a pressure cooker. That's not good for anybody – your workforce, your clients or your business.

6. Don't put an expiration date on workplace conflict resolution
In a perfect world, you'd be able to work out all conflicts in a short time period and never have to deal with them again. But, that's not always the case and each situation is different.

The thing about team member conflict is that it may arise again between the same team members. That's why it's essential you continue to check in and ensure everyone's still working well together.

Also, some situations just take longer to deal with. On the outside looking in, someone could assume if there was an incident, but no one was fired, then the situation must've been resolved. In reality, there may be more going on beneath the surface. What appears to be a lack of action could be the result of a lack of conclusive evidence. Or, maybe a final decision is pending once an investigation provides more details.

Multiple factors can affect the timing of a resolution, and follow-through is key for true conflict resolution.

7. Remind team members about your code of conduct
When people are hired, they have various kinds of paperwork to complete and read. One of them is the team member code of conduct. People may get caught up in their day-to-day duties and forget to follow some basic rules of conduct. Periodically, it's a good idea to remind team members what's expected of them and the consequences for violating the code of conduct.

Team member conflict is not an easy issue to deal with. But, by providing a clear roadmap for team members to follow should conflict arise, you can minimize loss of productivity and protect morale.