

# SME (Improving working relationships)

A small clothing firm with a manufacturing arm and a distribution arm.

## Problem

Poor co-operation and understanding between machinists on the factory floor and staff in the sales and distribution office.

## Assessing the risks and finding solutions

To address the business difficulties caused by the lack of co-operation and general 'them-and-us' atmosphere, two steps were taken:

- *Staff forum* - Senior staff from the factory floor and the sales and distribution office meet together once a week to discuss problems that have come up during the previous week, potential strategies to sort them out, and to plan ahead for the next week. This has allowed the two staff units to co-ordinate their workloads to complement each other's needs and demands.
- *Teambuilding sessions* - A (different) group of staff from the two units meets monthly to discuss work processes. Sometimes there is a clear project to be planned, which enables the two types of employees to appreciate that they are best working together towards the common goal. All staff are involved in these

teambuilding sessions, and generally, they will have the opportunity to attend three meetings a year. Minutes are taken and distributed to all staff, to keep them informed of plans made and issues raised at meetings they have not attended. One suggestion arising from the teambuilding sessions was for as many staff as possible to undergo a short-term secondment to the other section - spending half a day or a day in the other department to give them a better understanding of their colleagues' work.

## Results

An evaluation involving senior managers, machinists and sales staff found that communication problems between staff on the factory floor and staff in the sales and distribution office had been all but eliminated. There has also been a business benefit, as co-operation has enabled a much more fluent processing of projects.

- *Staff with very different career backgrounds and expertise can find it difficult to empathise with each other.*
- *This can inhibit their ability to work together effectively, which can harm productivity.*
- *Encouraging different groups of staff to communicate with each other can help overcome this.*