How to manage the 'R number' for conflict at work

By Anna Shields, Consensio 6 November 2020

Like a virus, conflict can spread within organisations, with those involved infecting others around them. Leaders need to be aware of the R rate for conflict in their organisation and implement strategies to prevent and manage conflict.

The growing R number for Covid-19 is making headlines again. In September 2020, R went above one for the first time since March. It has been increasing ever since. Like a virus, conflict also spreads in the workplace, whether people work physically together or remotely.

When individuals or teams are in conflict, they tend not to suffer alone. Conflict is stressful and can become all-consuming, so people spend time discussing it with those around them. This is how the infection passes to co-workers, impacting productivity, engagement and wellbeing.

Conflict can also spread quickly. It's human nature to gossip and there's truth in the old adage that bad news spreads fast.

Also, if conflicts are often seen to go unaddressed, it can become the norm. A grievance quickly turns into a counter-grievance and the blame cycle becomes embedded into the organisation's culture.

All this inevitably leads to increasing demands on specialists, such as HR, to help resolve these issues. Conflict cases often get referred after they have been festering and growing for a while, making them all the more difficult to treat.

Leaders can take a more proactive role in managing conflict by understanding how it is affecting individuals within their teams. The earlier the conflict is tackled, the more likely employees are to recover and build resilience for the future.

Measuring the R number for conflict

The first step in managing conflict is to identify where and how often it's flaring up. In the past, organisations have tended to look at the casualties of conflict, such as grievances and tribunals.

This is similar to tracking Covid-19 by only considering those in hospital. It leaves the majority of cases hidden and is also a reflection of past situations.

Other measures can be useful indicators of conflict levels in the workforce. Absence rates and causes, engagement surveys, staff turnover and exit interviews can be monitored.

Organisations can also undertake specific projects to assess conflict as part of a wider understanding of factors affecting health and wellbeing. All this information can be used to generate an overall picture, as well as comparisons, between different business areas.

It is worth noting that the aim of managing conflict is not to eradicate it altogether. When managed well, conflict can be a healthy part of organisational life. Challenge and debate are great ways to generate new ideas, improve processes and build stronger relationships.

When people feel their ideas are welcomed and listened to, even if they go against the grain, this helps to build trust and increase engagement. Constructive conflict can strengthen an organisation.

Treatment

Primary care
When the pandemic arrived in the UK, it was first picked up by primary care services, such as GPs. In the working environment, it is often line managers who are the closest to burgeoning conflicts and are also in the best position to address them.

Managers can help staff to resolve conflict before it gets out of hand and can prevent it from spreading to others around them. This means that managers need to be trained with 'first - responder' skills to foster constructive conflict and help their teams handle difficult conversations.

Urgent care
In an ideal world, all conflict would be managed by the individuals involved and wouldn't have the opportunity to grow and spread. Unfortunately, there will always be disputes that can't be resolved in this way and will need specialist support.

Selected managers or HR can be trained to informally advise or facilitate discussions, which can help to resolve many issues before they escalate and become formal.

Some cases may need the help of conflict management professionals, such as accredited workplace mediators, or specialist conflict coaching for managers who need support with difficult cases.

Self-care
By far the most effective way to manage conflict is by ensuring staff have the skills and confidence to address their own conflict situations. Even a basic level of understanding of conflict (and some simple ways to address it) can help swiftly resolve many conflicts.

Organisations can support staff in preventing and managing conflict by providing self-help support resources and training and ensuring policies encourage workplace mediation before grievance.

Teams can also learn to manage conflict constructively. If a manager encourages debate and models how to politely challenge and respond, this sets the lead for others to follow.

A conflict charter, developed jointly by the team, can set out how to manage disagreement, how to resolve issues and when to escalate for support.

Similar to a pandemic, acting early and treating conflict when it first occurs can prevent it from spreading and becoming unmanageable.

By building a conflict-resilient, healthy culture, organisations won't need to apply emergency 'lockdown' measures and conflict can become a natural part of organisational life.