How to develop a conflict-competent culture

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 8th Dec 2020

Anna Shields outlines ten areas where HR and L&D can look at to support a conflict-competent culture.

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only transformed where people work, but also the way they work. As organisations have adjusted to a new reality, many employees have felt additional pressures which have impacted levels of stress, mental health and workplace relationships.

As HR and L&D professionals assess how they can embed new employee wellbeing initiatives, now is a good a time to reset or reaffirm cultural norms that will enable people to work together collaboratively and constructively, wherever they are working. By fostering a culture of openness and empathy, organisations will build the foundations of a conflict-competent culture.

The shifting nature of conflict

Over the past nine months, many organisations have switched to remote working, pivoted to different product offerings or made substantial changes to the physical workplace. Difficult decisions have been made, such as restructuring, redundancies or closures, and many difficult conversations have taken place.

Conflict is harder to detect in remote teams. It can be challenging to spot that someone's behaviour has changed or that they've become disengaged from their team. Individuals are also more likely to dwell on issues in isolation, especially if they are juggling additional pressures such as home-schooling or financial worries.

New ways of working have also affected established ways of dealing with conflict. For many, dropping by a colleague's desk to clarify a misunderstanding is no longer an option. Booking a video call to talk through an interpersonal issue can seem too formal so problems are avoided and tend to fester away unresolved.

What is a conflict-competent culture?

Organisational culture consists of many elements, from leadership styles and beliefs to values and traditions, but essentially it is how people behave. An organisation's 'conflict culture' therefore is how management and staff think, believe and act with regard to conflict.

Is there a tendency to avoid conflict and allow it to fester away? Are debate and discussion discouraged so as not to rock the boat? Or is destructive conflict rife, to the extent that it results in bullying or harassment?

A conflict-competent culture is one where conflict is seen as a natural part of organisational life, where staff members are encouraged to air their views, challenge the status quo, discuss issues respectfully and manage conflict situations early and informally.

Whilst organisational culture adjusts slowly, over time, fostering openness and empathy will start the shift towards a healthier conflict culture. Empathy is the ability to understand and reflect the feelings of someone else. When we are in conflict, we tend to see the situation only from our own perspective and find it difficult to empathise with others.

However, if we can show empathy during difficult conversations, the other person is more likely to show empathy too, helping to diffuse the situation and move forward. Although some people are naturally empathic, most of us need support in developing this skill.

A culture of openness allows staff to challenge each other and encourages candid discussions about different points of views. To speak up, staff members need psychological safety, the belief that they will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes.

Managers need to ensure that people are treated with respect, even if they have contradictory points of view. This helps to build connection and trust between colleagues and within the wider team.

Building a conflict-competent culture

HR and L&D professionals are in an ideal position to both identify cultural needs and embed them. Whether it is assimilating staff back from furlough, onboarding new starters or helping staff transition from home to office working (and back again!), HR teams interact with staff across an organisation.

As L&D managers take an ever more strategic role they can identify where skills development support is needed and provide flexible ways to address it.

Here are ten areas that HR and L&D can focus on to support a conflict-competent culture:

Identify the need

HR is often at the receiving end when conflict gets out of hand, be that directly, by managing grievances or arranging workplace mediations, or indirectly, through resulting absenteeism or churn. Collating and interpreting this data can identify issues and help build a business case for informal conflict resolution.

Upskill for remote work

As conflict will arise remotely and can be more challenging to address, updating the skillset of remote workers is vital, especially for those for whom remote working will be permanent. Knowing how to recognise and deal with conflict in a virtual team is key.

Develop soft skills

As L&D professionals are aware, soft skills are just as important, if not more so, than technical skills. Many staff members will need training support to build the skills and confidence to practice empathy, listen without judgement and discuss issues respectfully.

Line manager focus

Now, more than ever, line managers are critical in demonstrating an organisation's cultural expectations. Supporting and training line managers to manage conflict effectively is a key skill, whether their teams are working remotely or not.

Giving staff a voice

At the heart of many conflicts is the desire to be heard. HR can help people have a voice by facilitating feedback through, for example, engagement surveys or team feedback processes, then ensuring that leaders respond quickly. This allows the whole organisation to demonstrate openness.

Leadership development

As in any cultural programme, role-modelling conflict-competent behaviours from the top is key. HR and L&D can help this by ensuring leadership development includes conflict competencies.

Digital self-help learning resources

Luckily, many employees don't encounter difficult conflict issues every day but, when they do, resources must be available to support them. Providing engaging learning tools will help all staff to address conflict issues as they arise and support organisational conflict-resilience.

Change management

If there's one thing that 2020 has highlighted, it is the importance of being prepared for, and managing, change. Some people are naturally change-averse, and this can lead to conflict within teams and with leadership. Recognising and managing change effectively can minimise this.

Conflict coaching and mediation

Although training and skills development can help staff to deal with many disputes that arise, there will be some issues that need extra support. By training selected individuals with coaching or accredited workplace mediation skills, staff can be supported through difficult situations before they get out of hand.

Policies and processes

Many organisations inadvertently discourage a conflict-competent culture by focusing on policies that direct staff to the grievance process when they have an issue with a colleague. By reviewing these procedures to direct staff to address issues directly and informally first, not only can formal processes be avoided, but conflict competency will grow across the organisation.

By leading a coordinated approach, HR and L&D professionals can develop a conflict-competent culture that will strengthen their organisations. When conflict is managed with empathy and openness, it has the potential to generate new ideas and innovation and strengthen workplace relationships – a real benefit to organisations in turbulent times.