

Managing People at Work

SAMPLE ISSUE

2 EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

There's no such thing as "not dealing with it"

3 MANAGING RIGHT

How well do you use feedback?

4 MPAW BRIEFING: LEADING TEAMS

Bring out the leader in every team member

5 CASE IN POINT

"The Comeback Kid"

6 WHAT TO SAY WHEN

A new idea needs to be revisited

7 IT'S YOUR MOVE!

When a staff member boils over

7 STAFFING ISSUES

When a new hire doesn't work out

8 PEOPLE SKILLS

Communicate better with your own boss

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Turn whiners into winners

Are you tired of hearing the same gripes about the same problems from the same people over and over? Try these tips from the pros:

- **Help people solve their own problems.** Let's say the issue is scheduling — no matter how you assign work shifts, nobody is happy. Challenge your team members to come up with a better system. They may devise an approach you'd never have thought of on your own, or they may conclude your approach is as good as any. Either way, they'll be less likely to complain about scheduling in the future.

This approach will work only if all team members feel their voices have been heard. To uncover differences of opinion within your team, ask for three possible solutions to your problem and agree to implement them one at a time, in random order.

- **Redefine the issue.** Whenever you're told something is a problem, ask a simple question: "Why?" Persistent complaints about specific issues are often symptoms of broader discontent. For example, gripes about scheduling may really be gripes about the division of labor within the team, or the overall workload of the team, or personality conflicts between co-workers. None of these can be solved simply by rearranging the schedule.

Use the details you uncover by asking "Why?" to help the team think critically about the issue. This process can be difficult if team members don't feel comfortable addressing underlying problems, but the effort will be worth it. You'll not only reduce your complaint load, but improve morale and build better team performance.

PEAK PERFORMANCE

Rein in rebels without squashing their spirit

"So, tell me again why you hired Lara," Mark said to his team leader, Louisa. "Was the talent pool really that shallow?"

"Of course not," Louisa replied. "Her skills and experience made for a good fit."

"A good fit?" Mark asked incredulously. "It's like working with a five-year-old. Every task becomes an issue that we have to debate before she'll do it. I guess I'm not surprised, given the hair and all. I went through a rebel phase too, years ago, but she seems stuck in hers."

"That's a pretty big assumption about someone you don't really know," Louisa cautioned. "But I can talk to her about her performance."

Nonconformists can bring energy and creativity to your team, but challenging and ques-

tioning everything can get in the way of performance and teamwork. Here's how Louisa dealt with her team's rebel:

- **Separate action from attitude.** Skilled team leaders know that you can't manage attitudes, only actions. But this distinction can be lost on employees as well. Louisa needed to show Lara that her nonconformist attitudes shouldn't require her to act in ways that harmed overall team performance.

"It's just like I have to do when I evaluate the team members," Louisa said. "It doesn't matter how I feel about an employee personally, and I don't have to change how I feel in order to give him or her a fair review. You don't have to 'sell out' to do this job — you just have

to do this job so that everyone else can do their jobs. It's basically saying you take working here seriously."

Lara asked for examples. "Well," Louisa replied, "Mark says you wouldn't give him the customer data he needs because you thought we shouldn't be collecting or sharing this info. I commend you for having committed views about privacy, and I'd be happy to support you if you want to make a case to change our practices. But that doesn't mean Mark shouldn't be able to do *his* job."

• **Channel creativity and energy.** Louisa made clear to Lara that there would be consequences if Lara failed to perform as

she should. But she felt she understood where Lara was coming from better than Mark did. If the team simply rejected Lara's positions out of hand, that would just reinforce Lara's suspicions about authority and the work world.

So Louisa, later, made her invitation to Lara more explicit. "I would *like* you to develop a case for changing our privacy practices that I can take to senior managers," Louisa said. "I may not agree with it, but I know that it's not an issue the enterprise considered when it developed these practices, and it is something we should think about now."

Louisa added that if Lara really objected, that would be okay, but that if

she accepted, this project and others like it would become part of her regular duties, and she'd be compensated and supported accordingly. After some skepticism, Lara agreed. She put together a solid proposal that led the enterprise to change its privacy approach, and followed that with some innovative ideas for improving employees' work conditions.

