



How to handle on-team conflict and negative work environments when working remotely

By Alex Efthymiades, Consensio, 15 March 2022

In those bygone days of working in an office or on site every day, it was fairly easy to tell when there was a conflict brewing between your team members. You could feel the dense, negative atmosphere, sometimes hear the harsh words and put-downs, and see the heads shake in meetings.

Perhaps the answer was to walk up to the warring parties, get them together in a room to air out their differences or delegate the issue to HR.

Now that many of us are working remotely at least part of the week, conflicts over the direction or speed of a project are still there – but it is harder to hear, feel and see them.

“Communication issues arising from working remotely include a lack of face-to-face conversations, which can lead to misinterpretations and assumptions,” says independent project manager Valentina Lorenzon.

“There is none of that real-time interaction, such as walking up to someone’s desk to ask a question. There can also be a lack of transparency around decisions, engagement and misaligned objectives, as well as speaking in a different, less professional tone. All of these factors can lead to conflict or a negative work environment developing.”

When people don’t go into an office, they are much more likely not to address difficult issues, argues Alexandra Efthymiades, director of workplace mediation specialists Consensio Partners. “That’s because you think you don’t need to, because you are both at home. It’s easier to work in silos when you work remotely. Managers need to be aware of some of the impacts of working remotely on personal relationships and trust.”

Set new boundaries

So how can project managers tackle conflict when it arises in the bedrooms and kitchens of the nation?

Lorenzon advises managers to “exaggerate” what they would do in a face-to-face environment.

“This means checking in with people regularly; make a point to encourage trust, collaboration and openness within the team,” she says. “You need to renegotiate how you will all work together by

setting new boundaries and coming up with new rules. You need to be transparent about your processes and decisions and address issues promptly to prevent them from escalating.”

On a practical level, if an issue is raised, then managers need to set up individual video meetings with the affected employees.

“Ask them what is going on and what their perception of the situation is. Try to be as impartial as possible, as it is likely you might have a stronger relationship with one of the employees than the other. Listen with empathy! Don’t say ‘Oh, come on, get over it!’” Eftymiades says.

“Ask them what they need from each other and their working relationship. You could then facilitate a three-way conversation where you are doing a lot of listening and they are discussing what has gone wrong with their relationship.”

Learn to empathise

Mike Wild, senior programme manager, says having a dedicated third-party person for staff to turn to is important in nipping conflict in the bud.

“Speak to a mentor or another experienced colleague and explain that you have had a run-in with someone,” he says. “It’s not to get a pat on the shoulder and be told that you’re great and the other person is wrong. It is to help you empathise with that other person and the pressures they face.”

Although harder to spot virtually, this closer engagement will allow managers to pick up on signs that there are tensions within their team.

“Just ask how someone is feeling rather than ignoring it,” Eftymiades says. “Regularly check in with people and ask how work is going and how their relationships are with other members of staff and with you. Ask them if they need to discuss anything.”

This is an area, however, where she believes managers are lacking. “We are not training our managers well enough in interpersonal, soft skills. This will keep people engaged and motivated if you can get it right,” she states.

Emotional intelligence

Lorenzon also believes in the need for project professionals to develop better emotional intelligence. Part of this could be creating bonding opportunities for their team, including informal gatherings such as virtual drinks.

“I have found that people are more open during these occasions than they would be in an office, because you are in each other’s homes virtually! You can share thoughts and opinions,” she says.

Wild is unconvinced. “I can’t imagine anyone wanting to have lunch over a screen. You’re so tired of staring at it, you want to get away! I find online work chats are a better way of bonding and finding like-minded oldies like myself to get on with!”

It comes back again to the human element, even in a remote world.

“The pandemic has helped us understand more about other stresses in life. That colleague is ignoring you not because they don’t respect you, but because their wife is ill,” Efthymiades says. “It’s about understanding your people better. We’re not there yet.”