

Drawing the line for line managers in conflict management skills



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It's a perennial problem that most of us have either witnessed or even been a part of. You are good at your job and get promoted to a position where, very soon, you find that you are no longer doing 'your job'. Instead, you are managing teams of people with little support or understanding on the finer nuances of people management.

This can quickly lead to workplace 'issues' and, taking this to its natural conclusion, talent attraction and retention figures can tumble.

This can subsequently become a reputation management issue with serious commercial consequences for you and your organisation. And we all know the old adage that people leave managers not companies.

No one could dispute the fact that nipping potential problems in the bud and effectively managing conflict in the workplace is something that is highly desirable for both the commercial and mental wellbeing of any organisation.

However, more often than not, it is also something that relies on the positive intervention and careful supervision of those very same line managers. And therein lies a problem.

Many line managers feel anxious and isolated when it comes to having difficult conversations and dealing with conflict at work.

When this is explored, line managers often admit that they lack both the skills and the confidence to effectively manage and resolve workplace conflict.

Are we setting managers up to fail by not adequately training them in this important skill?

Conflict avoidance or conflict management

Organisations often believe that line managers are conflict-avoidant because they don't see conflict. Our experience is different.

It is the lack of skills and confidence that holds them [line managers] back from managing conflict and having courageous conversations.

So instead of taking on the responsibility of managing conflicts within their teams, they are likely to pass it as quickly as possible to HR, avoid it until it explodes and goes formal, or they deal with it overly aggressively.

Managing conflict is vital to the health of individuals within an organisation and the organisation as a whole.

It is therefore vital that managers have the skills and confidence to do this. It is the responsibility of an organisation to equip their managers with these vital skills. And this is the responsibility of training and L&D professionals.

More so than most 'straight forward' technical training, this sort of development work necessitates a quantum change, a real shift in mindset and approach to people management.

A good starting point is that all managers undergo conflict management and/or workplace mediation training as this will increase their confidence and skill levels.

This should be part of any standard management development training programme and will not just make your managers better at their jobs, but will help the organisation as a whole by contributing to employee wellbeing, performance and engagement.

Case study: an NHS Trust

One organisation that is taking a more proactive approach to upskilling its line managers in this area is University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (UCLH), one of the UK's largest NHS trusts.

UCLH is a complex NHS trust which employs over 8,000 staff across its five hospital sites in central London. With a workforce of this size and complexity, operating in such a high pressure and intense environment, the Trust wants to effectively manage potential workplace conflict issues before they escalate.

Jacqui Finnigan, Psychologist and Lead Clinician at UCLH's Staff Psychological & Welfare Service, is leading the new approach to managing workplace conflict.

She said: "We already have an existing internal mediation service which functions very well. However, we realised that to be as effective as possible and to offer our employees the most supportive and nurturing working environment, it would be best if we could nip conflict in the bud before it reaches the formal grievance stage.

"With that in mind, UCLH partnered with Consensio to offer internal training of our senior managers across the organisation. The two-day course equips managers with the conflict resolution skills to facilitate conversations with members of their teams quickly, informally and with confidence. The goal of the training is to transform the culture of the organisation into one where conflict is not avoided, but rather dealt with quickly and informally by line managers to increase employee wellbeing and effectiveness across the organisation."

The training runs alongside another campaign, 'Where do you draw the line?' which invites staff to share their views on what constitutes bullying and harassment.