

# Build trusting relationships at work

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Do you value the importance of building trusting workplace relationships?

When conflict erupts in the workplace, the question of trust is never far behind.

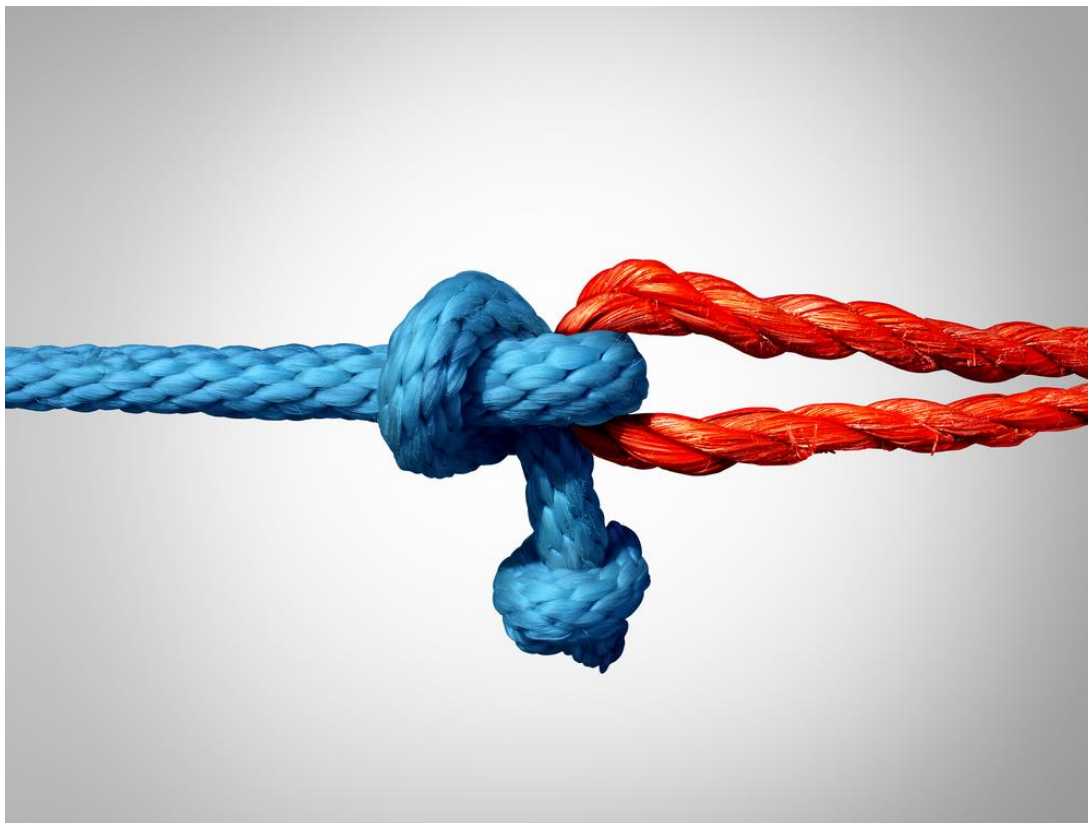
*“I trusted you. You let me down”.*

*“I can’t believe she did that. I’ll never be able to trust her again.”*

*“There’s no point me trying to talk to him – I can’t trust him with my true feelings.”*

These are phrases that ring constantly in the ear of the workplace mediator.

If trust – or its absence - is so central to workplace conflict, it is worth exploring what trust means to individuals in conflict to understand what it is, why it is lost and what can be done to restore it or prevent its loss.



