

Learning on the Run 6: Management Alignment

How to help management become aligned in a non-defensive way to focus on a growing employee conflict in the workplace?

The Request. The Director of a Local Health Department for a multi-site agency, wanted help with resolving a workplace conflict that was growing out of control. Two employees, working in a court mandated residential treatment program, were refusing to talk to each other. The animosity had grown to the point that they could no longer work cooperatively together and other team members were taking sides. The expectations were that everyone should be able to articulate concerns professionally; issues should be resolved outside of any disciplinary process and in accordance promoting a respectful work environment.

Larger Context. The management chain (Director, Manager, Supervisor, and Leads) was not accountable for what was happening in the workplace as the issues were building over time. Filing claims and counter claims of harassment or retaliation was the “go to” method for resolving differences. Subsequent investigations found no basis for the harassment complaints. There was no agreement among managers (Director, Manager, Supervisor, and Leads) on expectations of each other and staff nor a coherent plan for moving forward.

Consulting Intervention. Leadership decided on a multi-pronged approach to improve performance: Management strategy workshops; Re-setting expectations with staff; Resolving or verifying all claims; Managers Bi-weeklies with Leads; Individual coaching; Dialogue session between staff; Human Resources workshops for Supervisors and Leads; Team briefings on workshops
As an initial step, two half-day workshops were conducted with the management team and the Human Resource manager. The purpose was to have the team think jointly and strategically to improve the situation by an open conversation of their contributions, patterns and learnings up to this point. Part of the workshop involved clarifying management’s expectations and roles and considering both preventative measures and ideas for moving forward. Leads were added participants in the second workshop. Notes were taken during the workshops and summaries presented to management as a reference. The following questions were used to focus the discussion.

Why are we here?

What does the Director expect at this point?

What decisions, outcomes we are working towards?

Where do we stand currently? How important is it? Why?

What has led up to this current situation? (The history as we know it.)

What have we learned about management strategy from this situation?

In the best of all circumstances, what do we want to happen here? Thinking about the staff, their colleagues and management, what would a professional, accountable and respectful work environment look like in this situation, at it’s best?

What can we do to promote that?

What in your/their daily behaviors would need to be different?

What other measures, or signals would tell us (daily, weekly, monthly), things were improving?

What, specifically, is your responsibility in ensuring these expectations are met? A role you might adopt?

What are the possible scenarios that may follow?

What support or resources might ensure success?

What might sabotage this plan? What might we do then?

Last Line. When managers have become stuck in an ineffective approach to a conflict, a professional development workshop focused on what they are learning from the situation is one way to help them become more aligned for a coordinated effort.