



Sticks & stones: Why HR needs to watch their words

As the saying goes: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

Tania Coke, Senior Mediation Consultant at Consensio, confesses to HR Grapevine: “I would like to be able to put my hand to my heart and say that words have never hurt me. But it would be dishonest. Words have power. They affect the way people think, feel and act.”

This is as true of conflict management as it is any other field, or walk of life. Coke expands on this: “The way we talk about a conflict, even if we are only onlookers to that conflict, can influence its outcome. This is a sobering thought for anyone in an organisation who handles workplace disputes – which presumably includes anyone reading this.”

So, how can HR ensure their choice of words does not exacerbate the conflicts?

Coke says that one of the things that *can* exacerbate conflict is to deny its existence. She gives the following example: “I heard of a company whose leader declared: ‘Conflict? We have no conflict in our organisation’. This sends out a message that conflict is always a bad thing. Employees who hear their leaders speaking in this way are less likely to admit to having conflict or to ask for help.

“But when conflicts are ignored, and difficult conversations are avoided, the result is that, like wounds, the damage tends to spread.

“To avoid this, we can openly acknowledge the presence of disagreements and differences - and even welcome them as opportunities to clarify viewpoints and build mutual understanding.”

This can be done - even in small ways - on a daily basis. Coke explains: “Whenever we encounter disagreement, we can invite people to have a courageous conversation about it, to say more about their differing views and to share the reasons and assumptions that led to their views.”

Another way we might unintentionally make things worse is to use language which polarises conflict. Coke elucidates: “As a workplace mediator, I have heard the terms ‘victim’ and ‘bully’ many times. These terms can polarise a conflict into one powerful, evil party and one powerless, innocent one. When we characterise a conflict in these terms, at least one of the parties is going to be unhappy. They may feel misunderstood, mistreated or betrayed. This can drive in the wedge between the two parties even further and diminish the chance of a constructive outcome.

“In fact, in most workplace mediations, all parties feel themselves to be victims. I remember a case in which one person burst into tears while accusing the other of being a bully. To which the other person replied: ‘Well, I feel as if you are bullying me by bursting into tears’.”

The best solution is finding language that is as respectful to both parties as possible, safe in the knowledge that conflict is never as simple as one victim and one perpetrator.

Coke concludes: “Language is powerful. It can incite violence and divisiveness. And equally it can open the doors to empathy and understanding. We’d better watch our words.”