Overall, Louisa saw a double benefit. Lara had an outlet for her rebel tendencies. And because Lara now had more responsibilities that she took seriously, she acquired more discipline about getting work done.

There's no such thing as "not dealing with it"

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK



Joe's a little late — as usual. Janet's a day past her deadline — again. Jimmy made a couple of errors — no surprise. They're all small problems, not enough to bring down the law on otherwise good workers, so you decide to not deal with these issues. But is that possible? Of course not.

As managers, every time we choose to let a problem slide, we've made a decision that we don't mind confronting that same issue again down the road. And we've decided that "close enough" is good enough for our people. And we've decided that Joe and Janet and Jimmy

are going to be judged on something other than attendance, or speed, or accuracy. That's a lot to have decided when you think you haven't done anything.

Now, I know you don't need a lecture, but I've been struck by what I've heard from managers who *do* choose to address these sorts of "minor" problems. They aren't ogres seeking to punish and control their staff. All they aim to do is counsel people and, if necessary, help them tackle whatever obstacles are interfering with their performance.

And they hear "My last boss (or whoever) doesn't care when people show up (or whatever) as long as they get their work done." That's the norm, traditional work habits are exceptional, and managers who encourage those work habits are hopelessly square and Old Economy. (By the way, the managers of whom I speak represent a diversity of ages and industries, so this isn't just a Boomer vs.

X'er thing.)

I guess it's clear that I disagree, even though I've been late, and missed deadlines, and made mistakes just like anyone else. It's essential that we acknowledge anything that could represent, or turn into, a real live performance problem. At the very least, it shows Joe and Janet and Jimmy, and any other team members who happen to be listening, that we're paying attention to their work. Sometimes, the line between "I'll let this slide" and "I don't care what they do" can be pretty hard to see.

But maybe my colleagues and I are out of step with the times. I'd love to hear what you think. Drop me a line at mpaw@protrain.com or via paper mail at 907 East 15th Street, Austin, TX 78702.

Until next month, work well!

Mike Clark-Madison
Editor

BOTTOM-LINE

IDEA

Need to do some strategic planning, but don't know where to start? Remember the acronym

"SWOT," for "strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats." Brainstorm in each of these categories — "What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats our team (or organization) has seen in the last year (or two, or five)?" Focus on building on the strengths and opportunities and mitigating the rest.

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How well do you use feedback?

Feedback is the most important tool in any team leader's toolbox. How well do you use it? Take this short quiz and get some feedback of your own:

1. I overhear a customer praising Jane's efforts. I:
 - a. Give her a quick compliment.
 - b. Ask for details and praise her efforts myself as soon as the customer leaves.
 - c. Make a mental note to bring it up at our next meeting.
2. Joe excelled on his last assignment but still makes mistakes on routine tasks. I tell him:
 - a. "Why can't you do all your work as well as you did the last assignment?"
 - b. "I know you did well on the last assignment, but I need to see improvement in these other areas."
 - c. "These tasks need to be done a certain way, and after seeing how well you handled your last assignment, I know you can handle them."
3. Tim is a good worker, but he doesn't have a lot of confidence. I:
 - a. Remind him frequently how he's meeting and exceeding his goals.
 - b. Tell him he needs more confidence if he wants to succeed.
 - c. Give him a pat on the back every time he finishes a task.
4. If my team turns in an exceptional performance on a difficult project, I'd be most likely to:
 - a. Reward the team with a party.
 - b. Give each member a prize to express my appreciation.
 - c. Give each member a certificate, suitable for framing, that high-

lights his or her role in the project's success.

5. My production team has an unacceptable error rate. I tell them:
 - a. "The quality reports are showing results that need to be corrected."
 - b. "You guys need to shape up here; let's figure out how we can do that."
 - c. "I've seen you all put out quality products, and I want to get us back to that level."

Which are the best answers?

