

Real Business

Three top tips to prevent, manage and resolve workplace conflict

*By Alexandra Efthymiades, Director and Co-Founder, Consensio
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Preventing, managing and resolving team conflict is not easy, but it is an essential leadership skill. Consensio is one of the UK's leading conflict management and mediation consultancies. Director and co-founder, Alexandra Efthymiades, offers three top tips on how to deal with workplace conflict. Seven months into a global pandemic, conflict management skills are even more important. The continuing uncertainty is increasing our levels of anxiety, which is impacting our resilience, engagement, productivity and wellbeing. This is not a good recipe for workplace relations. At Consensio, we are witnessing first hand that the current context is making workplace conflict rife. As a leader, there are things you can do to support your team to prevent, manage and resolve conflict more quickly, informally and collaboratively, so that issues don't fester and grow.

“Whenever possible, the focus should be on the prevention rather than resolution of conflict.”

Three top tips for leaders to prevent, manage and resolve workplace conflict

1. Check in with your team members regularly

The current context is impacting people differently. Some people are doing well. Others are not. Some people working from home are enjoying having more flexibility and time with family. Others feel overwhelmed because they are juggling longer work hours on top of increased childcare demands and the worry of potential job losses.

When we're stressed at work, we have a tendency to become overly task-oriented and we don't focus sufficiently on workplace relationships. Right now, we need to focus on relationships. This means checking in regularly to ask how team members are doing, both professionally and in their personal lives. How are they coping? What are they struggling with? What support might they need?

Example case:

A recent client of ours was feeling isolated working from home, and worried about her job. She was working extremely long hours, focusing on tasks, not workplace relationships. This meant that her team was feeling side-lined and isolated from her and from each other. Through conflict coaching, she realised how her behaviour was impacting her team. She started to check-in regularly with them and found out that one of her team members was suffering from anxiety since the start of the pandemic, but hadn't said anything because he felt she did not care. Because she started to check-in with them, our client was able to find out how team members were coping and enable those that needed it to get the support that would help them cope better. In this instance, this meant that her team member did not need to take time off work, but was able to manage his anxiety with the support of his manager and Occupational Health. Right now, it's really important to create the psychological space that allows team members to speak about how they are coping with the continuing uncertainty. Some people may appear to be doing well when they are actually not.

You will only know if you ask.

“As a leader, it is important to remember that connection leads to trust, which leads to more communication and collaboration, and less conflict between team members.”

2. Use thoughtful communication

For those of us still working in a remote team, most of our workplace communication is happening via email. This means that much of our communication can be easily misinterpreted and misunderstood. As most of us no longer sit near our colleagues, misunderstandings can't be easily resolved over a cup of tea or a stroll around the block.

Instead of email, use richer real-time communications, such as videoconferencing. This will allow you to read people's facial expressions and engage in communication that is less likely to lead to misunderstandings. When you do send a written message, be more thoughtful than you would normally be about your tone and how someone else may interpret your message.

This is important because overwhelmed and anxious team members are more likely to read things into our written communication than they otherwise would. This is why we should put more context into our messages and use a friendly tone. Such messages are less likely to lead to misunderstandings and conflict.

Example case:

A few weeks ago, a client contacted us to refer a mediation between a manager and an employee who used to get on well but whose relationship had broken down since working from home. The employee had approached HR to say he wanted to take out a grievance against his manager, and HR suggested mediation.

During mediation, the employee told her manager that the reason their relationship had broken down was because she was sending her rude and insensitive emails at all hours of the day, and this made her feel bullied and disrespected. The manager, who was working extremely long hours and was under a huge amount of pressure, did not intend her emails to come across this way.

Mediation enabled the parties to speak about the pressures they were both under and the impact the behaviour of the other was having on them. They ended mediation with an agreement on how they will communicate better in the future to re-create their old and collaborative working relationship.

3. Ask for third party support if you need it

It is inevitable that there will be some degree of conflict at work. Because some conflict situations are really challenging to resolve, rather than trying to deal with a protracted situation on your own, you may need support from a third party, such as HR, a trained facilitator, an impartial mediator or conflict coach.

It may also be useful to look at online training courses to support your leaders and/or team members to manage conflict more collaboratively and with more confidence. You will find many excellent online courses on relevant topics such as *Courageous Workplace Conversations*, *Conflict Management Skills for Leaders* and *Workplace Mediation Skills*.

Example case:

One of our clients, who works for a conflict-avoidant organisation, contacted us after noticing a worrying trend in cases going to formal process. The client commissioned us to deliver an online *Courageous Workplace Conversations* course for senior leaders to learn to address issues quickly and informally with team members. The leaders who attended the course reported a significant increase in their confidence to have these conversations and felt much more skilled to manage things on their own before asking HR for support. The client is now thinking about rolling out the training course to other senior leaders, with the hope that the conflict-avoidant organisational culture can be transformed into one where conflicts are addressed quickly, informally and collaboratively.

Alexandra Efthymiades, Director and Co-Founder, Consensio

Alexandra has over 15 years of experience in the field of organisational conflict resolution and mediation. She holds two Master's degrees, including an M.A. in Organisational Psychology from Columbia University in New York. Alex was a community mediator in the South Bronx before becoming a workplace mediator in London. Alex has worked internationally, including at the United Nations in Geneva. She set up Consensio with Anna Shields in 2007.

About Consensio

Consensio is a leading conflict management and mediation provider with a distinctive approach. Consensio believes that conflict is best resolved through dialogue, informally and collaboratively. They provide training, conflict coaching and mediation services throughout the UK and internationally. Clients include: the BBC, British Gas, Bupa, Net-a-Porter, Sony, University of Cambridge, Westminster City Council, NHS Trusts, WWF and the United Nations.