



Managing COVID-19 conflict

In these extraordinary times, leaders have a critical role to play in identifying and resolving struggles. By **Anna Shields**



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Nowhere has been left untouched by the COVID-19 pandemic and FMCG is one of the sectors most affected, putting organisations and their staff under intense pressure.

The huge, unplanned fluctuations in demand across the consumables market poses significant challenges on a scale never seen before. Couple this with the resourcing issues caused by self-isolation and social distancing and the burden is felt organisation wide.

In such times of stress, conflict is likely to rear its head. New disputes can easily start as employees deal with increased business and personal demands or take on extra workload to compensate for colleagues that are ill or self-isolating.

If such disputes aren't addressed, they can fester and grow. Unresolved conflict affects health and productivity taking valuable time, energy, money and resources to resolve. So, what can leaders do to ensure conflict is managed and doesn't get out of hand?

Recognise when conflict is arising. Some signs are easy to spot, for instance arguments or complaints about behaviour. Others can be less obvious, such as team members withdrawing or taking sick leave. If staff are working remotely, conflict may not be so visible so managers should be encouraged to

organise regular virtual meetings and welfare calls which can be good opportunities to identify issues.

Don't ignore it. We often avoid addressing conflict, feeling we don't have the time to deal with it or are afraid of making things worse. However, leaving it unresolved can have significant consequences. In our research, 84 per cent said that conflict had affected their overall health, 75 per cent found their mental health impacted and 25 per cent had taken time off due to conflict.

'If staff are working remotely, conflict may not be so visible'

The research also highlighted a view amongst employees that leaders should take responsibility for workplace conflict. Leaders can make a positive difference, not only to the people involved in the conflict, but also to themselves, to their teams and to the organisation as a whole.

As a leader, it's important to 'walk the talk'. Rather than covering up disputes you encounter, use them to demonstrate how to respond to conflict in a healthy way. If people see their managers welcoming differences of opinion, inquiring respectfully and even-handedly, they are more likely to do the same. This can help cascade a culture of healthy conflict through an organisation.

Encourage people to tackle conflict

early and talk to the other person involved, preferably in person, though more likely virtually due to current circumstances. Organisations should ensure their policies align with this approach, encouraging employees to deal with the conflict themselves and, if that's not possible, with the help of a facilitator or mediator. Formal process should always be a last resort.

Be aware that many people feel they don't have the skills or confidence to tackle conflict. Training can help develop these skills and there are easy-to-access options online such as courageous conversations training and conflict resolution skills for managers.

Unfortunately, sometimes parties are unable to resolve a dispute themselves, particularly if it has been bubbling away for a long time. It can then be invaluable to enlist the help of an impartial workplace mediator. Face-to-face or online mediation can be a quick and cost-effective solution to help parties to communicate and come up with their own solution. As well as using external mediation services, many organisations train staff, including HR professionals, as accredited mediators who can conduct in-house mediations.

In these turbulent times, leaders who ensure their organisations deal with conflict effectively will protect the health and wellbeing of their staff and see benefits in terms of productivity and reduced costs. Empowering employees to resolve conflict informally and through dialogue builds conflict resilience across the organisation.