

Employee Rivalry: Deal with It! 5 Tips for Managing Dueling Staffers

By Barbara Jaurequi

Child Psychiatrist David Levy introduced the term "sibling rivalry" in 1941. Self-explanatory in its terminology, the concept of sibling rivalry is easy to grasp. The mechanism of *employee rivalry* works essentially the same way, with the employees in a competitive relationship, striving for greater approval from their employer or manager.

Many managers, in a desperate attempt to be perceived as "fair," find themselves going crazy as they try to distribute praise evenly and acknowledge hard work equally. Moreover, when they are delivering criticism to one, they feel compelled to deliver it to the other, whether he or she deserves it or not, so they aren't accused of playing favorites. Rivaling employees who are constantly trying to "best" each other don't always deliver superior work because of their competition. In fact, the animosity they feel towards one another can stifle their creativity and cause them to deliberately undermine their "opponent's" efforts. Furthermore, the tension between them can corrupt the attitudes of other employees and cause managers to lose objectivity regarding the rivalry.

Managers who recognize troublesome rivalries between two or more valuable staff members, should seek to resolve these rivalries before they upset otherwise harmonious workplaces. The following is a list of tips that are easy to enact. Consistent application of these suggestions is likely to eliminate or lessen the negative impact of employee rivalries.

- 1) **Collect data.** Managers should keep their eyes and ears open when milling amongst their staff. Observe the two rivaling staff members as they interact with each other. Notice attitudes, body language, and temperament. Pay close attention to the things that trigger negativity. Write your observations down. See if you can identify patterns of behavior. The important thing is for managers to recognize the symptoms of the problem such as arguing, gossiping and tattling on each other. Total resolution of employee rivalry may not be possible in certain circumstances; that's when symptom management becomes the goal. Effective management of the symptoms of employee rivalry can significantly improve an otherwise hostile work environment for everyone concerned.
- 2) **Be willing to separate rivaling employees to reduce tension.** This particular tip is a good way for managers to solve their rivalry problems with minimal managerial exertion. Consider, for example, that some personalities are very strong and, while not offensive to the majority of coworkers, may grate on the nerves of other employees. It is often like this with rivaling employees: *they just don't like each other*. Their dislike for one another causes them to be overly observant about what the other is doing or not doing. They are too aware of the other's responsibilities, deficiencies, and positive qualities (which are usually deeply resented). Even the most brilliant conflict resolution specialist would not be able to overcome this sort of interpersonal problem, because the problem is personality based and personality traits are enduring aspects of the self. They don't change. Therefore, managers' willingness to move people around could help reduce the kind of tension that leads to declines in productivity and employee morale. It may also reduce the number of "tattle-tale" sessions managers have to endure.

- 3) **Know your limits.** Managers need to decide how much energy they should spend on the problem of employee rivalry. If it has become a major disruption in the office, managers should address the problem with a plan for resolution in mind. On the other hand, if “conflict resolution” meetings are nothing more than fodder for drama loving gossipers, a simple, private discussion with each of the rivaling employees would be a better way to go. Specifically, don’t make a big deal out of a small matter that might correct itself in time, but don’t ignore a spreading cancer either.
- 4) **Don’t strive for perfect fairness.** Managers should not expect themselves to be perfectly fair, as per the opinions of rivaling employees. Rather, managers should strive to treat their employees impartially. For example, if you decide that one employee should be given an extra week to complete a particular project for whatever reason you deem worthy of the extension, then do so. But be prepared to do the same for the other employee if and when that employee needs extra time. However, don’t automatically extend the other employee’s deadline whether it’s needed or not just to be “fair”. Make your decisions on a case by case basis. If one employee comes to you crying “*Unfair!*” simply tell the employee that he or she does not have, nor is he or she privy to, all the information that went into your decision. Stick to your guns. Be unemotional, calm, deliberate, and firm. Managers should not explain certain decisions or they will open themselves up to an inappropriate debate with a subordinate.
- 5) **Conduct an honest self-appraisal of favoritist behaviors.** It’s important for managers to be aware of how their behaviors and attitudes may be perceived by those they supervise. It’s only natural for managers to have preferences when it comes to personalities and work habits. You may have a particular affinity for an employee who has, for example, a similar sense of humor as yours. Unintentionally, you may be favoring that person to a degree that is obvious and offensive to your favored employee’s rival. Consider if your preference for one employee over another is personality based or is that employee truly superior in terms of quality of work? If your favoritism is fueled by the former, it would be wise to check that! Better for you to make some behavioral changes than for you to lose a valuable employee who legitimately views your management style as inequitable.

One final thought about conflict resolution: Do some research about best practices before launching into a process with which you are totally unfamiliar. Better yet, get some hands on direction about how to proceed. You will gain indispensable knowledge about how to handle similar situations in the future. Any consulting fees you may pay for such training would be money well spent. You will learn where, when and how to conduct resolution sessions. You will learn how to be objective, judicial, and specific when laying out your directives and expectations and you won’t be blindsided by new cases of employee rivalry in the future as you are sure to encounter them as long as you are managing humans.

About the Author

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A.C.E.S. – Adult-Child Entitlement Syndrome, available on Amazon and other online booksellers. *A.C.E.S.* teaches parents of adult-children how to compassionately launch their adult-children into the world of personal responsibility in a straight-forward step-by-step approach. Contact Ms. Jaurequi by email at Barbara@BarbaraJPublications.com or phone her office at 909-944-6611.