



The Impact Of Covid On Workplace Conflict

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 3 August 2021

As more countries move tentatively back to a version of 'normal', and organizations cement their plans for working patterns, leaders may anticipate some unhappiness or discord amongst staff. But many may not be prepared for the number of workplace conflict issues rising to the surface.

Workplace mediators have noticed some new themes in employee conflict over the pandemic. New issues are appearing, different people are reaching out, and what they're saying has changed too. As time goes on, more of these disputes are becoming apparent, particularly as staff return to work, having been reluctant to bring up issues remotely or when it was 'all hands-on-deck' during the early days of Covid. By looking through the window of hundreds of Covid-era mediations, leaders can understand some of the bigger themes in workplace conflict to better support staff in addressing the issues they face.

Conflict and the organization

Over the past 18 months, one significant theme in workplace conflict is that employees are increasingly in conflict with the organization itself. Throughout Covid, many employee-employer disputes have hit the headlines, often fueled by pandemic-driven changes to working lives. Recently, Apple employees voiced concerns about 'rigid' hybrid working rules, and Google's staff are reportedly angry about a 'two tier' remote working plan. As organizations try to get staff back into workplaces, this theme is likely to continue.

It's interesting to reflect on is why there is more conflict between staff and organization. Many people's attitude to work has shifted over the pandemic. For some, the pandemic has led to a change in priorities, putting their own needs or dreams first. For others, the way they perceive they've been treated during the pandemic has affected their view of their employer. Whether staff want to take a different career path or fight for hybrid working, some now feel in a stronger position to stand up for what they want, or they'll walk, prompting some economists to forecast the 'Great Resignation'.

Conflict in teams

In the experience of many mediators and conflict coaches, the last 18 months have seen an increase in team mediations. Some have been driven by specific pandemic-related issues, such as colleagues not respecting social distancing or safety protocols. Others are indirectly related, such as team behaviors on video calls.

Generally, there has been more team conflict related to diversity. A recent survey by The Workforce Institute revealed that 83% of UK employees feel people at their organization are not heard fairly or equally. There are particular tensions between different age groups. Millennials and Gen Z have very different expectations as to how they want to live and work. This can cause friction with older

colleagues used to doing things differently. With the increase in flexible working patterns, this is an area that is likely to need continued focus.

There are other underlying themes contributing to team conflict. Managers continue to be under considerable pressure, from supervising remote teams to dealing with hybrid working or a return to work. When conflict does arise within their team, line managers often lack the skills and confidence to address it. This was backed up by a recent report for Acas, which reported that when employees discuss a conflict issue with their manager, union representative, or HR, only 43% reported that the problem had been resolved.

Conflict and the individual

On an interpersonal level, conflict has arisen from feeling overworked and overwhelmed, with additional at-home caring responsibilities a contributory factor. There have also been more disputes related to mental health during the pandemic, as existing mental health issues have been exacerbated by isolation, working conditions, and the uncertainty created by the pandemic. Underpinning this are wider societal shifts. More people are speaking up now, as they are increasingly aware of their right to be heard, fueled by seeing others do so on social media. Workers are also voicing their views more openly, illustrated by the recent Netflix controversy, which saw workers reportedly 'griping' about their bosses. There is also greater awareness of health at work, with staff talking more openly about mental health issues.

Whatever perspective conflict is considered from, the underlying theme is that employees are speaking up more, be that as an individual with coworkers, within a team environment, or asserting their views to their employers. Too often, conflict is viewed as a negative, but it is through the process of speaking up that individuals, teams, and organizations inspire, innovate and grow. So perhaps one of the few silver linings of the pandemic is that it offers leaders an opportunity to support those in conflict to speak up in a more informal way and find solutions to seemingly intractable situations.