

Isolation And Conflict In The Hybrid Workplace

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 31 May 2022

Conflict at work can leave individuals feeling isolated. Although this was already happening before the pandemic, workplace mediators have noticed an increase in feelings of isolation in the last two years. This is taking place alongside other growing societal trends. Pre-pandemic, Dr. Vivek Murthy, the 19th U.S. Surgeon General, said that isolation and social disconnection is the greatest public health crisis we face. With hybrid working potentially magnifying isolation and social disconnection, this should also be seen as a workplace health issue. What can be done to alleviate the damaging effects of isolation on employees, the wider team, and the organization?

Isolation and mental health

While hybrid and remote working bring many benefits, an increasing number of mediation parties report that they feel disconnected and vulnerable at work. These are individuals who are already experiencing conflict with one or more of their colleagues. This also needs to be seen in the context of the pandemic, where social contact was limited both in and out of work. Yet, many employees talk about the negative impact of conflict and isolation on their mental health and well-being.

The challenge for leaders is to identify and support isolated workers whose mental health is suffering. National initiatives, such as Mental Health Awareness Week, which this year focused on loneliness, raise awareness and share helpful resources about this important topic. Managers are often in the best place to spot signs of loneliness, such as changes in employees' behaviors or communication, and can encourage individuals to seek support.

The effect of isolation on relationships

If staff members feel isolated due to conflict and spend less time together in person, it is more difficult to build relationships and trust with colleagues. Comments and actions, or inactions, are more likely to be misconstrued. In some of our recent mediations, a number of parties have cited an over-reliance on email, leading to miscommunication and misinterpretations.

Managers have a key role to play. By recognizing those most at risk of withdrawal, managers can better support their teams. For example, a manager trained in facilitating conflict conversations can help team members discuss issues and communicate more effectively, which will nip conflict in the bud and lead to stronger connections.

The impact on productivity

In addition to the potential effects of isolation on individuals' mental health and relationships, there's also the organizational impact of reduced productivity.

Isolated workers often feel the need to involve HR, unions, employee relations staff and occupational health teams, either informally or through formal processes such as grievances. Parties in workplace mediations have described sending multiple emails a day about the conflict, printing emails as 'evidence,' and taking up many hours of their work time consumed by the conflict.

To address this, the actions of leaders are powerful and can make a real difference to the outcome of conflict. Leaders who promote and encourage the early resolution of conflict will be able to support those staff members who feel isolated due to unresolved conflict. The next step is to upskill staff to gain the confidence and skills to address challenging issues directly, before disputes grow or formal grievance processes are used.

Mediators see the sharp end of conflict—when issues have come to a head and relationships have broken down. By this point, parties feel isolated and lonely, and may have felt like this for months, if not years. It is much easier to deal with isolation and conflict when these first surface. This is why organizations need to focus on the prevention of isolation and conflict before they negatively impact mental health, teamwork, productivity and engagement.