



## What's hiding behind the mask?

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**As we start another year in a pandemic, workplace relationships are under strain and HR teams are dealing with the inevitable conflict issues that arise. For many of those still working physically together, colleagues are now partially hidden behind a physical mask.**

As we deal with the different challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, what's going on behind the mask?

### **Unmasking conflict**

At the heart of most conflict is miscommunication. The pandemic has shown us that although masks are essential, they may impact how we interpret each other.

Most people have experienced the muffling effect of masks leading to words being misheard. Body language and facial expressions also offer context clues to determine meaning. When we can't see the whole face, we lose valuable input and misunderstandings are more likely to arise.

Masks can potentially impact how people deal with conflict. Some people may be reluctant to have a difficult conversation, put off by the thought of trying to express a sensitive topic from behind a mask.

Not all workers have the option of asking to speak to someone outside where a mask could be removed. If so, conflict issues are less likely to be raised and can fester and grow. Conversely, other people could find it easier to talk behind a mask where they may feel protected or more able to disguise apprehension.

### **We all wear masks, even when we don't**

When we think about masks, we most commonly associate them with a physical mask, worn to protect or hide the face, but there are other forms of masks too.

Another definition of 'mask' refers to 'a manner or expression that hides your true character or feelings'. To function in modern society and at work, we learn to show or hide different aspects of ourselves, depending on the situation.

We wear these 'metaphorical' masks every day. However, it can be a strain to maintain our usual work persona in challenging times, such as a pandemic, 'when the mask slips'.

Also, when faced with a conflict situation, we need to know which mask to wear. Many of us don't know how to deal with conflict calmly and with control and instead overreact and make the situation worse.

Remote workers can be masked too, intentionally or unintentionally, such as participants on Zoom calls who turn off their cameras, which hides their reactions and engagement.

When our colleagues' faces appear in the small Zoom window, this obscures their body language and ability to give us valuable context cues.

### **Mitigating the mask**

Whatever mask is being worn, there are ways to counteract adverse effects that may contribute to conflict. During the pandemic, we've all learned ways to enhance our communication when wearing a face mask. Nodding to supplement a smile, varying our tone or language, or maintaining eye contact for longer to better read emotions.

For Zoom calls, staff can be educated in best practice to aid clearer communication, such as sitting further back from the camera so it's easier to read body language.

Line managers can be trained to spot the signs of conflict that can easily be masked in a virtual team and support their teams in addressing any disputes that arise.

HR teams are also able to look out for indicators of conflict across the whole organisation. Monitoring absence rates, staff turnover and the reasons for this, may reveal areas of the business that need additional support.

More direct methods, such as feedback mechanisms and surveys, can be used to identify whether mask-wearing staff are experiencing particular issues and strategies can be put in place to assist them.

Masks help protect us from infection but they don't protect us from conflict. To what extent physical face coverings directly contribute to a rise in workplace conflict is currently unknown with little research in this area.

Masks affect communication, and miscommunication is at the heart of conflict, so masks are likely to play a part. By looking beyond the mask, we can focus on better understanding each other.

Not only will issues be resolved as they arise, but we can also become better communicators when the masks (eventually) come off.