



‘Remote conflict’: What happens when teams work from home?

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It may be easy to assume that conflict only happens face to face, but even as entire teams have been disbanded and working from home, it can still rise to the surface. Anna Shields looks at the challenges that we can expect from workplace conflict issues in the ‘new normal’ era of remote working.

Workplace conflict has been traditionally experienced between colleagues who work together face-to-face. However, as more organisations embrace agile working, our awareness of conflict in a virtual environment has increased.

The coronavirus pandemic, which has forced many employees to work from home almost overnight, has brought ‘remote conflict’ into sharper focus. For HR and leaders, the need to support their virtual teams to understand and address conflict quickly and informally has become a pressing issue.

Unresolved workplace conflict can have a serious impact on the mental health and wellbeing of those involved. It can also have significant business costs as it affects the wider team, reduces productivity and takes up considerable time, energy and resources.

With so many employees now ‘out of sight’, there is a real risk that conflict goes unnoticed or is avoided until it grows to an unmanageable level.

Conflict poses obvious risks, but it also offers opportunities to foster innovation and creativity and improve workplace relationships. Harnessing the opportunities of conflict, especially in the current uncertain economic times, could be crucial in helping organisations face the challenges ahead.

So, how does conflict arise in remote teams, especially in the current pandemic, and what can HR and leaders do to help their teams manage conflict when it occurs?

Conflict and remote working

Workplace disputes can arise for a variety of reasons. Disagreements can occur over tasks, behaviours, management styles, personality clashes and much more. However, there are aspects of working remotely that bring particular challenges.

Communication is one area in remote working that commonly generates, or exacerbates, conflict. Firstly, the mechanics of virtual communication are different to office-based dialogue. We tend to use emails and messaging platforms more and it’s easier to misconstrue someone’s meaning in an email or not realise the impact of a hastily typed message.

And, who hasn’t struggled with video conferencing recently? Reading body language is much more difficult when we’re not physically face-to-face. Missing these vital visual cues often leads to misinterpretation of others’ intentions.

If we try to clarify, it can be hard to break into the video conversation or our connection slows down and the discussion has moved on. We can be left with the wrong impression, or give up, leaving us frustrated and disengaged. It's easy to see how conflicts can then arise or existing disputes grow.

In addition to the technical aspects of virtual communication, remote working reduces the opportunity for informal communication. Impromptu chats, or water-cooler moments, where news is shared or queries quickly resolved are key in building relationships and trust.

Pandemic pressures

Most of us have been significantly affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The suddenness of change, restrictions on freedom of movement and limitations to social contact have caused significant stress.

There are also worries about the health of family and friends, job security and the economic outlook. After a couple of months of lockdown, people will have adjusted to some aspects of the 'new normal', while in other ways, the pressures can have built up over time.

The current environment is affecting people in different ways. Some will be juggling work alongside childcare and home-schooling, others may feel isolated and alone. For many, workload has increased, whilst others will be finding their work life quieter.

This can lead to feelings of resentment towards colleagues who are perceived as having an easier time or 'relaxing' on furlough. These negative thoughts can damage working relationships now and also build up for the future when colleagues return to work.

The lockdown has also deprived us of many of the ways we used to take care of ourselves, such as socialising with friends and family, travel or sports. This means that our capacity to deal with conflict in a healthy way can be reduced.

Conversely, there can be benefits in the current situation. Colleagues that are able to share their experiences in times of crisis forge stronger bonds, supporting each other during this challenging time. For many, there is also the time and opportunity to develop new skills, both in the world of virtual teaming and by undertaking training.

Tips for managing remote conflict

There are practical ways that leaders can support their remote teams in managing conflict in a healthier way:

- **Facilitate connection.** Check in with people regularly, not only about tasks but also on a personal level. Foster team interaction with social video calls.
- **Keep an open mind.** If there seems to be an issue between colleagues, don't make assumptions and remember to stay impartial. Empathy and compassion will support colleagues to share their different points of view.
- **Tackle conflict early.** If you see colleagues in conflict, reach out to them. Encourage people to act quickly and have a direct conversation. Don't avoid addressing conflict just because we're not working physically together. Remote working could be the norm for many months.
- **Get support if required.** Leaders need the confidence and skills to manage conflict, which they can gain through training in courageous conversations or conflict management skills. If individuals are unable to resolve a conflict, consider bringing in an independent third-party to facilitate an online mediation session.