

Anna Shields: Surely HR is tough enough already? How to transfer conflict management responsibility back to managers

Anna Shields Friday, October 30, 2015



The UN – Conflict resolution experts

The life of a HR director has never been harder. The abundance of employment legislation and tendency to cut to formal process straight away has placed even greater strain on HR departments. The need for HR to be seen to deliver value to the organisation, not just transactional processes, has made HR a tough place to be. Dealing with conflict within the organisation adds to the burden.

The rise in legislation, red tape and tick box policies has made managers fearful of dealing with difficult workplace issues within their teams. The lack of skills most managers have relating to conflict management and the subsequent lack of confidence in addressing issues early and informally has meant referral to HR is the default position. All too often, by the time the issue reaches the HR department, it is too late – the conflict has escalated to a point where formal process is the only way forward and the cost that entails is significant and the relationships involved often beyond repair.

Upfront Management Involvement

Ingrained and systemic conflict management strategy lies in the involvement of managers from the very outset. It is about getting managers back to the grassroots of good people management. A CIPD

survey* found that two thirds of respondents wanted managers to be more involved with the people reporting to them and to model the right behaviors to manage and prevent conflict. 44 percent of respondents in the same survey cited that personality clashes were the number one cause of interpersonal strain. This puts managers in the best possible position to deal with conflict amongst their team members. But, managers tend to avoid dealing with workplace conflict either for fear of doing or saying the wrong thing or because they simply do not know what to do in a situation of conflict. Proper training in mediation and conflict resolution skills will enable managers to tackle conflict confidently and constructively.

So what skills do managers need to empower them to manage conflict at work more constructively? How can conflict management become embedded as part of their day-to-day management strategy?

Partly the answer lies in managers having more hands-on interaction with team members and providing more structure and clarity as to what is expected of them. Often conflict can be diffused by applying effective active listening skills to the person airing their side of the story. Impartial and non-judgmental listening is a skill that can be learnt and one that can make a positive impact very quickly.

Effective Questioning Techniques

The way in which managers ask questions can also diffuse potential conflict, and clarify misunderstandings that could end up as conflicts. Training people in questioning techniques is a powerful tool to get to the underlying causes of conflict. At the same time, learning that questions such as *'why did you do that?'* can sound accusatory and therefore put the person they are talking to on the defensive is also an important lesson to learn. However, open questions invite the other person to open up and give more information, for example, *'can you tell me what happened from your perspective?'* is a much more objective way of asking a question. Likewise, a simple reflection, such as *'that sounds like it was very frustrating for you,'* can demonstrate empathy and understanding. More broadly, you want your managers to be able to identify the warning signs of conflict early so that issues can be nipped in the bud. Understanding the basic psychology of conflict will stop tensions and disagreements escalating. Managers need to be aware that different personality types will deal with conflict in different ways. Some people show their annoyance very quickly and will openly confront someone with whom they disagree. Others may, on the surface at least, appear more laid back but will be getting more and more unhappy with one of their colleagues until they quite suddenly lose their temper and explode. Some people become withdrawn and quiet when they are faced with an issue they cannot cope with at work. Training managers to identify these signs will enable them to address each situation with sensitivity before it becomes a real problem.

A Collaborative Approach

Adopting a more collaborative approach will also help them in their first line of defense against conflict. Upskilling managers in workplace mediation skills will enable them to help parties identify the cause of the disagreement, what needs to happen to move forward and how they can resolve their conflict in a mutually acceptable manner. This will allow managers to facilitate difficult conversations at work much faster and more effectively than waiting until the issue has been blown out of all proportion and referred to HR.

Embedding good conflict management at the line manager level is all about training and empowering managers with key skills and strategies they can use to tackle conflict within their teams before it becomes a formal issue. Understanding the causes of conflict, how differently people deal with it, how

to listen and communicate effectively, as well as basic mediation skills will substantially boost managers' confidence. And confident managers will step in much sooner to have those difficult conversations with team members before they need to call in HR.

* CIPD Survey (2008) Leadership and the management of conflict at work