



Resolving Conflict In The Hybrid Office – 3 Tips From A Professional Listener

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 30 September 2021

As more staff return to the office, many leaders are supporting teams as they adjust to hybrid working. Part of this support will involve dealing with new sources of workplace conflict. To help employees resolve their disputes, leaders are often encouraged to be good listeners, for example, by applying 'active listening' skills such as eye contact, not interrupting, and asking open questions. Equally important, and often missing from communication skills training, is knowing *what* to listen for.

After many years as a workplace mediator and conflict coach, I've often been described as a 'professional listener.' As such, I've seen the power of deep listening and how it can transform relationships. By using some of the key techniques of a professional listener, leaders can pick up clues as to what's going on beneath the surface and better support their teams in resolving conflict in the hybrid working world.

Here are my top three tips for leaders to take their listening skills to the next level.

Tip 1. Listen for repetition

Leaders can gain new insights into the underlying issues of conflict by paying particular attention to the words used. Repetition is one signal to keep in mind. For example, if a staff member keeps repeating that they've not been consulted on new office working arrangements, it's a sign to dig further. You could make a simple reflection, such as 'You've mentioned a few times that you weren't consulted,' and then invite them to expand on this. Not only does this enable the person to feel listened to, but it will also give you further information about what 'consultation' means to them. It may be different from your understanding of the same word. And it may reveal that personal circumstances are being affected by the new way of working.

It might also highlight deeper issues beyond the office plans, perhaps that the employee doesn't feel valued. If you keep hearing the same words repeatedly, there's something that the employee wants to express that needs to be surfaced.

Tip 2. Listen for intentions, perceptions, and expectations

It's often by listening for what's between the lines that a manager can be most helpful to those navigating conflict. For example, someone in your team is feeling hurt that a co-worker arranged a face-to-face meeting with a client on a day when they are working remotely. It probably wasn't the goal of the other person to cause distress. By listening out for this, a leader can then help team members differentiate between what was intended by one person and what was experienced by the other.

At the heart of conflict are often differences in perceptions and expectations. In the example above, someone may perceive that they are being deliberately excluded or that a colleague disrespects their relationship with the client. A divergence in expectations may lead people to notice only those behaviors that fit their expectations of the other party and ignore the behaviors that do not match. If someone thinks their co-worker is acting with bad intent, they are likely to perceive every action as an intentional slight. Leaders can often pick up tensions between staff and encourage an open discussion before the situation escalates. A helpful question here might be, "How would you have expected the meeting to be organized?"

Tip 3. Listen for feelings

Emotions run high when people are in conflict. Angry accusations or a litany of unreasonable actions might be cited. However, underneath the anger is often a range of more complex emotions, which people need support to identify and express.

Encouraging those in conflict to express their feelings also opens the door to empathy - the ability to understand and reflect someone else's feelings. In a stressful conflict situation, people tend to see the problem purely from their point of view and find it difficult to empathize. If someone hears how their co-worker feels and then shows empathy towards them, the other is more likely to reciprocate. In this way, a leader can help colleagues move from positions of blame to empathy, defusing the situation and paving the way to move forward.

So, listen up

As a 'professional listener,' I've seen many leaders struggle with their active listening skills during a conflict situation. As staff adjust to hybrid working, leaders have a perfect opportunity to listen more deeply and help staff navigate the conflicts that may arise. The result is likely to be stronger, more collaborative relationships for the future.