People Management

Why conflict is ruining your workplace – and how to fix it

By Jo Faragher

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When staff fall out, everyone in your business suffers. Here's how HR can begin the fightback

On paper, they don't seem like much. A colleague is excluded from work conversations and not invited to a meeting when a new project is introduced. Another is cut off in the middle of answering a question or pulled up for an easily remedied mistake. Or perhaps the boss overrides reasonable decisions or embarrasses someone in front of their workmates, or forces them to take on more work with the 'incentive' of holding on to their contract.

These were all experiences shared by employees in a recent survey by CV-writing service TopCV. On their own, they just make work unpleasant. Combined and accumulated on a daily basis, they can make coming to work feel like a friction-filled, living nightmare.

Unfortunately, this is the day-to-day experience of more UK employees than you might think. The CIPD's latest research on conflict found that just over a third (35 per cent) of employees experienced some form of conflict over the past year, whether that was an isolated incident or an ongoing difficult relationship.

Instances of sexual harassment and bullying, such as those coming to light within the entertainment and tech sectors, politics and beyond over the last few years, inevitably factor here. The report found 15 per cent of employees have suffered bullying at work over the past

three years, with 8 per cent experiencing harassment of a non-sexual nature and 4 per cent sexual harassment.

But much more widespread are, according to the CIPD's senior adviser on employee relations, Rachel Suff, instances of "lower-level conflict that can create a breeding ground for the serious incidents or bullying".

"The media attention tends to focus on the sharp, serious end of conflict, such as sexual harassment," explains Suff. "But that only accounted for 4 per cent of incidents in our report."

Nonetheless, undoubtedly the rise of movements such as #MeToo, coupled with the explosion of social media, means employees are shouting louder than ever – and that's not always easy for HR to handle. "I think people are getting more confident at speaking up, as though they finally have a voice," says Natasha Wallace, chief consciousness officer at Clear Review. "But as soon as you have a more honest environment where people historically felt they had to keep things to themselves, you need to have more robust conversations and give honest feedback."

A tinderbox environment can often be linked to incongruence – where leaders say one thing and do another, she adds: "It could be a case of 'we support wellbeing' but then they expect teams to work long hours, or expect people to work as a team but set them individual objectives so people can't integrate."

What's happening outside the workplace isn't helping. Pressure on wages, teams feeling like they have to achieve more with less, not to mention political instability and differences of opinion among colleagues on Brexit – these are all factors that can lead to a sense of more friction at work.

Psychologist Kisane Prutton calls this 'asymmetrical unhappiness' – instances of accumulating conflict that may not end up in a formal grievance or mediation, but chip away at an organisation's culture. "The real level of this conflict is difficult to measure because the number of labour disputes doesn't tell you the backstory," she explains. "I think it's a systemic issue – the volatility outside is magnified at work. There's an expectation that people can find space for more human output; everyone is rushing around in a hyper-vigilant state so if someone comes into their path they just crash into each other. The environment is ripe for hostility."

All this leaves HR in the unenviable position of deciding whether to manage escalating conflict through policy so they're being seen to deal with poor behaviour, or to equip managers and their teams with the tools to handle difficult issues, which takes longer and won't be as visible.

This latter approach is challenging to pull off, says mediation consultancy Consensio's Anna Shields, with selecting and developing line managers with the right skills to tackle workplace conflict a notoriously tough nut to crack. "Managers are scared so they get HR involved too quickly and things get formal. Or their lack of confidence means undercurrents are allowed to fester, and aren't nipped in the bud," she says.

Andy Cook, founding director of employee relations consultancy Marshall-James and expert industrial relations adviser at CMP, says a shift to shared services a decade or so ago pushed

responsibility on to line managers without providing them with sufficient training to handle team conflict. "Managers don't like to admit they're not good at it so they go into avoidance mode," he says. "Also, it's hard to demonstrate a return on investment in mediation training because it's a subliminal cost."

The CIPD's research bears this out, highlighting a chasm between managers' perception of how well they handle difficult issues and the reality of what staff think. Fewer than half (44 per cent) of those who had experienced conflict felt the situation had been satisfactorily resolved, and almost a third (31 per cent) said the person they reported it to did not take it seriously. A quarter of employees felt challenging issues like bullying and harassment were often swept under the carpet.

The answer, if organisations are to prevent conflict from festering, the report argues, is for this to become part of the 'strategic language' of HR. "People professionals have a vital part to play in ensuring conflict is understood in all its nuanced complexity, and that organisations give it the strategic attention it deserves," it states. "It means understanding that situations and decisions involving people are not always clear-cut, there are lots of shades of grey and a strict adherence to procedure is unlikely to produce the best outcome."

More value needs to be attached to employment relations as an HR discipline, the report adds, and it needs to regain its status as an integral part of the HR professional's role, rather than a 'nice to have' skillset they deploy when circumstances require.

So to understand more about how conflict can present itself in the workplace, here are some breeds of dissent you might just recognise, and some suggestions on how to deal with them.