For item 1, b. This is what management guru Ken Blanchard calls "catching people doing something right" and giving immediate feedback. Asking for details makes your feedback more accurate and specific; you want to thank Jane for what she did, not just for making a customer happy.

For item 2, c. Temper negative feedback by following it with positive reinforcement. You want the last thing you say to be motivating, not disapproving.

For item 3, a. Give Tim the informational feedback he needs to evaluate his own performance, rather than positive but non-specific encouragement.

For item 4, c. Gifts are fine, but rewards — a form of feedback — need to be clearly linked to specific actions and contributions.

For item 5, a and c. A sounds cold, but when you're dealing with a serious performance deficiency, it's best to focus on the problem rather than the people. Once you've identified the problem and a solution, then follow with positive reinforcement.

LEGAL MATTERS

What's "work" under FLSA?

Under the U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act, most employees are entitled to time-and-a-half for time worked beyond 40 hours in one week. This sounds simple, but "work" under the FLSA can include:

- Work that is "suffered or permitted." If an employee works late, whether or not she's asked to, it counts under FLSA.
- Waiting time and on-call time, even if employees are on call at home.
- Rest and meal periods. Meals, paid or unpaid, are still "work" if the employee is not completely relieved of duties.
- Training programs. If a program is required, or during work hours, or directly related to an employee's job, it's "work."

Activities like changing into work clothes, cleaning equipment, and filling out time sheets are also "work," regardless of when they're done.

"Overqualified" candidates

We've all seen or heard of job candidates who were "overqualified" for the position offered. Can you really not hire people because they're overqualified? Here's what the experts said:

- Decide before the interview. You know qualifications before the interview. What you don't always know is a candidate's age, and many judges and juries view "overqualified" as a euphemism for "too old." Age discrimination is, of course, illegal.
- Document the business case. If turnover of "overqualified" hires has been a real problem in your business, have figures or examples ready. Otherwise, a court may not see why hiring highly qualified staff would be bad. And show that candidates under 40 have also been rejected for being overqualified. If you can't, then eliminate the word from your workplace.

Is training really the answer?

Having the skills one needs is only one prerequisite for good performance. Your team members also need to be able and willing to use those skills on the job. Before you decide that training is the answer to a performance problem, ask yourself these questions:

- Are my team members rewarded for using their skills? They may, instead, feel they're being punished — for example, by being given more work to do. Or they may be rewarded for not using their skills effectively, as in workplaces that value “working hard” over “working smart.” Or they simply may feel that no one notices their good work. Make sure that you can and do reinforce and reward the behavior you want.
- Are there obstacles that prevent them from using their skills? Do they have the time, the tools and supplies, and the authority to put their knowledge into practice? Even the most highly skilled workers won't produce in the wrong work environment.
- Do they have other skills that aren't being used? Don't be afraid to switch job assignments around to produce the best “fit” between team members' aptitudes and their responsibilities. You may also find that the task in question is ultimately dispensable or easy to outsource; by taking it off the team's plate, you free up time and energy that the team can devote to its strengths.

Bring out the leader in everyone

MPAW BRIEFING

You'll be a better team leader if you're not the only leader on your team.

Grassroots leadership ability means your team can solve problems, meet customer needs, and improve work processes more efficiently and effectively. If your enterprise wants its entire workforce to be “empowered” and “self-directed,” the time you spend developing each team member's leadership potential is time well spent.

But how do you do it? We've become so accustomed to “leader” as a synonym for “manager” or “executive” — someone with formal authority to direct others — that we overlook how many leadership opportunities there are within every team every day. Here are some ways to develop the skills that team members will need to shine in these moments:

- Show your team members that they're trusted. Honesty and trustworthiness are key components of leadership. Remember to recognize and reward ethical behavior. Too often, managers forget to thank their employees for doing the right thing in the face of pressure to do something else. Tell people that you're confident that they do and will act in ways that bring credit to the organization.
- Invite constructive feedback from your team. Honesty means more than not lying, cheating, or stealing. It also means speaking one's mind and taking responsibility for the decisions one makes. Help team members be more comfortable voicing their opinions by inviting their feedback. By showing that you appreciate their honest view of your performance, you'll create the right climate on your team for openness.
- Praise your team members' performance

publicly. Leadership ability depends on a known track record of good performance on work tasks. The key word here is “known.” Don't be shy about praising your team to your colleagues, to senior managers, and to customers. This builds the team members' reputation and their self-confidence.

