



A Stitch In Time: Why It Pays To Spend Time Resolving Conflict At Work

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 20 August 2021

When conflict flares up with a colleague, it's easy to ignore it. Everyone is busy, time is precious, and there are deadlines to meet. In Oliver Burkeman's new book, "Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals," he highlights that the average life span is 80 years or just 4,000 weeks on earth. With this in mind, why waste time on that difficult team member who you think will never change?

These are the stories people often tell themselves to avoid facing what can be an uncomfortable conversation. And it's true, conflict does take time to address and resolve. But if it's not dealt with promptly, a dispute can quickly escalate and end up taking much more time than it would have taken to nip it in the bud. Understanding why conflict takes time and the benefits of giving resolution the time it needs, leads to better outcomes and stronger workplace relationships.

No time for conflict

Working lives are busy; there are always emails to answer, meetings to attend, and projects to complete. For many, the pandemic has added more time pressure. Recent reports suggest that working hours have increased by up to 30% over the pandemic period. It's no wonder many workers feel overwhelmed and time-poor.

With the clock ticking, and the list of tasks mounting, it is tempting to brush issues aside or rush to a 'fix.' Managers are trained to solve problems, so they tend to apply this to conflict, saying, 'Oh, they just need to do x or y'. Not only does this take away an opportunity to collaborate, but it can also make the situation worse.

Ticking time bomb

People experiencing workplace conflict tend to spend time worrying or talking about the issue with colleagues, which affects productivity. Anxiety and stress frequently impact mental health and well-being, leading to disengagement or absence, which takes time to manage, and impacts other team members who need to cover the work.

As unresolved conflict gathers pace, it expands and evolves. More people become involved, such as managers, HR, and witnesses, especially if a dispute goes down a formal process, such as a grievance. The CIPD Conflict Management Survey (2011) estimates that, on average, a grievance takes seven days of management time, often over many months, which adds to the many other costs of conflict, such as legal fees and recruitment.

Why resolution does, and should, take time

There are many reasons why reaching resolution takes time. When difficult conversations are put off, by the time issues are addressed, parties are often more invested and entrenched and less likely to be objective. Emotions run high, and pride can be at stake. It takes time for people to have their say, vent feelings, and then be open to other possibilities.

The issues that underlie conflict are often more than they at first seem. What might appear to have been caused by an isolated incident, when unpicked, can turn out to have years of history. The incident which caused the conflict may just have been the 'last straw.'

Conflict is layered in complexity. When conflict resolution professionals mediate acute conflict, they help individuals to explore more than just the incident of conflict. There are differences in perceptions, intentions, and impacts that the parties need to discuss. These conversations take time, and parties learn useful information about each other and themselves, often gaining clarity about their thoughts and feelings in the time and space afforded by the mediation process.

A mediator not only helps parties to explore the issue at hand but reflects what else is going on in the room. The mediator listens on different levels, observing how parties communicate and how they hear each other to support them to gain a better understanding of the situation and move forward.

All things come to those who wait

They say time heals all wounds, and what often comes as a surprise to mediation parties is the healing nature of having time and space to listen and speak. Stephen R. Covey, author of 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,' said, "The key is in not spending time, but in investing it." There's no better place to invest some of those 4,000 weeks we have than in improving our relationships.