

The logo for CHANGEBOARD, featuring the word in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font with a small asterisk-like symbol inside the letter 'O', set against a dark purple rectangular background.

Developing your conflict management skills for a pandemic world

By Anna Shields, co-founder and director, Consensio – 30th July 2020

With employees juggling the pressures of new working with demands at home, workplace conflict can be more pronounced and complex. How can we ensure our conflict management and resolution skills are fit for the current working environment? Anna Shields, co-founder and director of Consensio, provides her insights.

There's no doubt that the world of work has changed significantly since the onset of the pandemic. Many people have been managing the psychological challenge of dramatic changes to their working lives with the competing demands of family life or pressures of isolation.

Although we may have adjusted to the initial sudden changes, as time passes, the situation continues to be uncertain. Some of us are transitioning back into a physical workplace, whilst others are managing the longer-term impacts of remote working or dealing with worries over finances and job security. The stress and anxiety many of us are continuing to feel may be having a significant impact on us, both physically and mentally. Stress affects our thinking and behaviour, making us more likely to get into conflict situations. In turn, being in conflict can cause significant anxiety, which further affects our health and wellbeing.

So, in the 'new normal' working environment, how can we ensure that people are equipped with the skills to manage and resolve workplace conflict successfully? Below we discuss five key areas that need particular focus during the pandemic.

Recognise that we need to communicate differently

Whether a manager is having a difficult conversation over a video call, or a staff member is challenging a colleague from behind a mask, the way we communicate has changed for many of us. It's important to recognise this and build the skills to deal with this new way of communicating effectively.

Generally, whether virtually or through a mask, we need to work harder to understand each other. On video calls, we miss out on the many helpful cues that body language can bring. Similarly, when talking to a colleague in a mask, it can be very difficult to read facial expressions. Without these context cues, it's easier to misconstrue someone's intent and conflict can flare up.

Also, we need to get used to 'seeing' ourselves whilst we communicate virtually. A manager or a workplace mediator dealing with a conflict is much more likely to be using video calls. Seeing yourself dealing with a stressful situation, observing your facial expressions, especially if you've been used to working face to face, can be unnerving.

Be aware of mental health

It's particularly important at the moment to be considerate of the state of mind of our colleagues. We need to be mindful that existing mental health conditions may have been exacerbated by the events of the past few months.

Everybody's circumstances are unique and different people will deal with the pressures of the current situation in a different way. If a conflict arises, it's important not to make assumptions about the person you are in conflict with. There may be things going on for them due to the pandemic that you are not aware of and that is impacting their behaviour towards you. Managers need to take a more empathic approach, keep an open mind and ask questions without preconceptions.

How to resolve conflict virtually

Although many of the core conflict resolution skills remain the same, with the current reliance on virtual communication tools, the way in which conflict is handled or mediation delivered may need to be adapted.

Managing conflict virtually may take more time. In remote working, a manager addressing a conflict with a team member can't just drop by a desk and ask for a quick chat. A video meeting can take time to schedule and, once on the call, it can take longer to establish rapport and understanding.

A workplace mediation can also take more time. Delivered face-to-face, a session would usually take a day, whereas an online mediation will need to be split into shorter sessions over various days because it is difficult for parties to sit in front of a screen for a whole day.

Address conflict early

In the current circumstances, with so many of us working from home, it can be easier for conflict to go unaddressed. However, if conflict is left unresolved it can fester and grow which will negatively impact the health and wellbeing of those involved.

With a remote-working team, it can be tempting to avoid tackling difficult situations and to wait to address it face-to-face. In a physical environment, with social distancing and protective measures in place, it may also be tempting to put things off because we may not want to add to the pressures people are under. Either way, it's crucial to encourage managers and colleagues to address conflict before it gets out of hand. Delaying conflict conversations is likely to make them more challenging.

The opportunity to foster deeper connection

Although there are challenges in managing conflict in the current situation, there are also opportunities.

Lots of people are enjoying remote working and finding the home environment more productive. We can also get to know our colleagues in a deeper way, seeing children or pets join a video meeting or sharing our personal challenges of the pandemic. Feeling more relaxed while working and building stronger relationships with our co-workers helps to reduce unnecessary conflict and enables us to deal with it more calmly when it arises.

Many employees also have more time and 'headspace' to learn. Online training can easily, and cost-effectively, reach people in any location. Interactive group training is particularly useful when learning conflict management and mediation skills. This can be achieved online with creative, well-structured content and the use of virtual breakout sessions. There's also the added benefit of learning alongside colleagues from different locations, who may not otherwise be able to meet.

We're facing an uncertain future, in which many organisations will be under financial pressure. It's never been more important to help our people navigate conflict in a healthy way. If we recognise the skills that need to be developed and support teams with training and external expertise when required, conflict can be resolved quickly, informally and collaboratively.