



How to avoid Christmas conflict at work



By Anna Shields
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December can be a busy and fraught time in the workplace. How should managers deal with the stresses and strains of the season and avoid conflict in the office? Anna Shields suggests some strategies for the festive period.

“That” time of year is rapidly approaching. The season of goodwill to all will soon be here. However, the reality is that, at home and at work, it is often more the season of forced bonhomie and strained relationships.

Coping with the additional pressures of the holiday season alongside those of our day jobs often means that even the best planned festivities turn decidedly frosty as conflict rears its head. Some unresolved disputes can linger on year after year, while others can build up over the preceding months, boiling over as workmates or relatives gather together.

Both in and out of the office, many of us will find ourselves spending extended periods of time with people we usually see little of. The potentially varied mix of ages, backgrounds and political viewpoints can make or break a celebration. To go from choosing to spend time with colleagues or family, to feeling obliged to do so, can also lead to feelings of resentment.

Striving for perfection

Many of us set unrealistic expectations of the season. By nurturing fond memories from childhood and hoping to create the 'perfect' festivities, we heap more pressure on ourselves. This impractical optimism can extend to workplace conflict situations, imagining that disputes will be forgotten and issues resolved.

Altogether, this is quite a flammable recipe. So, if you want the only bang to be from the crackers, here are some tips to avoid unnecessary conflict over the coming weeks:

Awareness: Be aware and attuned to your triggers and those of your colleagues. Check in with yourself. What am I feeling and why? What might others be feeling and why? What triggers me during the festive period and how can I remain calm in the face of conflict?

Anticipation: Are there any known issues bubbling, either for yourself or for those around you? Conflict at work, as well as at home, can be stressful, so you might notice warning signs such as fatigue, irritability and withdrawal. What can you do to decrease your levels of stress?

Perspective: In conflict, we can lose the ability to see a situation from multiple perspectives, often becoming attached to a single, negative point of view. How might it look from other people's perspectives? How might it be affecting them?

Address it... or not: Decide whether to address conflict, and this will depend who you are in conflict with. If it's with someone you are in a close working or personal relationship with, you may want to raise an issue – even if it's small – in case it remains unsaid, festers and grows.

Tackle issues early: If you're a manager, don't wait too long before addressing a brewing office spat. Nipping things in the bud can be important because, if you don't, conflict can escalate and turn into something unmanageable. And it's the annual company knees-up, it's best not to wait until the event is in full swing to broach the topic.

Mental health and well-being: Conflict can have a major effect on our health. In recent Consensio research, 75% of respondents said conflict had affected their mental health. Remember that some people find the festive season difficult due to experiences such as loss or separation. The festive season can be an opportunity to reach out. Be aware of those that are quiet and include them in conversation.

Listen, don't advise: When it comes to other people's conflicts, we can't always resist solving the problem for them. If a colleague opens up about a problem they're experiencing, it might feel unnatural or even unkind to refrain from giving advice. Often, the best support we can offer is to listen and ask open questions, which makes people feel heard and may help them build their own resources for handling disputes.

Avoidance: Yes, avoidance is sometimes OK. Steer clear of people you have issues with who you've been unable to reach agreement on. A seating plan can help for both a work social and a family event. A big gathering can be split into separate, smaller events.