



Managing Workplace Friction

Workplace friction is everywhere

From poorly planned rotas to misunderstandings between colleagues. For SMEs, where resources are tight and teams are small, these everyday inefficiencies can quickly become big problems.

This guide is here to help managers recognise the early warning signs, reduce friction with practical steps, and create a culture of clear communication and mutual respect.

Whether you're a seasoned leader or new to managing people, you'll find actionable tips and tools to smooth things out and keep your team performing at its best.

Understanding Workplace Friction

Workplace friction refers to the everyday points of resistance that slow down productivity, damage relationships, or make work harder than it needs to be.

It often shows up as:

- Missed or unclear handovers
- Last-minute rota changes and scheduling confusion
- Poor communication between departments
- Delays in responding to simple requests
- Tension between colleagues due to crossed wires or clashing styles

Why it matters

Friction leads to:

- Lower engagement and team morale
- Increased stress and absenteeism
- More errors and complaints
- Higher staff turnover
- Wasted time, energy, and money

In a small business, that kind of disruption can have a massive impact. The good news is that most friction is avoidable, or at least manageable, with the right awareness and processes.

Spotting the Signs Early

The earlier you catch friction, the easier it is to fix. Watch out for:

- Staff frequently working around one another
- Delays in decision-making or confusion over responsibilities
- Recurring complaints or requests for “clarification”
- Emotional responses – frustration, sarcasm, withdrawal
- Declining performance with no clear cause

You don't need to wait until things boil over.

How to surface friction through feedback

Not all issues are visible. Use your regular check-ins and team meetings to ask open questions:

- “Is there anything slowing you down at the moment?”
- “What's working well, and what's not?”
- “Are any processes feeling clunky or unclear?”

Create a safe space for honest answers. Often, the friction you're unaware of is the most damaging. Review issues regularly to spot patterns





Reducing Friction – What Managers Can Do

For quick wins that make a big difference, start with these straightforward improvements:

1. Clarify Roles & Responsibilities

Make sure everyone knows who does what, and when. Create a shared document or flowchart if needed.

2. Streamline Communication

- Use shared calendars and clear escalation routes.
- Set expectations for response times and preferred channels.
- Avoid unnecessary CC'ing and long email threads.

3. Fix Clunky Processes

If a form, tool or approval system is causing regular frustration, change it. Ask your team what's slowing them down.

4. Plan Rotas Properly

Poor scheduling is one of the biggest causes of team friction. Build rotas in advance, allow for feedback, and factor in regular rest.

Tools That Can Help

- Friction Tracker: Keep a simple record of recurring delays, complaints or confusion.
- SOP Checklists: Clear step-by-step guides for recurring tasks.
- Shared Planning Boards: Use free tools like Trello or Asana to manage workload transparently.

Sustaining a low friction culture

Reducing friction isn't a one-time fix. To make it part of your team culture:

- Include a standing agenda item in team meetings: "What's getting in the way?"
- Review and update key processes at least quarterly
- Encourage team members to suggest fixes and own improvements

Coach your team to resolve issues

Empower people to raise concerns directly and constructively. Offer coaching or short training sessions in:

- Handling difficult conversations
- Communication
- Giving and receiving feedback

Sometimes the friction is personal, not procedural. Don't avoid it, support your people to move through it professionally.

When to escalate

Managers aren't expected to handle everything alone. Escalate if:

- A team member reports bullying, discrimination or harassment
- Mental health is being affected
- You've tried improvements and the issue persists

Early escalation can protect people and prevent formal grievances.

Want support reducing friction in your team? Get in touch with us for a confidential chat.

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