- Encourage your team members to recognize each other's accomplishments. This is just as important as recognizing those achievements yourself. Good leaders know they enjoy the trust and support of others. Promote that confidence by making sure both you and your team members treat each other like leaders.
- Implement your team member's creative ideas. Good leaders aren't afraid to question the status quo and look for new ways to achieve the best results. If you want to promote creative risk-taking among your team, help them make their ideas work. Use your position as team leader to advocate for their ideas. Even if the suggestions don't entirely pan out, by showing your support, you'll make it easier for the team to continue to take risks when called for.
- Give your team problems to solve on its own. When facing a challenge, resist the temptation to push for the solution you think is the most obvious. Instead, define the boundaries within which a solution must fit — what's practical, affordable, legal, and so on — and step back. When a team member comes up with a potential solution, help him or her lead the team as it turns the idea into an action plan.
- Ask your team members to communicate on the team's behalf. Too often, even on empowered and self-motivated teams, the designated team leader is the official “voice” of the team's efforts. Why not ask members of your team to write the memos, prepare the reports, or make the

“The Comeback Kid”

presentations that explain and document your proposals, projects, and progress? By helping team members organize ideas and thoughts into logical, succinct messages, you'll encourage the strategic and critical thinking that's essential for effective leadership. You'll also be improving the basic communication skills they'll need to move ahead and succeed as managers.

- Use conflict as a leadership opportunity. While conflict is seldom pleasant, it's often a key occasion for team members to take the lead. Instead of stepping in to resolve conflicts for the team, encourage them to get comfortable with conflict and the different ways of resolving it. We all use a variety of conflict-resolution styles, including avoidance, concession, competition, and compromise, and no single style is always “right.”
- Allow the team to express its emotions. Leaders can prove their abilities by guiding conflict toward collaborative — win-win — solutions. This requires that leaders be willing to change the terms of conflict and try new approaches. And this in turn demands that leaders acknowledge their own emotional reactions and recognize those of others. Once they've done so, it will be easier for them to move beyond sticking points. When the team encounters conflict, encourage members to be as open (though civil) as possible.
- And most important, walk the talk. There's a common theme in all these suggestions: Good leaders create good leaders. The best way to reinforce leadership skills in your team members is to demonstrate them yourself, and then step back and let the team take over. If you use the skills and exhibit the values you think are important, you'll make those same skills and values more important to the team. And when the time comes for every team member to step up to lead, they'll know what to do.

CASE IN POINT

“Make today a good day,” Suzanne tells herself as she enters the building each morning. She hopes that eventually, all the good days will outweigh one very, very bad day that may have doomed her career with this organization.

Suzanne is a guest services supervisor at a luxury hotel — where she had started as a desk clerk less than two years before. Senior management at the hotel had already invited her to lunch, and her boss had asked her to go to an international conference as the hotel's official delegate. “Let's face it,” her boss had said. “Someday you're going to be the GM of a first-class property, so you might as well start learning the ropes now.”

All that star treatment changed one day last month. One of the hotel's frequent guests, a demanding and difficult client, had called Suzanne to complain that some items seemed to be missing from the room. Suzanne listened politely but basically blew the guest off, since one of her favorite team members, Joan — whom Suzanne herself had hired — was in charge of the guest's floor.

But a few hours later, Suzanne was paged to report to that floor at once, where she found the hotel's security and local police handcuffing Joan — caught in the act of burgling the guest's room. As she was dragged away, Joan called out to Suzanne “You promised I would never get caught!” in full view of the hotel's GM and other top brass.

The police later told Suzanne that Joan had been arrested for theft before,

when she lived in another city, and had a host of psychological problems. After Suzanne's superiors investigated, they criticized her decision to not follow up personally when the guest complained, but concluded that Suzanne knew nothing about Joan's crimes.

