



Responding to employee concerns

By Marilyn Scholl and Michael Healy

Co-op employees will at least occasionally bring complaints and concerns to the board or individual directors, yet the board itself is ill-suited for the task of handling these concerns. Employees deserve to have their concerns addressed professionally. In addition, direct board involvement can interfere with the authority already delegated to the GM, or can exacerbate already sensitive issues by inserting even more personal relationships into the mix, or can take too long because of the limited time the board has for the task. For these reasons, the board generally delegates responsibility for this work to the co-op's management.

Even while delegating responsibility, the board will need a way to hold the GM accountable for how employee concerns are handled. For specific situations where employees believe that the GM has done something illegal or unethical, there should be a separate mechanism to encourage employees to report their concerns directly to the board, and the board should have an established process for handling such accusations.

The table on the next page offers a guide for distinguishing three broad categories of concerns employees might bring to the board, and for deciding how to respond to those concerns. If a board has good policies and procedures in place, this guide can help everyone involved (directors, managers and employees) navigate potentially tricky waters with care.

Questions for Discussion:

- Do your board's policies directing the GM sufficiently and clearly define the board's values and expectations in the realm of treatment of employees and handling employee concerns?
- What might your board need to learn about operational-level personnel policies and practices?
- Are your board and directors prepared to respond appropriately if employees approach with concerns?

Related resources in the [CDS CC Library](#)

- Workplace Conflict Policy FAQ
- Dealing responsibly with operational concerns field guide
- CBLD policy register template

Employee Concerns

Type	Allegation of Illegal or Unethical Behavior (Whistleblower)	Grievance	Complaint
Description	Employee(s) allege unethical and/or illegal behavior by GM, e.g. theft, harassment, giving false info to or withholding relevant information from Board.	Employee(s) believe GM acted or supported lower-level managers in acting in a way that: a) violates existing policy, or b) creates an unfair situation for which there is no policy, or c) applies the policy differently to similarly situated employees, or d) follows a policy that is unfair or discriminatory.	Employee(s) feel GM is “wrong fit,” poor communicator, “too corporate,” is taking the co-op in wrong direction, is creating “a climate of fear,” etc.
What an employee feels	Something is going on that seems illegal or unethical	Something is unfair	Something is making me unhappy, dissatisfied. I don’t like the GM.
Values	Whistleblowers need to be encouraged and protected. Board needs to be informed of alleged unethical or illegal behavior.	Workplace conflicts need to be resolved in the workplace. Board sets broad expectation and holds GM accountable but does not intervene in workplace conflicts.	The GM’s style will not work for everyone. Employees should be free to express dissent or dissatisfaction in a non-disruptive way. The GM does not need to be popular.
Board response	Thank you. We’ll look into this and get back to you.	Board requests employee(s) to use existing conflict-resolution procedure as described in employee handbook, reminds them of non-retaliation provision.	Board requests employee(s) to take the matter to GM. Board reminds of non-retaliation as co-op policy, agrees to hold GM accountable for retaliation.
Board action	Board is responsible for fact-finding. Can hire an outside investigator if warranted. Findings go to Board. Board decides action based on findings. Employees who brought the allegation are informed that the investigation confirmed or did not confirm allegation.	Rigorously hold the GM accountable to policy expectations about staff treatment. Require verifiable data. Ensure all data is objective.	Rigorously hold the GM accountable to all policy expectations. Require verifiable data. Ensure all data is objective.
Resolution process	Board or third-party fact finding	Employee(s) use conflict resolution procedure.	Board only acts or communicates as a body with employee(s) if retaliation is claimed. If retaliation is claimed, board appoints an investigator.
Final authority	Board	GM or by some process determined by GM	GM or by some process determined by GM