

The 'C word'

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There seems to be a certain word in the English language that organisations avoid at all costs. This word is only mentioned by a few brave individuals in hushed whispers, like any other word that we perceive as a taboo. So what is it about this word, the C word, that makes it so difficult to say, let alone discuss within most organisations?

The C word we refer to is conflict. Organisational conflict. It is as if, by not mentioning this word, not talking about conflict and the impact of it, we can somehow pretend that our workplace is immune from it. But the reality is that by doing this, we are actually losing out on a huge opportunity. This may sound like an oxymoron, but as workplace mediators who deal with conflict on a daily basis, we know that conflict is not inherently bad. Importantly, by speaking about conflict, we can make a real difference to the wellbeing of people within organisations. And this in turn will have a positive impact on how an organisation functions.

Below we look at why most organisations avoid the C word, why it makes good business sense to acknowledge that conflict is normal, and why we should shift from viewing workplace conflict as something negative. As you will see, the C word can actually have a lot of positive connotations.

Why organisations avoid conflict

If conflict occurs in every organisation, regardless of sector or size, why the silence? For some, it is that they don't want to hang out their dirty laundry for others to see. For others, it is because conflict makes them feel so uncomfortable and unequipped that they would rather avoid it altogether. The paradox is that by not acknowledging and dealing with workplace conflict, we allow it to fester and grow. As a workplace mediator, I see how small issues between colleagues transform into something much bigger and more problematic. What could have been resolved quickly and

informally now needs witnesses and documentation. A grumble turns into a grievance. So at the outset, it makes sense not to avoid conflict but to find informal ways, such as mediation, for people to have courageous workplace conversations to resolve issues quickly.

Perceptual shifts

Conflict conversations and informal conflict management should be the norm in all organisations. But this requires a change in the cultural mindset. To do this we must shift people's perceptions about what conflict represents. For most of us, it represents something negative – it makes us feel vulnerable and awkward. But those of us who work with conflict know that the C word is more complex and interesting than that. Of course it can be negative. But it also has huge potential for being constructive. Constructive conflict happens when people are given the opportunity to collaboratively resolve interpersonal conflicts together: it can lead to better communication by clearing the air and clarifying misunderstandings; it can strengthen relationships by enabling people to speak about what is important to them and what they need; it builds empathy; and it can lead to creativity by allowing people to brainstorm alternatives and thus come up with better solutions to problems. What's there not to like?

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