trainingZONE

Conflict management training in a virtual world

Anna Shields Co-founder, Consensio

27 August 2020

Remote working brings with it new issues and conflicts. Training people to handle these conflicts will also be happening virtually in many cases, so it's vital that learning providers adapt their content and delivery accordingly.

In today's remote workplace, conflict hasn't disappeared, but the way we are able to manage it has changed. This is why conflict management training has evolved, to ensure managers have the skills to resolve conflict in a virtual workplace.

Over the past few months, the coronavirus pandemic has transformed our working lives. Now, large numbers of employees are still working from home, whilst others are transitioning back into a physical workplace. Either way, for the foreseeable future, the days of face-to-face training are behind us. This means that online training isn't just a valuable option – it is now a necessity.

Another necessity for many organisations is the ability to manage workplace conflict. Conflict doesn't disappear in our virtual workplaces, and when left unresolved, it impacts employee health and wellbeing, as well as engagement and productivity.

Dealing with conflict online isn't new, and workplace mediation services have been delivered online for some time. What is different now is that there are many more teams managing conflict remotely, often for the first time. L&D professionals need to ensure that their teams have the skills to manage conflict virtually and that the available training reflects the new world of remote work.

So, how has conflict management training, more traditionally delivered face-to-face, changed to make it effective online and how can it deliver the skills needed in a virtual workplace?

Training design
As with many online services, training needs to be designed and structured to reflect that the online experience is very different to the face-to-face one. This is especially important when training in interpersonal skills, such as conflict management and mediation.

Online training programmes need to be devised creatively to engage delegates online. They also need to be broken up into shorter sessions, as time on the screen is more tiring than face-to-face. As group interaction is particularly useful when learning conflict management skills, virtual breakout rooms allow trainees to discuss, practice and learn from each other's experiences.

New sources of workplace conflict

There are many sources of conflict at work and the case studies and role plays on conflict management programmes are developed to reflect the real-life scenarios that delegates may be involved in once they start using these skills. With the shift to virtual working, there are also new causes of conflict that need to addressed in a training environment.

When relying on virtual communications, or indeed speaking with colleagues wearing a mask, there's more potential for misunderstandings. Many of the helpful cues given by body language or facial expressions can easily be missed. Without these context cues, it's easier to misconstrue someone's intent and for conflict to flare up.

There may also be disagreements more directly related to Covid-19, for example, staggered start and finish times, furlough decisions or excessive workload. Training needs to help people discuss these issues and the impact they have on individuals and teams. Conflict always, but especially now, needs to be handled with empathy and compassion, and the resolution of conflict can only occur if the needs and feelings of those involved are addressed and worked through.

Self-care in an online environment

Alongside training design and course content, there needs to be a focus on self-care for delegates. Learning to handle conflict can be stressful in any situation, and the virtual environment brings two additional potential stress factors: online fatigue and self-view. Since dealing with conflict is tiring for all involved, it's important to take regular breaks and factor in time to decompress after facilitating a difficult conversation.

Whilst one of the benefits of virtual training and online conflict resolution is the ability to see how one comes across online, delegates can find it unnerving and distracting to see themselves on screen. Experiencing this in a training environment and learning to manage it can be valuable.

Delivering resolution

Alongside these new challenges of virtual resolution, there are also many opportunities. Online training will cost-effectively reach people in any location, making it much easier to set up a training course with colleagues across multiple time zones. Staff trained in virtual conflict management will be able to deal with issues swiftly and informally, creating a safe virtual environment for courageous conversations to take place.