

Calming conflict: emotional intelligence in the workplace

By Alex Efthymiades, Consensio, May 2021

Conflict is a constant in life. Every day, large or small, conflict permeates society, relationships and the workplace. Of course, realistically, some degree of conflict between workers is inevitable – the key is knowing how to prevent a dispute from spiralling.

Moreover, while the potential for conflict in the workplace is ever-present, the biggest global event of the past 12 months – the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, of course – has served to expand the scope for discord, despite a large proportion of the workforce still doing their job from home.

According to the Workplace Fairness Institute, there are key warning signs – applicable to both the traditional office environment and employees working from home – that workplace conflict is escalating. These are: (i) focus shifts from the problem to becoming personal; (ii) people become frustrated with ongoing dialogue and become reluctant to discuss the issue; (iii) camps or coalitions are formed; (iv) team members become distracted and spend time in small group discussions; and (v) people become openly hostile or isolated.

“The pandemic has increased workplace conflict in many organisations, both in situ and with remote workers,” says Alexandra Efthymiades, director and co-founder of Consensio. “There are various reasons for this, most notably that people are under much more pressure than ever before. “Continuing uncertainty is leading to anxiety, and people who are stressed and anxious have lower levels of resilience for dealing with conflict,” she continues. “For remote workers, one issue driving the increase in conflict is that they are not able to communicate face-to-face. The overreliance on email communication leads to more misunderstandings and miscommunication, which can result in conflict.”

Emotional intelligence

One way of calming conflict in the workplace is by tapping into individuals’ emotional intelligence – defined by Salovey and Mayer as “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action” – to find collaborative and sustainable solutions.

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In a workplace scenario, emotional intelligence can help those at loggerheads to discover common ground by helping to improve communication, management, problem solving and relationships. According to a survey of employers by CareerBuilder, almost 75 percent of respondents suggested they valued an employee’s emotional intelligence more than their IQ. It is also a skill that many believe can be improved with training and practise.

“The role that emotional intelligence can play in helping to navigate a path through and out of conflict is significant,” believes Ms Efthymiades. “Arguably, without the attributes of emotional intelligence, we are more likely to get ourselves into conflict and unable to amicably resolve conflict. Emotional intelligence should always be a high priority within the workplace, but it is even more important now, when people are under intense pressure and uncertain about the future.”

That said, while the options emotional intelligence brings to the table are certainly helpful, incorporating the concept into an organisation’s health and wellbeing framework is a challenging endeavour, requiring a significant recalibration of attitudes and behaviours.

“Organisations need to carefully consider upskilling their workforce in emotional intelligence-related skills, as these do not come easily to most people,” continues Ms Efthymiades. “Management development training programmes, for example, need to include a component on emotional intelligence, as well as conflict management and mediation skills. These skills are needed more than ever in the current environment, and also once we finally exit the pandemic crisis.”

Redefined

With the stress and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 still very much a concern, organisations need to harness all available means, including emotional intelligence, to temper the workplace conflicts the pandemic continues to ferment. This may include redefining workplace dynamics.

“Our hope is that the pandemic will redefine workforce dynamics for the better, because in crisis may lie opportunity,” says Ms Efthymiades. “The pandemic has shown us the importance of wellbeing to support us through a period of calamity. Wellbeing should be an organisational priority in and of itself, but if we need to make a business case for it, then we can confidently argue that a healthy and resilient workforce is more productive and engaged, which positively impacts business success.

“There will always be conflict in organisations, even when the pandemic is finally behind us,” she continues. “Organisations need to embrace a new mindset to approach human relationships at work. This means, for example, modelling and encouraging early and informal resolution. The pandemic context is an opportunity for us all to rethink and redefine the importance of human connection, both in and out of work.”