



## Reducing The Stress Of Conflict At Work Using The 3Rs

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 28 October 2021

Stress at work affects most people at one time or another. And interpersonal conflict, whether it's with a boss or a colleague, accounts for a significant proportion of this stress. According to a recent report for Acas, between 2018-2019, nearly 5 million UK employees suffered stress, anxiety, or depression due to workplace conflict. An estimated 85% of these staff members continued to work and exhibited 'presenteeism,' impacting productivity and employee wellbeing. Ahead of next week's International Stress Awareness Week, there are three areas where leaders can help their staff to reduce the stress of conflict. These are the 3 Rs – reframing, response, and resilience.

### Reframing conflict

Conflict is commonly seen as negative. Being in conflict with someone at work can feel uncomfortable. Most people don't relish difficult conversations or confrontation, which is why staff and managers often avoid dealing with issues when they arise. However, there are ways in which organizations can create a culture where conflict is nipped in the bud and dealt with informally and quickly, and where conflict conversations are seen as a normal part of life at work. This culture would welcome diverse perspectives and view constructive dialogue as a path to innovation, creativity, and improved processes.

A powerful way to reframe conflict is to see it as a learning opportunity. Conversations can be approached more openly if they're framed from the perspective of 'What can I learn about the other person's point of view?' or 'What can I learn about myself?' This more constructive mindset helps reduce the stress and anxiety around conflict and builds stronger, more trusting relationships.

### Response management

As conflict is often perceived as a threat, the brain prepares the body for an emergency response, releasing stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol - the classic fight, flight, or freeze response. Not only does this stimulate physiological effects, such as increased heart rate or sweaty palms, but it also impairs the ability to think clearly and rationally, hence why those in conflict often lose control and say things they may later regret. Thoughts turn negative, and the situation becomes binary: victim or bully, right and wrong, my fault or yours.

Actively managing this response is particularly helpful in reducing conflict-induced stress. A key step is to notice how the conflict affects one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. This greater self-awareness can help break the cycle of negative thinking and open the door to change. Relaxation techniques, such as controlled breathing, can help to manage the stress response in the moment. Research also suggests that seeking support from family, friends, and colleagues also helps, as positive social interactions are calming.

## **Resilience to conflict**

The third 'R' is resilience. Without the skills and confidence to manage conflict constructively, staff will avoid dealing with issues. This, in turn, means that conflict management skills aren't practiced, leading to a self-perpetuating circle.

The key to changing this pattern is to create a conflict-resilient culture, supported by policies and training. Traditionally, policies encourage those in conflict to lodge a grievance, encouraging "resolution" through formal routes and effectively discouraging staff from speaking with each other directly first. However, it is the informal conversations that are key to resolving conflict quickly before it gets out of hand.

For organizations, supporting staff to reduce the stress of conflict protects employee wellbeing and opens the door to closer working relationships and enhanced performance. The 3 R's were once the foundation of the education system, so perhaps they can be used again to re-educate leaders and staff to take a more collaborative and less stressful approach to conflict.