

## Dealing with conflict: Advice from a workplace mediator

In this piece, Anna Shields, co-founder and director of Consensio, discusses how people can best manage potential conflict situations.

In the 1950s, Winston Churchill famously professed to prefer jaw jaw to war war. It's a sentiment that is as true today as it ever has been, and certainly not restricted to the field of international diplomacy but valid in almost every aspect of our personal and professional lives. From the shop floor to the board room, quiet, calm negotiation is more powerful than shouty confrontation in almost every scenario you can imagine.

When we are in a state of high emotion, such as anger or rage, our rational thinking is switched off, we don't listen to the other person, and we are much more likely to cause hurt or offence. However, when we can have those difficult conversations and negotiate in a calm manner, we are in the best state to listen, to understand and to empathise with each other and to find the most creative solutions that will suit everyone involved.

I am a workplace mediator and in a recent mediation case, one party asked for an apology from the other because they had been shouted at in a team meeting. Although the shouter did apologise, it was accompanied by an attack in which they accused the other of discriminatory and unethical behavior. So, although the apology was given, it wasn't actually accepted by the other person. However, later, when both parties were talking to each other more calmly, the shouter offered an unprompted apology for their behaviour. This time, it was offered and received in a completely different way – with empathy and understanding on both sides.

But don't forget, all of this is dependent on the culture you are in. What might look like a 'shouty confrontation' to a Brit might look like a friendly chat to someone from a different culture.

### Horses for courses

How you deal with conflict issues absolutely depends on who you are in conflict with, and the relationship that you have with that person. If you are talking to someone in your family, it might be OK and normal behaviour to let off steam if you have the kind of relationship where that is immediately forgiven and the relationship is not at risk. If it's with someone you are in a long-term relationship with, you may want to raise an issue – even if it's small – in case it remains unsaid, festers and comes back to haunt you. However, if it's a stranger that you'll never see again, you may choose not to make a big deal of it.

But do think about the aim of the conversation. If you want or need to express your full emotions, you may risk being more shouty than if your aim is to find a rational settlement to the issue. In which case it may be more helpful to have a quiet, calm negotiation.

Ask yourself one key question: should I prioritise finding resolution or preserve/improve the relationship? Always stay calm and remember that this isn't just about you; it's also about the other person. Just as we have certain needs (to be respected, valued, etc.), they do as well. So, when you are having a conflict conversation, think about the message you are trying to get across and what the other person needs from the conversation. By taking the other person's needs and perspectives into account, we are more likely to come to a resolution that will suit everyone.

### **Shark, turtle, teddy, fox or owl?**

At Consensio, we use a conflict management model called the Thomas-Killman Instrument (TKI) that identifies five main ways to deal with conflict. These five styles have been likened to different animals by David W. Johnson, a researcher of conflict resolution, and provide a guide to how we behave in conflict situations:

- The 'avoider' (the turtle) who retreats in the face of conflict.
- The 'competitor' (the shark) who focuses on their goals at the expense of relationships.
- The 'accommodator' (the teddy bear who downplays their own concerns to satisfy the needs of the other).
- The 'compromiser' (the fox who seeks a middle-ground resolution).
- The 'collaborator' (the owl who looks for a solution that satisfies everyone).

We are all capable of switching between these styles. For example, we will all be a shark if we see our child run into a busy road, however, we tend to have a dominant style. The TKI is a helpful tool to make us more self-reflective and think about how our preferred style affects how we handle difficult conversations and conflict situations.

If we want to be calmer, it helps to not be impulsive but to plan conflict conversations. Don't jump into something when you are in fight mode. Have these conversations in a calm environment when you have time to really discuss the issues that are important for everyone concerned. We need to remember that there are lots of sides to every story and that the other person's perspective can be as valid as ours.

Finally, the following are my top tips for restoring harmony and defusing potential conflict issues:

- Plan things in advance, think about the goal of the conversation and the words you will use. What does the other person need?
- Is it the right time for this conversation? If you're both too angry, pause and delay the conversation until you're both calmer and able to think more rationally.
- Stay calm and be open to the other person's point of view.
- Share perspectives on what the issue is. What are the facts, what are the feelings and perceptions of all people involved?
- Express yourself without assigning blame. Listen to the other person without trying to defend yourself and criticising them.
- Work together to problem-solve. Ask questions like 'What do you think we should do about this?' and 'What will make this easier for both of us?'