

Editor's Note: Safety Group Program Monthly Newsletter Article — Sept. 2021
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If Mask Conflicts Arise, Keep Workers Safe Using These Tips

We have all seen videos on social media where customers at stores or restaurants yell or become angry when asked to wear a mask. With mask wearing poised to make a comeback this fall, employees in customer-serving industries might find themselves in sensitive positions if their employer requires masks.

Masking has [become a hot-button topic](#). Colorado lifted the state's universal mask mandate in July, with decisions on future orders related to mask wearing passed to the local level. At the same time, COVID-19 cases have surged in some areas of the state, prompting places such as [Boulder County](#) to reinstate mask mandates. Throughout the pandemic, individual businesses have maintained the right to ask employees and customers to wear masks, regardless of government policies.

"There might be more resistance to mask wearing going forward because we've been through this before," says Pinnacol Chief Security & Fraud Prevention Officer Todd Faubion.

By preparing your team for potential conflicts beforehand and emphasizing solutions, you can keep employees safe and avoid physical or [escalated conflicts over wearing masks](#).

Tips for avoiding conflicts over masks

1. Get everyone on the same page

Knowing the rules can help employees navigate tense situations. Faubion points to three things businesses and employees should understand:

- The mask wearing requirements mandated by the county health department,
- The recommendations your business has in place for employees, and
- How to approach imposing those recommendations on customers and co-workers.

2. Provide situational guidance

Answer specific questions from employees to help guide them, such as:

- When someone enters who is not masked, should I say something or let them pass by?
- If I should say something, what should I say?
- If the person refuses a request to wear a mask, what should I do next?

Customers might not be the only ones who refuse to follow mask mandates. Your employees might also want to know:

- Should I say something to a co-worker who isn't wearing a mask?
- If so, what should I say?
- Should I tell a manager if a co-worker isn't wearing a mask?

3. Keep the emphasis on solutions

Risk mitigation measures often prove effective. For example, keep a supply of free paper masks available at the front of your business that employees can offer to anyone who simply forgot to bring a mask. This could end a mask discussion quickly, Faubion notes.

4. De-escalate a brewing conflict

Encourage employees to walk away from conflicts that appear in danger of becoming loud or physical. They can stop arguing or alert a manager about the situation.

“You might need to let these one-off incidents slide in order to prevent greater safety concerns,” Faubion says. “No circumstance supports escalating to a verbal or physical confrontation, either between two co-workers or an employee and a customer.”

Finally, keep in mind that a business’s primary responsibility is to serve its customers and protect its employees. Reassure employees that masks are not the last or only line of defense against COVID.

“There will be circumstances where employees might come in close contact with someone who is unvaccinated and refuses to wear a mask,” Faubion notes. “Employers can continue to take other measures to protect their employees, too, including [encouraging vaccines](#) and social distancing.”

[Visit Pinnacol's blog](#) to see more tips on how to keep your employees safe. Contact our safety consultants at safetyoncall@pinnacol.com to ask questions about employees and masks.

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