

## WORKPLACE CONFLICT IN THE HEAT OF SUMMER

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**SUMMER HAS ARRIVED.** About that, there is no doubt. Several recent days of almost 100 degrees has thrust us into the realization that the cold damp Spring that we thought would never go away, has.

While most of us excitedly anticipate the warmer months of the year, planning vacations, cook-outs, and long weekends sunning ourselves at the beach, workplaces must continue to function and productivity must be maintained. For some manufacturing plants, the summertime may be their peak production months. In many of these companies, manufacturing, assembly and shipping departments work with no air conditioning, relying on fans to keep employees moving in steamy environments, with indoor temperatures easily reaching over 100 degrees.

Most of us are aware of the effects of the heat on health.

Studies indicate that heat may also increase stress and change attitudes, leading to greater conflict in the workplace. In a study of student behavior by Robbie Patton, a combination of high temperatures and high humidity seem to encourage poor behavior and slower mental responses. Other studies have suggested that violent crime rates are higher in the South than in other regions of the U.S. Field studies also support the thinking that heat affects behavior negatively. According to one source, 2.6% more murders and assaults in the U.S. took place during the summer. Other time period studies provide consistent results. Aggression-as measured by assault rates, spontaneous riots, spouse battering, and batters being hit by pitched baseballs – is higher during hotter days, months, seasons and years.

Many companies already take enhanced steps, during the hot summer months, to alleviate heat stress and keep their employees healthy. Our informal survey of companies has provided some suggestions for workplaces:

- Make sure supervisors are aware of the signs and symptoms of heat stress, and know what to do about it.
- Have a plan for setting work/extended break/lunch periods.
- Make sure employees drink adequate water throughout the day. Electrolyte replacement drinks may help to reduce dehydration.

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- Plan fun events/activities that keep employee morale at a high level.
- When possible, shift working hours away from the hottest part of the day to the cooler early morning and evening hours.

Certainly, keeping employees cool and happy will not reduce all conflict in the workplace.

Some workplace conflict is inevitable. Co-worker disputes, interpersonal communication issues, layoffs and deteriorating performance are just some of the issues Human Resource professionals deal with on a weekly basis. Even conflict that simmers below the surface may affect organizations.

There are preventive measures that companies can take to deal with workplace conflict throughout the year.

- Bring issues out in the open before they become problems.
- Discourage gossip and don't ask employees to report on other employees.
- Recognize and praise employees for the value they bring to your organization.
- Make sure every employee understands and shares the company's goals; make sure employees know what is expected of them in reaching those goals.
- Have a process for resolving conflict. You may want to bring in a conflict resolution specialist to help you design a Conflict Management Process.
- Provide Conflict Management training for your managers and supervisors. Providing them with the skills to informally resolve complaints will go a long way toward building morale and productivity.
- Consult with a mediator or conflict resolution expert who can help diffuse conflict in the workplace. The parties in conflict meet with an outside neutral trained mediator to negotiate a resolution that leaves employees empowered and better able to work together.

Above all, stress respect in the workplace. Respect is the basic ingredient for building a high morale, high productivity and high quality of life environment. And, if your organization operates efficiently with high morale during the three cooler seasons, a few of the steps listed above may be all that is required to keep stress levels low and the workplace productive.

One last note: make it a priority to enjoy the summertime. It won't last forever.