People Management

How to improve post-pandemic union and employer relations

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 8 November 2021

With increasing numbers of staff returning to their workplaces, and others adjusting to hybrid working arrangements, new and existing conflict issues are rising to the surface. With the pressure on organisations to adapt, recover and grow in a post-pandemic world, it's critical for UK unions and employers to work closely together to resolve employee disputes and support productive working relationships.

The impact of Covid on conflict

The pandemic has put immense pressure on many organisations. Nowhere was this felt more keenly than in the teams dedicated to supporting employees, such as HR and unions. Jane Perry, who was a BECTU trade union official for 14 years says, "initially there were lots of issues around getting people furloughed. The hours we worked were crazy."

The NHS, at the coalface of fighting the pandemic, found Covid had a significant impact on workplace conflict, according to Karl Cockerill, ex-union rep and now mediation service coordinator for a large NHS trust. "In the last 18 months, I haven't done a workplace mediation that hasn't mentioned Covid", Cockerill says. "Be it the way people are following or not following the Covid measures, or as a result of the stresses that people have been under."

In other sectors, there have been different challenges, particularly with new hybrid working patterns. "It's frustrating," says Perry. "I've had a case where someone wanted to continue to work from home, as returning to the office would have significant health implications. They were being told they had to return to the office."

On the flip side

Although there have been many challenges, there have also been positive experiences of HR and unions working together. At Cockerill's NHS Trust, HR and occupational health work closely with unions to ensure workplace conflict is resolved quickly and informally, and the pandemic didn't stop that. "We all feel it's crucial that conflict issues are mediated within five-to-seven days, which saves months of worry and stress for everyone involved," he says. "When the pandemic hit, we offered the choice of online mediation or face-to-face mediation in a large, well-ventilated room."

Whether conflict is Covid-related or not, what are the cornerstones of a successful relationship between unions and HR?

Openness and transparency

It all starts with communication. "Union reps sometimes have a reputation for being combative," says Cockerill, "but often, that's a reaction to how they feel they're being treated by management. To have a successful relationship, HR needs to involve unions from the start."

Camila, who works in HR for a large union, seconds the need for early involvement. "Open communication and transparency are key," she says. "If unions are involved in policies from the outset, you get buy-in and you can work together to resolve conflict informally."

Open communication requires trust and a positive and collaborative mindset. Perry says, "everyone needs a win-win attitude. It's about seeing industrial relations as an objective process rather than taking it personally. It's when it's taken personally that there's strife."

Direction from leadership

Another core component is the need for support from senior leaders, both in promoting the right culture and having the policies to support it. Cockerill feels that both unions and HR are often just trying their best to follow the processes they are set. "Union training is centred around going down the grievance route," he explains, "and, as many company policies direct staff in conflict to deal with it through grievance, HR is often the same."

Dealing with conflict through grievances is usually a long process that is stressful and time-consuming for everyone involved. These circumstances make it difficult for HR and unions to work together constructively. Encouraging informal resolution as a starting point leads to fewer issues reaching unions and HR and sets the tone for a more collaborative approach.

Policies alone aren't enough. "Organisations can turn a blind eye," says Perry, "saying 'we've got a policy' and then think that's enough." Cockerill adds, "you need senior management buy-in. With the directors on board, they will influence both union reps and HR to work together."

Staff empowerment

The key to managing conflict effectively is ensuring staff and managers have the skills and support to address conflict early and directly. Camila says, "I don't think organisations do enough; it could be better. They need to create a culture where people are empowered to talk informally before issues get bigger. People need to have the skills and feel safe to speak up."

When it comes to bullying, Perry's specialist area now as a freelance consultant and trainer, she says, "organisations need to have the courage to teach people how to politely rebuff the early signs that someone is testing their boundaries. It's important to tell employees what is and isn't acceptable behaviour and what to say when something doesn't sound right."

The last 18 months have thrown many challenges at HR and unions alike, and many have worked together more closely than ever before. As organisations start to emerge from the pandemic, this poses an opportunity to build a new era in union and employer relations.