

Excess Baggage? Unpacking The Conflict Luggage You Carry Into Work

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 30 June 2022

The summer holiday season is in full swing, with news of flight cancellations, challenging journeys and mountains of luggage. After a few years of staycations, workers are looking forward to traveling further afield. They are booking their time off, doublechecking travel insurance and turning their minds to what to pack in their suitcases. What will be useful? What can be left behind?

Baggage is more than clothes, phone chargers and passports. Whether on holiday, or back at work, the baggage of previous experiences is also brought along for the ride. Sometimes that's useful, as a manager delves into their bag of skills to solve a technical issue. But on many occasions, it can be a burden, slowing the journey towards the desired objective or even derailing it.

Nowhere is this in sharper focus than in situations of conflict. The way people deal with issues when they arise is significantly influenced by past conflict experiences, preconceptions and assumptions. To reduce turbulence when managing these challenging situations, mental baggage needs to be unpacked, examined and repacked, traveling with the items that will be most useful for the journey ahead.

Baggage inspection

In conflict, it's tempting to focus on other's faults, and to dwell on what they did wrong, and what they need to do to make it right. Finding fault won't result in change. Therefore, a useful starting point is to unpack our conflict baggage.

This psychological baggage is packed with conflict habits, prejudices, biases, and thought and behavior patterns developed over years. Tackling this excess baggage involves spending less time blaming others, and more time inspecting and understanding ourselves. A practical step is to notice one's trigger points and understand them better. For example, if a staff member has experienced a coworker taking credit for their work, they may be more sensitive if their contribution to a new project isn't recognized. If a manager has a habit of ignoring conflict, they may overlook a conflict brewing in their team. Understanding these triggers gives an opportunity to explore how they could be fueling conflict.

Don't believe the reviews

Just because a review on TripAdvisor says check-in staff were offhand, it doesn't mean every traveler should expect the same experience. In conflict, making assumptions can be particularly unhelpful. If a team member is criticized for challenging a manager, they may assume this will happen again. They may then decide to keep their opinion to themselves and feel frustrated, or give their view, but with the expectation of receiving the same negative response.

The key to countering this is to focus on the assumptions that could be coming into play. It can be helpful to approach a trusted friend or colleague to talk it through, which will help gain perspective.

Someone not involved in the immediate situation can be well-placed to spot false assumptions, challenge a viewpoint and point out blind spots. They might ask about other experiences in team meetings, or query if there are other reasons why a manager might have reacted that way.

Be a curious traveler

One of the reasons that conflict is challenging to navigate is that in the face of a threat, a natural reaction is to close off. Countering the tendency to close down means trying to understand the other people involved in conflict. A good way to do this is with attentiveness. Pay attention to how others express themselves in conversation, both verbally and non-verbally, and stay focused on what is happening in the moment, rather than letting past experiences cloud what is happening now. As well as observation, questions can be enlightening. Take time to ask how someone is, and what's going on for them. That could reveal a whole host of other pressures influencing their behavior. If something that was said has caused upset, express this to the other party, and ask for their perspective. This can open the way to a clearer understanding.

Like travel, managing conflict is a journey. It takes planning and preparation, understanding why some routes feel uncomfortable, and sometimes venturing into unfamiliar territory. Whatever the destination, it's important to know what baggage is being carried, consciously select what to pack and ditch bags that are no longer needed.