

How to turn conflict-avoidant managers into conflict-competent managers



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It's an ongoing issue in the workplace. How do you address conflict? Alex Efthymiades extols the virtues of conflict management training.

Given the ongoing economic uncertainty, it is no surprise that workplace conflict is on the increase. The threat of redundancy and restructuring, real or perceived, deeply unsettles and creates tension in the workplace. Issues become magnified and conflicts, big or small, take on much greater importance than they otherwise would if everything was going well.

This increasingly common scenario, if not effectively managed, can lead to disputes and conflict which are ultimately destructive. Managers may be spending

increased time on trying to deal with conflict within and between teams, with less time to focus on their priorities and responsibilities.

Conflict drains the value of your best asset: your people. It is not just the time and energy taken up when people are embroiled in a workplace dispute, but also the reduction in motivation, productivity, loyalty and a loss of job satisfaction. Conflict creates feelings of hurt, anger and frustration, which adversely affect people's ability to fulfil their potential, enjoy their jobs and make a meaningful contribution.

In this article, we will explore the impact of unresolved workplace conflict on managers, employees and business. Specifically, we will examine the importance of differentiating between destructive and constructive conflict and how viewing conflict as merely destructive will result in patterns of conflict-avoidant behaviour. Finally, we will outline how conflict management training can transform conflict-avoidant managers into conflict-competent managers and why investing in such training makes good business sense.

Constructive versus destructive conflict

Conflict exists in every organisation, regardless of sector, size or region. Yet conflict per se does not have to be destructive. If issues are addressed efficiently, misunderstandings clarified and messages clearly and openly communicated within a team, topics of disagreement produce opportunity for learning, innovation, growth and change. However, when we speak about conflict, it is usually referred to as destructive, i.e. conflict that escalates miscommunication, relationship breakdowns, feelings of distrust and deep suspicion about other people's motives.

Destructive conflict tends to be more prevalent during times of economic uncertainty, especially if your managers have not been given the necessary skills and confidence to address issues before they escalate. In addition, in tough times, people may be more likely to avoid difficult issues because they fear that addressing these could mark them as a 'trouble-maker' and ultimately cost them their jobs.

Managers, like most other employees within an organisation, tend to be conflict-averse. Yet, rather than blaming managers for this tendency, we need to understand where it stems from. Might this tendency to avoid conflict penetrate the culture of the organisation as a whole? What internal capacity has been built to constructively manage conflict? Is there an over-reliance on formal process to deal with issues?

It is important for an organisation to look at ways in which it can support and empower managers to change this behaviour and to view conflict not as something to be avoided and swept under the carpet, but as something that needs to be addressed early on. Yet for this to happen, there needs to be a thorough

understanding of the advantages of conflict management over conflict avoidance. This is where building internal capacity is crucial and training is a key component of this.

From conflict-avoidant to conflict-competent

Conflict management training can make a huge difference to the levels of conflict within your organisation for a number of reasons. Firstly, training will enable your managers to differentiate between destructive and constructive conflict. By gaining a new perspective on conflict, managers are less likely to avoid it as they will see its potential for increasing understanding, organisational learning and growth. Managers will also learn that conflict is a normal part of organisational life and how it is managed is paramount to issues of employee wellbeing, productivity and business success.

Conflict management training also helps managers to recognise the warning signs of conflict. By understanding that certain clues – erratic changes in behaviour, email communication and misinterpretation, not to mention copying other people in, avoiding face-to-face communication and higher than normal rates of absenteeism – are warning signs of conflict, managers will be able to use the new tools they learn to address issues before they become more serious and ultimately destructive.

Managers on a conflict management course will learn about the causes of conflict and how it may impact members of their team, themselves and the business. Whether the causes relate to different working styles, lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities, contradictory perceptions of what constitutes fair or unfair treatment or what is often labelled as 'personality clashes', conflict management training gives managers new insights and self-awareness that will ultimately allow them to manage conflict in a more sensitive, impartial and effective manner.

Lastly, through experiential training in conflict management skills, managers will be able to practice key techniques that they can employ in the workplace, increasing their interpersonal skills level and confidence to deal with issues that used to be perceived as overly daunting and difficult. The training will help to enhance the qualities that we know contribute to employee wellbeing and business success.

Summary

Your managers are at the forefront of conflict. Working towards supporting your managers to shift from conflict-avoidance to conflict-competence will reap enormous benefits to employee wellbeing and business success. You can support your managers to become conflict-competent by providing in-house conflict management training. This training empowers managers to address issues head-on,

in a highly-skilled, sensitive and empathic manner. In turn, a shift in organisational culture toward more respectful and humane modes of interpersonal communication will ensue. The benefits that your employees, managers and the business as a whole will reap from this approach are vast.

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