



## How To Create A Healthier Organizational Culture In A World Of 'Viral' Conflict

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 26th February 2021

Conflict is always in the headlines. Whether it's the leader of KPMG telling hundreds of staff to "stop moaning" about the impact of the pandemic, the chaotic parish council Zoom meeting, which inspired countless memes, or the latest rift at Buckingham Palace with Prince Harry and Meghan stepping down as working royals.

Disputes have always had the potential to harm or even destroy an organization's reputation, but now it's more likely than ever. Not only does technology give employees the means to share issues far and wide, but the social climate has changed, and people are more likely to speak out. Leaders need to be aware of the potential reputational risk of mismanaged conflict, and organizations and individuals need to take responsibility for fostering a healthier approach to workplace conflict.

### Why 'bad news travels fast'

In the past, news of a dispute or CEO's misdemeanor would likely be gossip around the watercooler. In some cases, a staff member might leak a 'scoop' to the industry press. But now, employees have the technology at their fingertips to share a comment or video across the world for all to see.

It's not just technology that is helping conflict 'go viral.' There are also underlying societal shifts. Many commentators have written about the upswell of public reaction to divisive politics – be that through Brexit or Trump. Workers are also increasingly likely to speak up. The #MeToo movement not only galvanized people to speak out but demonstrated that their voices could make a difference. This trend has continued, for example, with Marcus Rashford's campaign for free UK school meals. As people feel their voice matters, technology can amplify the voices that have previously been ignored in society.

The current pandemic, which has created a high proportion of remote workers, could also be playing a role. In a survey of 900 employees conducted by MetLife UK, 32% of employees stated that the pandemic had weakened their relationship with their employer. Of those, a quarter said that their employer's response to the crisis had affected their level of trust. A weaker employee-employer relationship could mean that disgruntled workers feel less loyalty and are therefore more likely to share issues harmful to an organization's reputation.

### Why leaders should take note

Although highly charged exchanges, such as those in the viral Handforth council Zoom meeting, may seem extreme, similar issues appear in physical and remote workplaces. In my own conflict resolution practice, inappropriate behavior in video meetings is cited frequently in team mediations. HR clients also report that, due to the pandemic's increased proportion of remote working, conflicts often remain hidden until they get out of hand.

Whether conflict is a seemingly isolated incident, limited to a few individuals, or more of a common occurrence that may be indicative of an underlying grievance culture, it can significantly impact time and resources. As illustrated by the KPMG case, it only takes one incident to put an organization and its management in the spotlight, with the subsequent reputational issues and disruption to operations that a CEO's resignation can bring.

### **Macro and micro responsibilities**

Conflict will always arise, so how can organizations and their employees take responsibility for fostering a healthier approach to conflict?

Having a more flexible conflict mindset is fundamental to a constructive approach. Instead of seeing opposing views as an attack, if they are viewed as a chance to learn more about colleagues, or an opportunity to find a better solution, much of the emotional defense reaction to conflict can be diffused. Receiving conflicting views with curiosity rather than animosity deepens awareness, helps people feel heard, and can ultimately improve workplace relationships.

Individual efforts can be supported organizationally by embedding conflict resilience skills from top to bottom through training. Leaders themselves have a responsibility to set the tone and role-model desired behaviors. A CEO, addressing staff, has an opportunity to demonstrate to each employee how to deal with conflict by welcoming differing points of view.

We can't stop conflict from going viral. People share stories on social media to feel connected, and there will always be interest in reading about other's fortunes and misfortunes. Leaders will always worry about unwelcome news headlines, but if they start to recognize some of the benefits of healthy disagreement, conflict becomes an opportunity to connect with one another in a new and healthier way.