However, their warm feelings for her obviously cooled. “I think it would be best if I handled hiring decisions from now on,” her boss said, even though Suzanne had no way of knowing about Joan's past. And nothing more was said about Suzanne's representing the hotel at official functions.

Now Suzanne is wondering what to do next. She realizes she has to win back her superiors' trust, but she's not sure how to do that, since she's doesn't know how to do her job better than she has been. She's scanned the want ads, but jobs at her level of the industry are rare in her area.

What should she do? Send your suggestions (200 words or less) to Managing People at Work, Attn: “Case in Point,” 907 East 15th Street, Austin, Texas 78702. Or e-mail your ideas to mpaw@protrain.com. The author of the best suggestion we receive wins a \$50 U.S. savings bond.

In the event we receive similar suggestions, the prize will go to the one with the earliest postmark or (electronic) “send” date. We'll be featuring our readers' responses, along with suggestions from our panel of experts, in a future issue. Please let us hear from you!

BOTTOM-LINE

IDEA that you aren't working on right now off your desk. This makes it easier for you to focus on one thing at a time, in the most appropriate sequence, according to your plan for the day. Check it at the same time you check your voice- and e-mail.

Hide your in-box! Not from people who need to put items in it, but from yourself. Keep things

You need to rethink a new idea

Stem the tide of e-mail

Are you drowning in a flood of e-mail? Here are some tips for stemming the tide:

- Use filters aggressively. If you don't have an e-mail program that filters and sorts messages, get one now. Sort incoming mail into folders for your staff, your managers, others in your organization, customers and clients, personal contacts (like your spouse), and any professional discussion lists or forums. Let everything else go into a generic inbox folder. When you read your mail, go through the folders in that order.
- Pick up the phone. Most of us are too quick to click the "reply" button. e-mail is best suited for messages that don't really need a response. If you find yourself looking at an on-line back-and-forth dialogue, pick up the phone and have a real conversation.

Promote yourself wisely

Have you blown your own horn today? Nobody likes a braggart, but self-promotion is an important way to hold your own in the organization. Some tips:

- Look for ways to praise your team in public. Nominate your employees for recognition programs. Celebrate the team's accomplishments in the internal newsletter. Post your customers' raves on the break-room bulletin board. All this motivates your team, but also helps you shine as the team leader who made it all possible.
- Volunteer for high-profile assignments. The annual charitable campaign is high-profile. Coaching the company softball team is high-profile. So is redecorating the break room. If people notice your good performance on these fronts, they'll be more likely to take a second look at your performance of your everyday duties.

Your team was enthusiastic about a change it had decided to adopt. But the new idea ended up being a disappointment, and now motivation and morale are low. What do you do? Here's an approach you can use.

- **Start with reassurance.** Praise the team's efforts to make the change work. Don't paint a picture that the team knows is too rosy, but reinforce your commitment to success.
- **Identify needs and expectations.** Outline where the team needs to go, and gather its input on short-term strategies for getting there. Focus on practical and immediate action steps.
- **Look at outside factors.** Pinpoint things beyond the team's control that will either help or hinder your efforts. Identify what you, as team leader, need to address.
- **Re-emphasize your support.** Show your appreciation for both the team's efforts and the input you've just received.
- **Commit to further action.** Agree on the next steps — both yours and the team's — and set a time for following up on your progress.

Here's how to put this approach into practice:

Manager: We've gotten a lot of negative feedback from customers about our new approach to covering their accounts.

Stacy: Or not covering their accounts ... but that's what the company gets for cutting our budget. We tried our best to make a bad situation work.

Manager: We did try our best. But people feel they aren't getting good service, and they're talking to our competitors. Now, changing was a good idea; it just wasn't the right idea for right now. But I'm impressed with how smart and hard you all have worked to make it happen. (Start with

reassurance.)

Joan: Well, what now? We don't have enough people to cover all the accounts one-on-one. What are we supposed to do instead? (She sighs.)

Manager: Keep working to make our system better. As I see it, we need to quickly repair our relationships with our key customers and still cover our other accounts while handling inquiries from potential customers. (Identify needs and expectations.) How do we do that?

