

Finding harmony in chaos

In recession, the volume and intensity of organisational disputes inevitably soars. What can an organisation do to protect itself from this tide of destructive conflict? Asks Tania Coke, Senior Mediation Consultant, Consensio.



Interpersonal disagreement and difference are inevitable, even healthy features of organisational life. At best, they can foster constructive debate, healthy competition, innovation and personal growth. At worst, they can degenerate into bickering, resentment, de-motivation and illness. The external environment has a major influence in determining which way it goes. During recession, it is usually the latter, degenerative pattern that wins out. The additional stresses of job and salary uncertainty that accompany recession typically serve to exacerbate the downward spiral of hostility and self-defensiveness. But is there anything an organisation can do to prevent the surge of destructive conflict that recession seems inevitably to bring? What are the personal qualities that can enable employees to defy the destructive tendency of conflict, even in a recessionary environment? And how can organisations best promote these qualities in the workplace?

Two qualities can help employees to resist the degenerative forces of conflict. The first is a sense of personal empowerment. Conflict generally brings out a sense of powerlessness in the affected parties. Each party sees themselves as the helpless victim and the other as the evil perpetrator with sole responsibility for the conflict situation. Until the individual is able to accept some degree of responsibility, take decisive action to improve the situation and accept the consequences, the conflict will remain festering under the surface. A second quality needed for constructive handling of conflict is the ability to take perspectives. In conflict we usually lose this ability, becoming increasingly entrenched in our own position. We also lose the desire to listen to the other party, to try to understand what that person feels and why they acted as they did. For conflict to have constructive potential, the individuals concerned need to regain the ability to see perspectives other than their own.

But these two qualities, which may come naturally when times are good, are hard to access in times of conflict, let alone in the paranoid atmosphere that recession usually brings. Nevertheless, there are ways to influence the culture of an organisation, and to promote desired qualities and behaviours that perpetuate constructive rather than destructive conflict from occurring. In order to foster the desired qualities of personal empowerment and perspective-taking, the organisation needs to have the right culture and processes in place. In particular, it needs to pay careful attention to the style of its leadership, as well as available conflict management processes.

These qualities are more likely to flourish in an organisation when they are clearly evident in its role models. In order to encourage perspective-taking, those in positions of authority need to clearly demonstrate behaviours such as eliciting opinions, listening impartially and encouraging open debate – both in everyday dealings and in times of conflict. To promote empowerment and personal responsibility among employees, leaders need to be visibly putting trust in their people, giving them appropriate autonomy and, if the situation demands it, accepting personal responsibility for failure. All these desired behaviours can be reinforced through recruitment, training and evaluation. But the living example set by leaders and managers is arguably the number one determinant of organisational behaviour.

Another factor which will directly affect the organisation's ability to handle conflict, is its conflict management processes. In most organisations, the typical response to a workplace dispute (other than ignoring it in the hope that it will go away) is to resort to grievance or disciplinary procedures. And yet, few would disagree that these simply fan the flames of destructive conflict. But there is a less formal process for handling conflicts that does the opposite and which the government is increasingly promoting for this very reason; mediation. Mediation arguably provides the best opportunity for parties to regain a sense of personal empowerment and perspective-taking. From the outset, it is made clear to the parties that the mediator will not be making decisions on their behalf, or making judgements about the rights and wrongs of the case. Only the parties have this right. Secondly, by allowing the parties to have a free conversation with one another, as opposed to pleading their case to an arbitrator, the parties have a far better chance of being open to one another's perspectives. By introducing mediation as a standard response to organisational conflict, new possibilities arise enabling people locked in lengthy psychological combat to begin to see one another as a real human being, not a de-personalised enemy.

There are clear steps an organisation can take to combat the degenerative forces that lead from minor disagreement to full-blown hostility, even in the midst of recession. By paying careful attention to its leadership style and conflict management processes, an organisation stands a far greater chance of fostering the qualities of empowerment and perspective-taking. Armed with these qualities, not only is it possible to avoid the devastation of destructive conflict, but even to bring out the positive potential underlying difference and disagreement.