

How L&D can promote the benefits of conflict management skills

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 23 September 2021

Managing conflict is a key skill for line managers but is often seen as an inconvenience and something for HR to handle. Now is the perfect time for L&D to help promote the benefits of conflict resolution training.

The fallout from the global pandemic has permeated every level of corporate life. That includes strained relationships between employees. As working life increasingly returns to a 'new normal', more of these conflict issues are becoming apparent. L&D and HR play a pivotal role in ensuring that conflict management skills are recognised as an invaluable part of a line manager's 'day job'.

Sticking your head in the sand

Although in pole position, line managers often don't tackle issues when they arise. A recent report for ACAS revealed that nearly 10 million people experience conflict at work each year, resulting in significant financial and personal costs. Yet only 23% of employees in conflict reported speaking directly to the other party. Of these cases, around half spoke to their manager, union representative or HR, with only 43% reporting that the problem had been fully or largely resolved.

The report highlights both the extent of conflict within organisations, and the critical role managers play in resolving it. To help organisations address this challenge, L&D and HR need to understand why line managers aren't tackling conflict, and then engage managers on the importance of conflict management skills and practical training to build capacity.

Line managers can sometimes see conflict management as a hassle, an unnecessary distraction from their day job, and not something that should be part of their management responsibilities. This outlook often results in a 'send them to HR' approach, which not only tends to formalise conflict, but also means that managers don't learn and practice conflict resolution skills.

Building the business case

Because many line managers have responsibility for cost control or have P&L responsibilities, outlining the business impact of conflict can help make a case for skills training. The ACAS report estimates that a grievance typically costs £951, a disciplinary £1,141, and resignation on average £2,324 per person.

By contrast, when conflict is resolved early and informally, costs are generally two-thirds lower. This highlights the potential cost savings for managers who have the skills to identify and help resolve conflict in their teams.

Team management

It can be tempting to see disputes as being limited to the parties involved. However, it's important that managers recognise that unresolved conflict can spread, which affects the wider team. Parties in conflict often spend a significant amount of time talking about the issue with other team members, which impacts time and productivity, as well as morale and engagement.

Conflict often leads to absence and resignations, and other team members then need to cover work, or spend time with recruitment. None of this makes a busy manager's life easier. Skills to nip conflict in the bud is, therefore, a worthwhile investment.

Personal impact

An important part of building the case for training is communicating the personal impact of managing people in conflict. As conflict management and mediation professionals, we see the emotional toll on managers who deal with team members in conflict.

Line managers who have built up strong relationships with their team often feel distressed when they witness team members under extreme stress or suffering health implications for something that the manager can feel has happened 'on their watch'.

There's also the potential personal 'reputational' impact. A manager perceived by their team as not dealing with conflict, or not handling it well, can lose the respect of their team. Disputes that result in formal processes, such as grievances, tribunals or legal proceedings, often get discussed at senior level, which is not the sort of profile-raising that most managers would wish for.

The opportunity

Although HR and L&D can highlight how conflict skills and training help managers do their job, there's also an opportunity to promote the benefit of mastering these skills. For a line manager, being seen to handle conflict well and support team members, builds trust between them and their team.

A team that feels safe discussing issues is more likely to suggest new ideas and challenge the status quo, which results in better processes or innovation. High-performing teams often comprise individuals with diverse, contradictory opinions which, when managed well, help teams build collaborative relationships and perform better.

In short, line managers who support their teams in conflict situations, not only reduce the adverse impact of conflict, but can also reap significant rewards.