

What can Amazon teach us about workplace relations?

By Alexandra Efthymiades on 19 Oct 2015 in [Dispute resolution](#), [Employee relations](#), [Mediation](#)



Amazon may be one of the world’s most successful online retailers, but the company hit the headlines recently due to the allegations of its “bruising” approach to workplace relations. What long-term impact does a culture like this have on employees?

A recent New York Times (NYT) article stated that the founder, Jeff Bezos, believes that “harmony is often overvalued in the workplace – that it can stifle honest critique and encourage praise for flawed ideas.”

The article claimed that Amazon instructs its workforce to “disagree and commit – to rip into colleagues’ ideas, with feedback that can be blunt to the point of painful, before lining up behind a decision”.

Whether this is a true reflection of Amazon’s culture or not, it raises the question of what potential impact such a culture could have on the long-term health of its workforce.

Research published this year by Harvard and Stanford Business Schools suggests that health problems associated with job-related anxiety account for more deaths each year in the US than Alzheimer’s disease or diabetes. It is likely that the same is true in the UK.

The combination of the Amazon story and the recent study into the impact of work-related stress means that there are important questions that all organisations should ask themselves.

These include: What type of management culture do we foster? What informal conflict management techniques do we offer to foster healthy workplace relationships? What are we doing to enable people at work to enjoy their jobs and thrive, both psychologically and physically?

Considering how much time most of us spend at work, it is essential that organisations take their employees' wellbeing seriously. And as someone who works in the field of workplace mediation and conflict management, I know first-hand that employee wellbeing is not yet high enough on the agenda of most workplaces.

Dealing with stress

Some stress and some conflict are a normal part of organisational life, and they cannot be completely eliminated. As the researchers from Harvard and Stanford Business Schools state, "a stress-free workplace is not realistically or economically achievable".

But importantly, some stressors can and should be managed and decreased as this will have a positive impact. They may not be able to be completely eradicated in practice, but even reducing their prevalence "could potentially go a long way in improving health outcomes and cost", according to the research.

If we go back to Amazon and the NYT article, many quotes stand out. This one from an ex-Amazon employee is particularly telling: "Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk."

There are a myriad of workplace stressors that have a negative impact on employee wellbeing, from job insecurity to long work hours, increasingly demanding jobs, and also stressful and unhealthy workplace relations that manifest themselves in real or perceived negative behaviours, such as bullying, harassment and discrimination.

Many of the complaints that I hear in workplace mediation are that employees don't feel fairly treated or valued at work, that they don't feel they have a voice, and that they feel that they are treated with little empathy or respect.

This causes low self-esteem, a lack of motivation and low morale, resulting in a work environment that is not harmonious, productive or healthy. Not only does this negatively impact employees at the individual level, it will also impact an organisation's reputation, efficiency and subsequently, their bottom line.

Healthier workplace relations result in a more engaged, motivated, happy, creative and productive workforce, which is clearly beneficial both at the individual as well as the organisational level.

Managing conflict

There are many ways to foster healthy workplace relations. One of these relates to how workplace conflict is perceived and managed within an organisation, including in cases of severe relationship breakdowns.

Most people within an organisation either avoid conflict and leave it to fester and grow, or approach it in an overly aggressive and punitive manner. Many managers lack the confidence to address issues early, and rely on HR to resolve problems when they have become serious or formal.

However, where managers are trained in conflict management skills, they are able to recognise some of the early warning signs of conflict to prevent issues from escalating. This sort of training encourages managers to reflect on how their personal style and behaviours affects their team members. It helps them to learn the importance of showing empathy and respect to those they manage to create a culture of honesty and open dialogue.

Through training, managers can build a framework for implementing some of the effective communication skills that are necessary to have difficult workplace conversations, and how to collaboratively resolve issues.

There is something else we need to take away from the allegations surrounding Amazon's bruising workplace culture and the recent research into the long-term and damaging health consequences of workplace stress. That is that we need to value the individuals who comprise our workforce because they deserve to work in an environment where they are respected.

This is not to say that we should stifle honest critique to ensure harmony, but to say that this critique needs to be delivered in a respectful and empathic manner. This will support a culture of loyalty, motivation, innovation and creativity.

People's self-esteem should be fostered at work, not destroyed. As Sir Richard Branson says, "If you look after your staff, they'll look after your customers. It's that simple."