Skip: Well, the folks at XYZ are pretty miffed, but I think I can calm them down. So maybe I should focus on them for a while.

Manager: OK. And Dana and Stacy can cover Megacorp and Webster, which were their old accounts.

Dana: That would take care of our three biggest customers. But what about the rest? That's three fewer people to service the other accounts.

Joan: You know, actually, since all those accounts are so much smaller, I think we can handle it with the help of the support team. I can ask them to take on some more customer care if we can get more help with new-customer inquiries. Isn't there any way we can get more staff?

Manager: I think we can probably get some temp help. Is there any way we can handle some of our workload some other way — say, through the Website? (Look at outside factors.)

Skip: Yes! If XYZ could order online, they might not even need full-time customer service. And I'm sure other customers feel the same way.

Manager: I'll call Info Systems and find out. Thank you all for these ideas and for all the effort you've put into making us the best. (Re-emphasize your support.) Let's meet again on Friday to figure out a plan for the next 30 days. Then we'll see how things look. (Commit to further action.)

When one of your team members boils over

IT'S YOUR MOVE!

Other managers say your team is a little “high-strung.” It’s true that your staff members work hard and fast and sometimes get angry at each other. Still, until now, you’ve seen no signs that the “creative tension” on your team would lead to trouble.

But you just spent an hour with Sharla, asking her to take some time off and reconsider her decision to resign. By the end of your talk, she was no longer shaking, and the color had come back to her face, but she was still afraid to return to work — and especially afraid of Tim.

Tim and Sharla have been working on the same projects for four months, usually under tight deadlines. Sharla is hardly a shrinking violet and is often

more focused on her work than she is sensitive to her co-workers. But you and your team members understand that she’s ultimately both dedicated and good-hearted, and you would be very sad to see her go.

Soon after Tim got reassigned to work with Sharla, you realized that her bossiness rubbed him the wrong way. Never the most outgoing of people, Tim became noticeably sullen and irritable. While he still got his work done, sparks between him and Sharla — and the rest of the team — became more frequent.

According to Sharla, though, she had never felt physically threatened by Tim until today, when he backed her into a corner of the file room and said that the next time she interfered with his work — his language was much stronger —

he would “take care” of her, and that she’d be “lucky to be carried out of the building in one piece.”

Other team members witnessed the scene and, though they couldn’t confirm the specifics of what Tim said, they agreed that he was intimidating Sharla and making some sort of threat. Now that Sharla is safely off the premises, what do you do?

Option A: Call Tim in and ask for his side of the story.

Option B: Immediately send Tim home and begin a formal investigation.

Option C: Call a team meeting and discuss appropriate workplace behavior.

Match wits with our experts. Turn to “And the Answer Is...” on page 8.

STAFFING ISSUES

When a new hire doesn’t work out, ask yourself ...

How disappointing! The labor pool is almost dry, you found someone who seemed perfect for the job you need to fill, but that person didn’t work out. Now you need to re-recruit, and you dread that a solid candidate isn’t out there — or likewise won’t work out if you hire. Here are some questions to ask before you go back into the pool:

- **How long can I wait?** The longer you can spend actually recruiting, rather than simply rushing through resumes and job banks, the better off you’ll be. You’ll have learned something from the failure of the last hire that can help you better tailor your recruiting pitch.

This is especially true if your team wasn’t a good fit for your last hire, as opposed to the other way around. It’s critical that you find candidates for whom the opportunities you offer are important and desirable. Careful recruiting can find you those people, but it takes time.

- **Where should I look?** Make an active

effort to get your message out in places, and to people, that it didn’t reach before. With a failed attempt at filling the job under your belt, you can make a more informed choice between different types of candidates.

For example, if the last hire was too young and green to handle customer contact, start looking at mature adults re-entering the workforce or changing careers. Compare their level of interpersonal skill with younger candidates’ level of technical skill, and decide which is more important to your success.