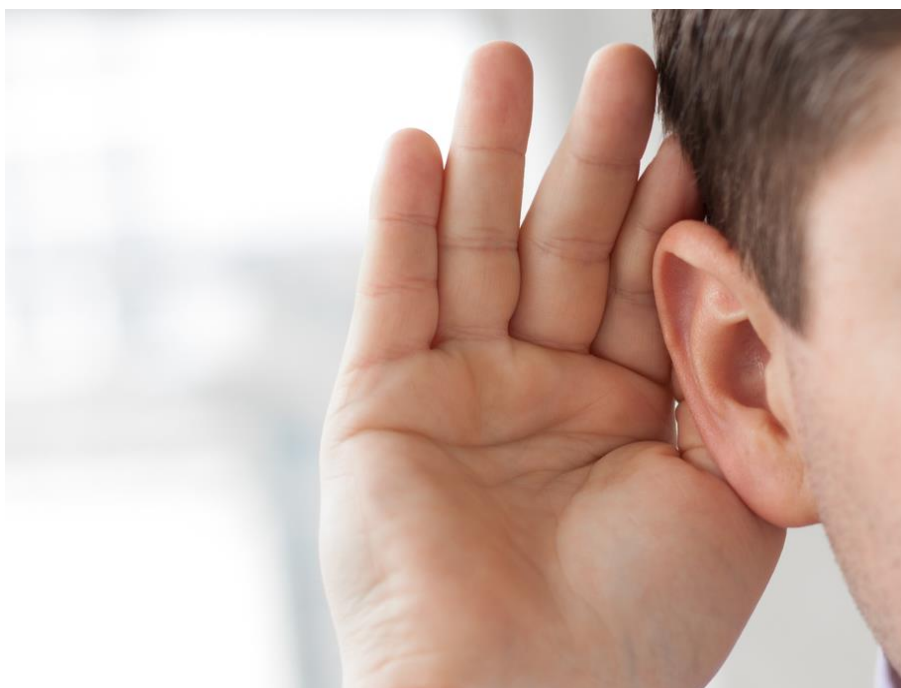
## The cycle of destructive conflict

Trust is what allows people to feel safe in a relationship. When we trust someone, we believe they will not intentionally say or do anything to intentionally harm us. Trust is lost when that person says or does something which does harm us. When this happens, we no longer feel safe. Instead, we feel under threat. As a result, we respond either by retaliating or by avoiding contact, for fear of further harm. Whichever response we choose, the relationship is sure to deteriorate, resulting in further retaliation or distancing on both sides. This is the cycle of destructive conflict, a cycle all too familiar to the HR professional, along with its various undesirable by-products, for example in the form of spiraling stress, inefficiency, sickness absence and financial costs.

In the case of workplace conflict, the initial trigger is rarely a deliberate attempt to cause harm. Most workplace disputes can be traced back to wrong assumptions of one sort or another. A hand raised in frustration may be misinterpreted as an act of aggression. A piece of developmental feedback may be perceived as a public insult. An oversight caused by tiredness may be construed as an intentional act of sabotage. But the cycle has now been triggered and the person who feels aggressed, insulted or sabotaged responds in a way that causes the other person to lose trust, leading to a cycle of behaviours that is increasingly - and deliberately - harmful.

## So how can we prevent the cycle from being triggered?

In some cases, more can be done to communicate intentions and expectations before any wrong conclusions can be drawn. During a difficult conversation, the person giving feedback could explain the spirit in which the feedback is being given. The gesture of frustration could be accompanied by a verbal expression that lets the listener know the frustration is not aimed at them.



But it's unrealistic to think that this will work in every case. In the example above of the person who messed up through tiredness, it would be absurd to expect them to announce to all concerned: "I'm tired and may make an error, but if I do, it isn't intended to harm anyone."

So responsibility also lies with the person on the receiving end of the apparently offensive behaviour. They can help avert the conflict cycle by asking for an explanation, or expressing the effect it had on them. "What did you mean when you said...?" Or "I felt very uncomfortable when you said..." This kind of open communication can prevent the wrong assumptions that trigger the cycle of destructive conflict.

## **Understanding ourselves to understand each other**

Another antidote to destructive conflict is self-awareness. The wrong assumptions we make often follow certain patterns. Some people have a tendency to feel criticised. Others have a tendency to feel victimised. We too easily interpret other people's behaviours in the light of these tendencies, assuming an intent to criticise or victimise where there was none. The more we can do to raise awareness of our own negative tendencies, the more likely we are to spot ourselves in the act of initiating a conflict cycle – and hence to prevent it.

But here lies the nub of the problem. At the very moment that calls for self-awareness and open communication, we are feeling unsafe or under threat. Far from wanting to open up and reaching out, these conditions make us clam up or lash out. It isn't easy asking for an explanation when your heart is pounding and the blood is rushing to your head.

It isn't easy, but it isn't impossible either. With enough training and practice, we can develop the skills needed to convey our intentions and feelings, and ask others about theirs. And we can develop the qualities we need to be able to access those skills even in times of imminent danger: qualities such as humility, openness, respect and presence of mind. As well as studying the theory and skills of conflict management, the ideal training would include role-play practice to simulate – in a safe environment – the conditions of workplace conflict.

Courageous conversations and conflict management training are the most effective ways to promote open communication and self-awareness, and prevent destructive conflict from emerging in the first place. But when it does emerge, workplace mediation is another powerful tool for minimising the damage. Mediation is a process which is designed to help people in conflict to talk to one another. It is a chance to explain our intentions, express our feelings, and ask questions about the other person's perspective. Many a wrong assumption has been uncovered through mediation, allowing the parties to break out of the cycle of conflict and start to rebuild trust.



Trust will always remain a mysterious and elusive quality, but through services such as conflict resolution training and workplace mediation, organisations can get closer to establishing trust as the true north of its working relationships. And ensuring that when the needle dips south, it won't be for long. For more information, [click here](#).



**By Tania Coke**

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