

What can we learn from how the NHS manages conflict?

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UNRESOLVED WORKPLACE CONFLICT CAN HAVE A SERIOUS EFFECT IN ANY ORGANISATION. BUT IN HEALTHCARE, WHERE IT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO PUT LIVES AT RISK, THE EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICT IS PARTICULARLY CRITICAL.

The NHS is one of the world's largest employers and conflict in the workplace is never far from the surface. Only recently, a Royal College of Surgeons report hit the headlines when it warned that a "fractured relationship" between two consultants at a London hospital was affecting the running of a paediatric surgery department and could have the potential to put patients at risk.

However, the situation also highlighted the crucial role that HR strategies played in addressing conflict. Workplace mediation, away-days and 'constructive conversations' were all cited as being utilised to manage the case.

HR professionals across healthcare, and indeed many other sectors, are experiencing the benefits of using informal conflict management tools to resolve disputes before they escalate into time-consuming grievance processes, or even legal and tribunal claims.

Mediation

Mediation is a powerful intervention for individuals and teams experiencing conflict. A confidential, voluntary and informal process, mediation helps parties to talk issues through together with an impartial mediator to find a way forward.

Increasingly, large organisations such as NHS Trusts, are using mediation to informally resolve workplace conflict. Some Trusts use external mediators whilst others train staff members as accredited mediators and set up an in-house mediation service.

Team healing

When senior individuals are in conflict, it is likely that this will affect the wider team. If the conflict is not resolved, it is likely to escalate into something unmanageable, which will seriously impact the functioning of whole teams or departments. Even after mediation, it is important to help the wider team, who may not have been involved in mediation, to move forward.

A trained facilitator, or a team manager, can support this recovery by encouraging the team to reflect on what can be learnt from the experience and what can be done differently in the future, be that on an 'away-day' or in the normal working environment. After a stressful conflict situation, a team needs to heal fractured relationships, build trust and find more productive ways of working.

Constructive conversations

Many organisations find that conflicts arise, or are exacerbated by, people not having the confidence or skills to talk openly about an issue. When we have a problem with a colleague, most of us struggle to have a courageous face-to-face conversation. We may fear getting hurt, losing control or making things worse. The trouble is, when we avoid these conversations, tension and resentment rises, and small issues can grow into something much bigger.

However, having 'courageous conversations' is a skill that can be learnt through training and, with practise, becomes easier. Furthermore, these conversations can be a golden opportunity to increase our self-awareness and understanding of others and forge closer relationships with our colleagues.

Prevention is better than cure

Conflict is a natural part of working relationships and can bring many benefits to an organisation, such as generating new ideas and strengthening relationships. It's not a case of preventing conflict altogether, but rather ensuring that conflict is managed well when it arises, and disputes are dealt with in their early stages. In other words, making sure conflict is a healthy part of organisational life.

In addition to encouraging individuals and teams to learn from conflict and equipping them with the skills and confidence to have courageous conversations, HR professionals can support a healthy conflict culture in other ways too, including:

- Training line managers as 'first responders' to support their teams in dealing with conflict themselves and to be able to facilitate discussions so issues can be resolved before needing mediation.
- Ensuring managers and senior staff 'role model' healthy conflict, support constructive challenge within their teams and discourage negative behaviours.
- Review policies and processes so that they encourage personal accountability in addressing issues early and the use of informal resolution before formal procedures.

An organisation that builds resilience to conflict in these ways can reap many rewards, from reducing the time, energy and resources spent dealing with destructive conflict, to boosting the productivity and well-being of employees. Considering how healthcare, and many other sectors, are under ever-increasing funding and resourcing pressure, effective conflict management offers a great opportunity to increase the financial, emotional and physical well-being of organisations and their people. And keep out of the headlines.