



Getting your head around workplace conflict

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 28th July 2021

With Acas reporting that workplace conflict is costing UK businesses over £28.5 billion a year, ensuring staff have the skills to resolve issues that arise at work is crucial. But it's more than just what to say and when. What we often overlook is how our attitudes and beliefs affect how we approach conflict. Adopting a more positive conflict mindset can help to resolve many disputes before they get out of hand.

The cost of conflict

Most people will encounter conflict at some point in their working lives. A boss demanding more work than is achievable, or a colleague making disparaging comments in a meeting. Sometimes we can brush these off but, in other instances, they can have a much more significant effect. If left unresolved, issues fester and grow, affecting working relationships, productivity and mental health.

A recent study for Acas revealed that 9.7 million UK employees experience conflict every year, at a cost to organisations of nearly £30 billion, the equivalent of more than £1,000 per employee. Costs are direct and indirect, ranging from HR time spent dealing with grievances, legal costs incurred to increased absence and the cost of recruitment. Then there are the personal costs. The study reveals that over half of those experiencing conflict – around five million employees a year – report suffering stress, anxiety or depression as a result.

With these eye-opening figures, it's more important than ever that we are equipped to manage conflict situations when they arise. A critical aspect of this, and one that can be especially difficult in the heat of the moment, is to look at our own conflict mindset.

Awareness of ourselves and those around us

We all have inclinations towards certain behaviours and viewpoints. Some people tend to feel criticised; others tend to feel victimised. These predispositions act as a 'lens' through which other people's intentions are judged. For example, do you assume that when someone with whom you have a tricky working relationship disagrees with you, they are trying to undermine your authority? It can be useful to ask what stories you are telling yourself about the other person to justify your viewpoint.

Being more aware of our reactions can also be insightful. When talking to a colleague, you might notice there is tension in your body, that your heart is racing, or that you feel flushed. These are common reactions when we feel under threat, and our fight-flight-freeze (FFF) response has been activated. Sometimes the signs may be less obvious, for example, feeling on edge or out of sorts. By being aware of our reaction, we can then manage it and choose to respond in a more considered way. We can also observe other people's body language and tone to recognise if they are being triggered and then amend our approach to help deescalate a tense situation.

Open your mind

As we often feel threatened by conflict, it can become difficult to think clearly and calmly. Someone says something out of turn, we feel the need to defend ourselves and the situation can escalate. As this cycle continues, we become increasingly fixated on our existing opinions and beliefs, becoming 'closed off' to other points of view.

Focusing on being open to the other person is particularly useful in a conflict situation. During workplace mediation, parties often use words such as "open" or "open-minded" when they reflect on their experience of going through the mediation process. If your approach in conflict is one of openness and curiosity, this will be reflected in how you speak and act. Asking questions, attentive listening and being non-judgemental also demonstrate openness.

It's also helpful to be open to the possibility of change. When we are in conflict, it's easy to make assumptions about how things will turn out, telling ourselves, "It's no good, it will always be the same with them." It's helpful to believe that there could be a different outcome this time.

Many organisations are affected by the financial costs of conflict. However, we all can experience the personal impact of conflict. By better understanding ourselves and those around us, and being open to different perspectives, we can adopt a healthier conflict mindset, reducing the costs all around.