

Resolving not to solve other people's workplace conflicts



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There's a well-known Chinese proverb that teaches: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." At the heart of this are two principles, both of which chime with the wisdom of our times.

First, the principle of thinking to the future. Today we appear to be more mindful of the longer-term. Just think how commonplace the word 'sustainability' has become. The second is the principle of empowerment. Today, many organisations aspire to be networks with power distributed away from the centre.

Over the past few decades, these two principles have become engrained in many aspects of organisational life. Take, for example, the field of professional development. It used to be common to assign mentors to younger employees: the mentor would offer advice drawing on their longer experience in the business. Today, many HR departments prefer the coaching approach in which the coach, often someone with no experience of the coachee's industry, helps the coachee to think for themselves and find their own answers to the challenges they face.

Resisting the urge to problem-solve

But there's one area where these principles have yet to take root. When it comes to other people's conflicts, we can't seem to resist solving the problem for them. If a team member or colleague opens up about a problem they're having with another person, to many of us it feels unnatural or even unkind

to refrain from giving advice. But there are reasons why the kindest thing may be precisely that. Here are a few.

People in conflict too often feel helpless, confused and stuck. Bombarding them with advice can compound their helplessness and leave them feeling more disempowered than before. What's more, conflict is a highly subjective matter. If you describe the same dispute to ten different people, you're likely to end up with ten different opinions about who's to blame and what should be done. Surely then the best people to decide are the ones who are going to live with the consequences, i.e. the people in conflict themselves. Moreover, if we're to honour the principle of long-term thinking, we should be looking for ways to help people build their own resources for handling disputes, now and into the future. There are better ways to do that than doling out advice based on our own past experience.

So how can we apply the wisdom of the Chinese proverb to the way we handle other people's conflicts?

Time to think

The first is by simply listening. It is a rare and precious thing to find someone willing to listen to our experiences of conflict without blurting out their opinions or steering the conversation in the direction they think best. This kind of open-minded, non-judgemental listening is precisely what most of us long for when we're caught up in conflict. It helps us to clear our mind, figure out what we really think and feel and decide what course of action would be best.

We also value being asked questions that help us find our way forward and gain insights that will make us better at handling conflict in the future. Some of the questions we appreciate most are those that do not imply judgements or assumptions or railroad the conversation into a different direction to the one we want to take. One way to avoid this is to ask questions which follow directly from what the speaker has just said and to offer them options about where to take the conversation. For instance: "You've been speaking about how this has affected your working life. What has that been like for you? And what could make it better?" (For more ideas about the kind of questions that can empower people in times of conflict, see our Guide to Conflict and Wellbeing at Work.)

Building the conflict muscle

Another way we can help people in conflict is to signpost them to services that build their capacity to handle conflict themselves. Conflict coaching and workplace mediation are two such services. A conflict coach is an independent expert who helps people in conflict think through their situation and get clearer about what they want to do. A workplace mediator offers the same support and also helps people in conflict to communicate with one another directly. Both services are based on the principle of self-determination, namely that the people in conflict are the ones best placed to make judgements and take decisions about the situation they are in. There are also a wide range of training programmes available specifically designed to empower people to deal with difficult conversations, handle conflict better and build conflict resilience.

According to the zeitgeist of our times, instead of doling out quick-fix solutions, we should be looking for ways to help people solve their own problems. The question is whether we are able to follow this advice even when it comes to the thorny issue of other people's conflicts. You will see that, once you stop trying to solve other people's conflicts and instead listen to what they are going through and help them come up with their own solutions, conflict can be an enormous opportunity for growth and creativity.