

Alex Efthymiades: Conflict management – another answer to employee engagement?

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The UN, renowned peacekeepers

Introduction

Employee engagement is something every organisation desires, but few know how to achieve. In this article, we approach the issue from a different angle. We argue that an effective way to raise employee engagement is to improve an organisation's ability to manage conflict quickly, informally and collaboratively. This is because conflict at work, when badly managed, can have an immensely detrimental effect on employees' motivation, commitment and levels of engagement. Conversely, if employees are able to transform potential conflicts into opportunities for greater creativity and deeper relationships, this will positively impact employee engagement.

What is employee engagement?

There are myriad definitions of employee engagement. For simplicity, we will use Forbes Magazine's definition: *"Employee engagement is the emotional commitment the employee has to the organisation and its goals. This emotional commitment means engaged employees actually care about their work and their company. ... When employees care — when they are engaged — they use discretionary effort."*

With this definition in mind, we can start to explore how most organisations' conflict management processes – usually based on formal, top-down and evidence-driven processes – hinder rather than support a culture of healthy conflict management and how this links into employee engagement.

When people are in conflict with each other, they aren't happy at work, and vice versa. This leads to less engagement. But when employees are happy at work – because they enjoy their work, feel valued and respected and have good working relationships – they are more likely to be engaged.

How do traditional conflict management processes damage employee engagement?

Traditional conflict management processes, such as grievance procedures, tend to be formal, top-down and evidence-driven. This often further damages rather than repairs working relationships and, therefore, decreases levels of engagement. Our work as mediators gives us an insight into the various problems associated with the use of traditional conflict management processes:

1. **A focus on "victim" and "perpetrator"** – When employees aren't given the opportunity to resolve their conflicts informally and collaboratively, they are left with processes that look for evidence of a "victim" and a "perpetrator". Most workplace mediation cases include allegations of bullying and harassment because when employees are in conflict, they feel victimised by the other party and, often, by the organisation as a whole. When someone feels like a victim – and most people in conflict do – they aren't able to engage because they are so embroiled in conflict that they are robbed of the emotional energy necessary to do so.
2. **Perceptions of an unjust organisation** – Parties who are in conflict tend to feel undervalued and disrespected by the

other party and by their organisation more generally. In addition, conflict affects engagement because employees may blame the organisation for its response to conflict. One employee, on hearing that a colleague had taken out a grievance against him, said: "My feelings shifted from disbelief, to anger, to sadness and, most painfully of all, to a sense of betrayal that my company had not nipped this complaint in the bud."^[1] For this mediation party, and for many others like him, the conflict contaminated not just his relationship to his colleague, but to the organisation as a whole, making it very difficult to feel any sense of loyalty or engagement.

3. **Workplace conflict causes stress and demotivation** – Workplace conflict causes staff members considerable stress, loss of motivation and anxiety. When workplace conflict is avoided by the organisation, or managed in an overly aggressive and formal manner, it can lead to high levels of sickness absence due to work-related stress. Many parties who attend workplace mediation have been on sickness absence and their levels of engagement are minimal.

How does good conflict management improve employee engagement?

Organisations that adopt a culture of constructive conflict management by using informal and collaborative processes are likely to have higher levels of employee engagement. Here are a few reasons why:

1. **Conflict is viewed as normal** – Healthy conflict organisations view conflict not as something that needs to be done away with, but rather as a phenomenon present in all relationships which, when addressed quickly, informally and collaboratively, has the potential to strengthen working relationships and lead to greater creativity. These organisations don't avoid conflict: they work *with* conflict, not *against* it. They fundamentally believe in the opportunities conflict offers and they understand that strong relationships result in better team work, higher morale, better productivity and happiness. And higher levels of engagement.
2. **Employees feel empowered to make decisions** – One principle of good conflict management is employee responsibility – the idea that even in conflict situations, employees are trusted enough to make their own decisions. This principle can be put into practice through mediation (which allows parties to make their own decisions regarding resolution) or conflict resolution training (in which managers learn to nip issues in the bud quickly and to support team members in making their own decisions, where appropriate). When employees take responsibility in conflict situations, they are demonstrating their engagement: they are making discretionary effort to solve a business problem. At the same time, the organisation is demonstrating trust in their employees, which leads to more loyalty and engagement.
3. **Learning opportunities for staff** – Another principle of good conflict management is self-development, as it supports employees in transforming conflicts into learning opportunities. When employees experience conflict as an opportunity for growth, understanding and deeper relationships, they learn a valuable lesson: that, by working *with* conflict, better working relationships are fostered.

Conclusion

Workplace mediators see a clear link between employee engagement and conflict management. There are some simple ways that you can raise the levels of employee engagement within your organisation by looking at the ways in which your organisations manages conflict:

- Focus on **nipping issues in the bud** as quickly as possible so that they don't escalate.
- **Upskill your managers** so they have the necessary skills and confidence to manage issues in their teams informally and collaboratively. Because most managers don't have these skills, they either avoid the conflict, try to deal with them too aggressively or rely on HR to try to resolve issues, often when it is too late.
- Offer parties an **informal means of resolving their issues**. A grievance should never be the first point of call. Instead, allow parties to have difficult conversations with each other in the presence of an experienced and accredited workplace mediator who has the skills to listen to both parties impartially and who supports them to come to their own resolution. Not only will this allow parties to feel that they have been listened to, but the sense of ownership this brings will have long-lasting positive benefits for them and their ability to trust the organisation and engage with it.
- Take a hard look at your organisation's current conflict management processes and decide whether your

organisation is **promoting a culture of constructive conflict management**. Then look at your employees' levels of engagement. You are bound to find a correlation.