



There's No Better New Year's Resolution Than Becoming Better At Resolution

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 23 December 2021

As the year draws to a close, it's often a time to reflect on the past 12 months. Millions of people worldwide will make New Year's resolutions, only to abandon them again within a few weeks.

This year, why not try a different approach? With workplace conflict affecting at least a third of employees each year, it's never been a better time to focus on improving conflict resolution skills. By taking inspiration from some popular New Year's resolutions, leaders can take three simple steps to build their conflict resilience in 2022.

#1 Exercise... the conflict muscle

According to a survey by YouGov, the most popular New Year's resolution in 2021 was to do more exercise. Building physical fitness takes time and repetition, which also applies when developing conflict resolution skills. Just as no one can go from a sedentary lifestyle to running a 5km race overnight, it's unrealistic to expect that dealing with conflict will feel like a walk in the park from day one.

Building conflict resilience is like strengthening our muscles. It is built up bit by bit and with attention, training, and practice. A good place to start is with the little niggles that crop up every day, such as feeling irritated when a teammate always shows up late or being upset when you feel repeatedly interrupted by a colleague. By acting early and speaking directly to the other person to understand their perspective, minor issues are unlikely to escalate into bigger disputes.

As with any fitness regime, realistic goal setting is important. And so is being prepared for the occasional training setback. A conflict conversation may not always go as expected, but there's usually something that can be learned from it, which can be carried forward for the future. Conflict management training or on-demand resources can help the learning journey. More serious conflict issues may benefit from specialist expertise from a conflict coach or workplace mediator.

#2 Healthy eating... balancing the conflict diet

Very popular, especially after an indulgent festive break, is the resolution to eat better or lose weight, even though around 80% of diets don't succeed. One of the main reasons for this is that a mindset change is needed first. Similarly, having a healthy mindset towards conflict is key to dealing with issues constructively. And yet, this is increasingly difficult to achieve.

Just as many people now recognize that a highly processed food diet can be harmful to health, there's also the need to acknowledge that some information that is 'consumed' can be unhealthy to the conflict mindset. In an increasingly digital world, AI algorithms track what users read and watch and then offer similar content to maximize time spent on the platform. Instead of experiencing a

wide range of unfiltered content, digital consumers receive a higher proportion of information that aligns with and reinforces existing views. Over time, this narrows perspective, and when faced with a real-life conflict situation, people are likely to be less tolerant of others' viewpoints and convinced that their view is right.

Being conscious of this influence and taking steps to mitigate it helps counter its effect on thinking and behavior. When addressing a conflict situation, take time to prepare your mindset, recognize that there may be a range of viewpoints, and be open to them.

#3 Quit bad habits... smoke out unhelpful behavior

Breaking bad habits can be hard. Indeed, studies show that quitting smoking is the toughest New Year's resolution to keep. One challenge is that bad habits often feel good. When we resolve to kick unhelpful conflict habits, the challenge is two-fold. First, knowing what's a bad habit, and second, moving away from what feels 'good,' or more accurately, what feels comfortable or familiar.

A common bad habit in conflict is to look to blame someone for what has happened. When a mistake is made, or something goes wrong, it's a common response to look for the source. Why? How? Who? People may blame someone else to protect themselves. The person who has been blamed then feels under attack and becomes defensive. This is likely to fuel a cycle of blame, with neither party wanting to lose face or take responsibility. As the cycle continues, each becomes more entrenched in their position and less able to see other viewpoints.

When a problem arises, rather than looking to blame, explore what happened, and be curious and empathic. Often when one person shows empathy, others do the same, leading to better understanding and collaboration.

Instead of making the same resolutions as last year and the year before, make this New Year's resolution a commitment to learning a new skill – conflict resolution. By exercising your conflict muscle, adopting a healthy mindset, and ditching the habit of blaming, your conflict resolution skills can grow and flourish. As 2022 arrives, rife with uncertainty, keep in mind one certainty: being conflict-resilient will benefit you and your colleagues for years to come.