- **What went wrong?** There’s a reason not to ask this question first — although

you may already know the answer. If you start from here, you may decide that your “perfect” hire wasn’t so perfect after all, and then seek a candidate who’s “more perfect.” Your real need may be to rethink what “perfect” means.

This will be easier once you’ve gotten a sense of who’s out there in the talent pool and how you can reach them. Consider ways you can match this job to the available talent by rethinking the job’s duties or qualifications, or the ways this hire might work with other team members. A good hire who’ll help you succeed for the duration is much more valuable than a “perfect” hire who doesn’t work out.

BOTTOM-LINE

IDEA

A suggestion from author Alex Hiam: Find a color of sticky-note pad that no one else in your office uses. When team members do something superior, jot a quick note of praise and stick it to their desks; the unique color will stand out. You’ll motivate even when you’re not around to praise in person — though you should do that, too!

Communicate better with your own boss

Communication is the fuel that makes work teams run at top speed. That includes communication with your manager. If you don't have an open channel with your boss, your efforts as a team leader will be frustrated right and left. Here are some suggestions:

- **One-on-one meetings.** Push for regular one-on-one meetings with your manager. Neither you nor she has time for an open-ended chat, so prepare as you would for any other meeting — by creating an agenda.

Send your manager a brief written list of your current projects, goals, and priorities. Use the meeting to discuss these and clarify any misunderstandings. A 15-minute stand-up meeting once a week may be all you need to stay

on a common course.

- **Team meetings.** Your manager may, and should, also hold regular staff meetings with you and your fellow supervisors. These are your best opportunities for information gathering about general issues — for example, the organization's overall financial health — that you'll need to report back to your team.

Be sure to take notes and listen closely to what your manager says to your peers, so you'll learn as much as possible. If staff meetings aren't as worthwhile as they could be, don't hesitate to come up with suggestions for making them better. Share these ideas with some or all of your peers, and then approach your manager.

- **Memos and e-mails.** Generally, face-

to-face communication is the best way to ask your manager for anything. If you need to follow up on such conversations with a memo or e-mail, don't assume that this means your manager wants all the details. He may simply find it easier to process the same information by seeing it in writing, or he may need something to forward to his even busier boss.

Use a simple, just-the-facts approach and offer to provide additional details if desired. If need be, use the memo to ask for a follow-up face-to-face meeting. Periodically ask your manager for feedback on your written communication. You may find that even if the content remains the same, you'll get better results by adjusting your writing style to her preferences.

Stand firm — always — against workplace violence

AND THE ANSWER IS

Our panel of experts felt that Option B (send Tim

home and begin an investigation) is your only acceptable choice for the short term. If your other witnesses could confirm that Tim was actually threatening Sharla with physical harm, then your best choice would be to fire him on the spot. You should also instruct security to not allow Tim back into the building except to meet with you or with HR, and then only with an escort, until the investigation is complete.

No matter how “high-strung” your typical team climate is, there's no excuse for violence in the workplace. Your responsibility to keep your team safe outweighs other considerations. You'll be able to get Tim's side of the story (Option A) as part of your investigation, which should if possible be han-

dled by a third party, such as your HR department or a contract provider. Even if it turns out that Tim did not actually threaten Sharla with violence, you have enough evidence to give him at least a written warning.

Our panel felt that holding a team meeting to discuss the limits of acceptable behavior (Option C) was a neces-

sary next step, but not the first step. Setting firm boundaries for the whole team is both easier and more effective than trying to step in when individuals' behavior gets out of hand. Also, consider bringing in outside experts to discuss anger management and conflict resolution strategies.

ADDRESS BOOK

www.protrain.com — Tune into the all-new Professional Training Associates web site, complete with searchable archive of past MPAW issues and a recap of useful links cited here.

www.fastcompany.com/online/17/feedback.html — The online version of the *FC* article “How to Give Good Feedback” also links you to input from readers.

www.opm.gov/ehs/workplac/index.htm — The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (the federal government's HR department)'s online handbook for dealing with workplace violence.

www.bena.com/ewinters/xculture.html — Consultants Rob Sellin and Elaine Winters' page of resources — their own and others — on “Cultural Issues in Business Communication.”