

# Don't Just Do Something—Sit There

*The decision to intervene in a conflict between employees should be a conscious one, not a gut reaction.*

**A**N EMPLOYEE STORMS into your office complaining about the new VP. She's fuming. You wonder how you can help.

Many managers' tendency would be to dive head-first into this situation. As a manager, it's your job to solve problems and put out fires, right?

Not so fast. Have you considered doing nothing at all? Given the prevalence of terms like *harassment*, *anger management*, and *employee grievance* in the American workplace, one would hope that companies have a heightened awareness about the way people treat one another. But alas, one downside of the current situation is that many employees choose to let their supervisors settle disputes instead of handling them on their own.

That creates two significant problems. First, managers' schedules are now squeezed tighter than ever. "Most managers spend much more time dealing with subordinates' problems than they even faintly realize," write William Oncken, Jr., and Donald L. Wass in the classic *Harvard Business Review* article "Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?" One study found that 42% of the time of the man-

agers surveyed is spent dealing with office conflict. Second, if managers never allow employees to work out conflicts among themselves, they'll never meld into a high-performing unit. At some point, subordinates have to learn how to collaborate and communicate directly.

In other words, not jumping in to resolve every employee tiff can benefit you the manager and your direct reports alike. "Intervening is a strat-

**Ask yourself: How can this conflict best be used to improve the interactions in this group?**

egy, just like not intervening is a strategy," says Christine Kutsko, president of The Capstone Group, a Cleveland-based consulting firm that specializes in performance improvement. Your decision to intervene—or not—should be the result of considered thought, not an emotional response to conflict. After all, conflict often occurs among people who care about what they're doing. Perhaps, instead of ending the dispute as quickly as possible, your chief concern should be: How can this conflict best be used to improve the interactions in this group?

"If a dispute doesn't interfere with an employee's performance, does not disrupt the work environment, and is not a violation of company policy, then 'benign neglect' is probably a suitable approach for a manager," says David Lipsky, director of the Institute on Conflict Resolution at Cornell University (Ithaca, N.Y.). View such a dispute as an opportunity for your staff members to develop their problem-solving skills. Even though you may be "doing" nothing in such a situation, it's crucial that you be "actively passive," advises Milwaukee-based management consultant Joan Lloyd. As a general attitude and as a response to specific employee disagreements that you're aware of, you need to convey the perspective "that employees resolving their own conflicts is a development opportunity."

So, to return to the example of the direct report who's complaining about the new VP, don't try to referee the issue the employee is presenting. Instead of asking the direct report what she would like you to do, ask what she is planning to do.

Of course, not all employees feel experienced enough or confident enough in their position in the company to take this on. You need to be familiar with the maturity and communication style of your employees in order to determine your response. But in general, "if you treat employees with respect, if they feel like they are trusted to do the right thing, more often than not, they will have the confidence to resolve most issues that come up during workplace conflicts," says Matthew Gilbert, author of *Communication Miracles at Work* (Conari Press, 2002). ♦

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## Times When You Should Definitely Intervene

- When the disagreement is between an assertive employee and a timid, less vocal person, or when the rank of the disputants is not commensurate.
- When an argument between two employees has broadened to encompass additional staff members.
- When the conflict involves illegal conduct, such as sexual harassment or civil rights violations.

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