Training skills for invisible conflict conversations

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 21st July 2021

Conflict at work causes significant organisational and personal costs. The solution lies in developing leaders and managers who can spot problems early and tackle them before they escalate, says Anna Shields.

Nearly 10m employees experience workplace conflict every year, at a cost to UK companies of £28.5bn, according to a recent report published by Acas.

A significant proportion of these costs were incurred when conflict resulted in formal procedures with costs on average three times higher than informal options. Yet only around a quarter of employees experiencing conflict reported speaking directly to the other party.

With the huge opportunity to save time, money and protect wellbeing, organisations need to enable these conversations to happen. And yet, as soon as organisations start to track these conversations, there is a risk that they move from informal to formal.

This highlights the paradox that HR and L&D face – how to train managers and teams for these 'invisible' conversations, whilst also being able to 'see' that they are happening.

What are invisible conversations and why are they important?

An example of an invisible conversation is a manager hearing of an issue in their team and then talking with the individuals involved to find a resolution. HR never needs to get involved so the issue remains invisible to the organisation.

Similarly, colleagues in conflict could be speaking directly with each other or a staff member could ask their manager for advice about a conflict they are experiencing to find an informal resolution.

If a conversation takes place early, directly and collaboratively, many issues can be resolved whilst keeping the relationship intact. However, when these conversations are avoided, tension and resentment rise making it more stressful for everyone involved.

If a dispute is taken straight to a formal process, such as raising a grievance, the issue is much less likely to be resolved constructively and the associated costs – both financial and personal – are much greater.

The new report, 'Estimating the costs of workplace conflict', written by Professor Richard Saundry and Professor Peter Urwin, attempts to quantify these costs. With an estimated 9.7m employees experiencing conflict each year, the report calculates an average cost to organisations of £1,000 per employee in conflict, rising to £3,000 where the conflict results in formal procedures.

Then there are the human costs associated with conflict: 40% of employees in conflict felt less motivated, 85% had the potential to exhibit 'presenteeism' (working while ill), and 56% reported stress, anxiety and/or depression. These costs don't include the impact on people's lives and relationships outside of work.

Yet, despite the significant organisational and personal costs, only 23% of employees experiencing conflict reported speaking directly to the other party. So, it would appear that in many cases, the invisible conversations that could resolve conflict quickly and informally just aren't happening.

Why don't employees have these invisible conversations?

Many employees fear conflict, worrying that they will get hurt or lose control, that they won't be understood or that they will make things worse. Many people also lack the skills to have these conversations, not knowing what to say or how to say it, or how to manage their reaction in what can be a highly emotional situation. As it's uncomfortable, they avoid the problem and hope it will go away.

This lack of skills and confidence applies to managers as well. Many managers don't know how to spot conflict when it's happening or how to encourage staff to address it. This means they aren't able to role model a positive, constructive approach to conflict.

The report describes that, of the respondents who discussed their problem with their manager, union representative or HR, only 43% also stated that the problem had been fully or largely resolved.

How can L&D support?
With only a quarter of staff experiencing conflict speaking to their manager, training for leaders should be an integral part of an organisational strategy. A number of disputes will still go to HR, so ensuring HR teams can deal with issues effectively is also critical.

HR managers trained in conflict coaching skills can help staff understand their options when facing a conflict and help them understand the implications of their choices. Sometimes, they may be able to encourage staff to try informal routes rather than formal procedures.

Saundry and Urwin's report backed up the effectiveness of workplace mediation, observing that nearly three-quarters (74%) of those who underwent mediation reported that their conflict had been fully or largely resolved.

Using mediation, whether external mediation services or through training internal mediators, encourages informal resolution. Yet it can still be a sign that invisible conversations aren't happening early enough.

For a conflict transformation strategy to be truly effective, all employees need to know what's expected to address conflict informally and support in doing so. A clear policy that encourages an 'informal-first' approach is an essential foundation.

Providing on-demand training and resources is a cost-effective and effective way to support staff as and when they need to address a conflict situation and also helps to facilitate continual learning.

Conflict management skills should be embedded into competency frameworks, and assessed through recruitment and development processes, especially for managers. Leadership teams can be coached to set the example and promote a positive conflict culture.

Also, working with HR and communications colleagues to communicate the benefits of constructive conflict from personal growth and relationship building to business benefits such as increased creativity and innovation.

Measurement – the paradox of invisibility

In any L&D strategy, and indeed in many aspects of business, it's natural to want to measure effectiveness. How many conversations are taking place now? How many should be taking place? Leaders may also want to identify problem areas or highlight where the good managers are in order to give recognition or share skills.

But there's a paradox. To measure and track accurately a process needs to be created and, in this case, a process around a behaviour that you want to be natural and informal. It's one thing to encourage staff to have a direct conversation, but another to then log a report.

A conversation could then be perceived as yet another business metric. Some staff may not want to flag when they're dealing with a conflict, fearing how it will reflect on them. There are also issues around trust; staff should feel empowered to take responsibility for their own interpersonal relationships without big brother watching them.

Aside from tracking indicators, such as the number of grievances raised, there are other options that could help build a realistic picture of whether effective invisible conversations are taking place.

Questions can be included in employee surveys, for example, 'How do you think your manager handles conflict?', 'How confident do you feel in talking to a colleague you are in conflict with?' or 'Do you feel able to challenge and suggest new ideas?'

Exit interviews can also identify conflict as a reason for leaving, especially if conducted impartially, i.e., not by a line manager. In reality, measurement is likely to be a combination of indicators.

As well as highlighting the significant opportunity to reduce negative impacts of conflict, the Acas report also underlines the great potential of focusing on relatively low-cost, high-impact prevention actions, such as direct conversations.

It will mean shifting from a culture of conflict avoidance to one of healthy conflict. Seeing these as 'invisible' rather than 'difficult' conversations, helps to depressurise them and, with L&D's leadership, talking about and learning from conflict can become the norm to the benefit of everyone.