



How To Avoid Conflict Contagion As U.K. Workplaces Reopen

By Anna Shields 4 August 2020

Boris Johnson has given employers the freedom to ask staff to return to their physical workplaces from August 1, but teams are not just picking up where they left off. The new rules, fresh challenges, and continued uncertainty are likely to make workplace conflict more pronounced and complex. By creating a team conflict charter, leaders can empower teams to manage conflict early, informally, and collaboratively.

Workplace conflict during coronavirus

There are many sources of conflict at work, from misunderstandings and personality clashes to unfair treatment and bullying. During the Covid-19 pandemic, other areas of conflict have also emerged, for example over virtual communication and frustration over workloads. As physical workplaces re-open, there are likely to be a number of new challenges relating to staggered working hours, different attitudes to social distancing and other safety measures, such as handwashing or face coverings.

In this 'new normal', it is highly likely that leaders will be managing geographically-dispersed teams, with some staff returning to a physical workplace, others continuing to work from home, or a mixture of both. It may be many months, or longer before offices return to full capacity, and some may never do so at all. It's easy to see how a team whose values were closely aligned a few months ago may be out of sync now, and how the early warning signs of conflict can be missed in disparate teams.

A proactive conflict protocol

Many leaders feel that they lack the skills and confidence to address conflict situations, and it may be tempting to ignore inter-personal conflict, hoping the problem will just disappear. Rather than waiting until relationships break down, cliques form and sickness absence rises, consider developing a team conflict charter.

A team conflict charter is a set of ideals, developed by the team, which describes how they would like to communicate with each other and how they will handle any conflicts that arise. The team manager can facilitate the discussion in a safe and confidential environment and some teams will find it useful to capture the agreement in written format.

Questions should include:

- How should the team communicate with each other regarding existing tensions and trigger points?
- What specific actions can everyone take so that conflict is seen as an opportunity for better communication rather than a negative cycle of blame and counter-attack?
- If team members can't resolve a dispute themselves, what informal support is available, for example, facilitation, conflict resolution training, or workplace mediation?

Reaping the rewards

Allowing team members to discuss these questions will empower them to focus on the informal prevention and resolution of workplace conflict. With a charter in place, it is much more likely that conflict is addressed early and before it gets out of hand. This will prevent many of the harmful effects of unresolved conflict.

The conflict charter reflects a commitment by the team that each individual will take responsibility for their actions. Because it is developed collaboratively, team members are much more likely to adhere to it. The charter also helps to clarify expectations about how the team will deal with conflict, which will strengthen relationships between teammates and build trust.

When leaders and their teams deal with workplace conflict informally and sensitively, it can become a healthy part of organizational life. Conflicting views and constructive challenges can foster innovation and generate fresh ideas, which most companies value, particularly in these uncertain times.