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The need for upskilling your ‘first responders’ at work

Tania Coke, Senior Mediation Consultant, [Consensio](#), discusses the importance of upskilling line managers with conflict management training.

In cases of interpersonal emergency – when workplace conflict erupts – line managers are usually first on the scene. You could think of them as the organisation’s conflict ‘first responders.’ They have the opportunity to provide emergency first aid to help defuse tension before the professional emergency services arrive on the scene – that’s HR to you and me. So what is it that the first responders can do to minimise the damage? What actions are needed to get the casualties of unresolved workplace conflict in the recovery position?

Resisting the Urge to Judge

Before talking about the actions that the first responders can take, we need first to think about their presence. This, more than anything they do or say, will determine their effect on the conflict. For most line managers arriving on the conflict scene, the default behaviour will be to ask questions such as: who is right? who started it? whose fault is it? The parties to the conflict themselves will almost certainly be wrapped up in this way of thinking, looking for people they can win over to their side to confirm their own rightness and the other party’s wrongness. But it is precisely this impulse to defend and attack that triggers the kind of behaviours that cause most damage. So the first priority of the first responder should be to steer the parties away from defensive and aggressive behaviour. They can help do this through role-modelling. If the parties sense that the line manager is not in the business of taking sides, this can encourage them to drop their defences and leave off attacking the other side. That opens the door to a more reflective state in which the parties can reflect on the situation in a mature, constructive way. So that is the first challenge for line managers: to resist the urge to take sides.

But this is easier said than done. Judgements form at the speed of light, fed by a host of assumptions and biases. I may assume, for instance, that a person is innocent because I see them as the underdog, and my bias is to defend the underdog. Or I may assume innocence on the basis of what I already know about the situation, which is not a complete and accurate picture of what is going on. It takes training and practise to overcome these assumptions – especially the ones we are not even aware of. Being realistic, we should accept that we can never be entirely rid of prejudice, but we can nurture the desire to become more self-aware and, through practise, get closer to reaching that state.

Opening the Door to Honest Reflection

What can line managers actually do, other than taking care not to leap to conclusions about the rightness and wrongness of the case, and not making assumptions about who is right or wrong? Of course the right thing to do or say will depend on the situation. Let's take the case where the line manager is alone with one of the parties to the conflict. In the moments after conflict erupts, the parties are at their most vulnerable. This is the time when they are most likely to do or say things they may regret. The line manager can help them recover their senses and gain perspective on what has just happened by asking open, non-judgemental questions. This can give the parties an opportunity to express honestly how they feel and why, free from the compulsion to defend or attack. The challenge for the line manager is to listen patiently and without judgement as each party lets off steam. The line manager will probably feel pressure to identify solutions to the conflict as quickly as possible. But rushing into problem-solving while the parties are still embroiled in the frenzy of conflict rarely produces the best outcomes. The ideal is to wait until they have regained their senses and are able to make their own decisions about what needs to be done and how to achieve this.

To sum up, the best way for line managers to ease a workplace conflict situation is through the presence that they bring. An impartial, non-judgemental presence in the room can help steer the conflict parties away from defensive, aggressive behaviour, and help them return to their best selves. The line managers can also offer open questions to help the parties reflect honestly on what has happened and eventually get clearer about what they need to do and what they can learn from the experience. And just as emergency first aiders require training and practise in order to qualify for the role, conflict first responders need conflict resolution training too – in the skills of listening, questioning, non-judgement and self-awareness.