The one that bubbles underground

This type of conflict starts off small, often without managers registering it is even there, according to Wallace. "Perhaps someone gets a promotion and someone else doesn't. That person starts rallying for support because they feel wronged. It all happens underground but all the manager sees is hacked off employees," she says. "This is one of the hardest types of conflict to get in the middle of, and unless you have a culture where these sorts of issues can be raised, it will impact on performance."

Carrie Birmingham, former HR director at News UK and now consultant, believes the existence of conflict at work is often trying to tell us something, and that HR's role is to find out what that might be – from a simple process issue to something more sinister embedded in the culture of the organisation. "It's telling you something needs attention," she says. "Maybe two teams have been set up in a way that encourages conflict – let's look below the surface and see what's really going on."

The one that's left to fester

"If managers lack confidence and they don't have the skills, this is a recipe for conflict going on longer than it should," says Shields. And if something that could have been solved with an open conversation escalates and becomes more formal, introducing mediators or holding a resolution meeting may be too late, she adds: "Factions have been drawn already, so conflict sets in."

Shields says managers should be coached in listening skills and resilience to prevent them from rushing to formal procedures. "The formal process sits at the top, with mediation underneath, but there are a lot of stages before you get there," she says. "You can have facilitated or supported conversations [where HR or a mediator is present] and the manager can initiate a difficult conversation with those involved before that."

The misunderstanding

If an employee feels they're not being heard, this can be a breeding ground for conflict. "It can be worse for people with high demands on them but low levels of control," says Prutton. "We often see this in low-paid roles where people have little autonomy." But while managers need to be mindful of how employees feel about their role and whether they have a voice, sometimes the 'noise' of a busy workplace can obscure the real reasons for unrest.

"The hidden gem for a mediator is if it's a misunderstanding," adds Prutton. "Sometimes it might be a notion of bullying when it's a case of them not being heard, rather than being bullied. Perhaps the manager has strict goals placed on them and is not treating the employee in a human way. We need to give people the time and space to listen properly."

Suff notes that often conflict masquerades as one thing when its root is something else entirely. "The conflict may be expressed as a performance issue, but there could be other tensions underneath such as a relationship breakdown or resentment over not being promoted," she says.

The one where the manager made things worse

Almost a third of employee respondents to the CIPD's conflict survey said that, when they reported an incident to a superior, their manager actually ended up making things worse. There's a consensus that managers need more skills in dealing with difficult conversations, but these must be embedded into day-to-day interactions rather than 'switched on' when bad things happen. "Often if a manager has come to HR about a situation it's because they can't stand it any longer – it has got so bad something has to be done about it," says Birmingham.

In cultures where conflict is dealt with before things boil over, there tends to be regular dialogue between managers and HR, so managers feel they can have a 10-minute pep talk with an HR professional before dealing with an awkward situation, rather than saying the wrong thing or avoiding the issue altogether. "I don't mind a manager running to HR if they want us to help them to help themselves," says Birmingham. "If we're coaching managers, giving them the understanding of dealing with difficult situations and the opportunity to apply it, they'll do better."

The one where the culture is the problem

The CIPD's research revealed that one in five employees felt 'people in my team sometimes reject each other for being different'. "Attitudes and behaviours don't have to come in the form of overt prejudice for someone to feel excluded," says Suff. "Organisations need to be aware of any hint of a culture that doesn't embrace diversity and acceptance.

"You need to promote a culture that is transparent, healthy and open, but where the slightest sign of inappropriate behaviour is challenged." This means taking complaints seriously and encouraging individuals to call out bad behaviour when they see it. Policies that deal with harassment or speaking up should be visible and brought to life, with senior leaders taking the lead. Third-party helplines can be useful here but, without an inclusive culture, employees may not feel comfortable using them.

The one where conflict comes from the top

Leaders have a huge influence on how conflict is managed within an organisation. Under pressure to deliver on ever-more ambitious targets, they often focus on the technical aspects of performance rather than on what motivates people as humans. Left unchecked, this can filter throughout the business and create an environment of stress and disengagement.

"When it comes to dealing with undercurrents of conflict, managers are in a privileged position," says Teresa Boughey, founder of Jungle HR and a seasoned change management leader. "They need to be authentic in their interaction rather than transactional." This often comes down to gaining a true understanding of how the other party thinks, she adds, citing an example of competing leaders with conflicting styles who underwent a mediation session: "We looked at what was driving their behaviour on a 'bad day' and how that affected how they dealt with each other. They realise now that they come from opposite perspectives, but actively work around that rather than letting it get in the way."

Regardless of who is experiencing this sort of two-way conflict, empathy is crucial. For HR, encouraging managers to ask the right questions can help. "Rather than focusing on someone's to-do list, ask them what's the one thing that's keeping them awake? If someone's feeling vulnerable, how can you change your approach?" advises Boughey.

More important than the right questions, she concludes, is truly listening to the responses – wise advice for anyone who's experienced conflict at work.