



3 Ways To Reduce The Stress Of Conflict (According To Those Who Have Experienced It)

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 7 November 2022

Conflict is stressful. As a workplace mediator, I see first-hand the impact conflict has on individuals, teams, and organizations. People involved in a dispute can be stressed about what it means for their job, their health, and their relationships. The ripple effect of conflict can impact team dynamics when colleagues feel obligated to take sides in a conflict. And the effect is felt in the wider organization when HR staff are under pressure to resolve grievances, and leaders need to manage the costly reputational damage from high-profile conflicts.

Today marks the start of ISMA's International Stress Awareness Week, and it's fitting that this year's theme is 'Working together to build resilience and reduce stress.' It's by working better together, both from an individual and organizational perspective, that the stress of conflict can be reduced. In my experience, there are three main themes that mediation parties cite that they wish would have happened to help reduce the stress of conflict.

1. I wish...we'd spoken earlier

When faced with difficulties in a relationship, there can be a natural tendency to avoid it or to put off taking action, hoping it will disappear. The problem with this is that the issue doesn't go away, and instead, it can fester and grow. The parties involved spend time mulling over what was said or done, and stress can begin to build.

Traditionally used organizational processes for managing conflict can amplify stress. Formal routes, such as complaints or grievances, can take months, with multiple meetings, interviews, investigations, reviews, and appeals. The uncertainty and anxiety created over a prolonged period can be highly stressful for those involved, and can lead to longer-term effects on health and well-being.

Mediation parties often reflect that they wish they'd spoken with each other much earlier, as once they do speak, it usually leads to a deeper understanding and [wider perspectives](#). Mediators often hear things such as, "I wish I'd known what you were going through," or "I wish you'd known that I felt really hurt by what happened." Recognizing the value of earlier and informal action, conflict-aware organizations provide extra support for staff. This informal and collaborative support includes facilitation, conflict coaching, and mediation, which enables and empowers people to resolve issues more quickly and informally.

2. I wish...we'd talked directly

Many people who experience conflict prefer to seek support from a trusted colleague or friend, rather than talking directly with the other parties involved. Frustrations can be aired, and opinions sought, in relative safety. Those who find themselves in conflict are looking for someone to discuss

their situation with, and for that person to side with them and validate their point of view. As helpful as this support can be, it can also lead to hearsay and bias, which is usually inaccurate and misrepresentative. This may inadvertently add fuel to the fire, and elevate parties' stress levels.

Formal processes can reinforce this. Investigations involve calling witnesses, who have their own biased recollection and interpretation of events. Meetings are held behind closed doors, so parties don't know what's been said about them, and have no right to reply. The parties involved in a dispute can be advised not to speak to each other while formal processes are in progress, which may cement their points of view. In the majority of cases, this separation not only increases stress, but also reduces the likelihood of resolution or repairing damaged relationships.

Fortunately, some organizations now advocate a direct-first approach, and provide training, on-demand resources, and specialist support to equip staff with the skills and confidence to have informal and direct conversations. Formal processes are still an option, and indeed are appropriate in some instances, but staff have more routes open to them, and the support to understand the implications of their choices. Not only can a direct conversation diffuse conflict and reduce the stress associated with it, but taking action helps to regain a sense of control, which has a further calming effect.

3. I wish...the organization had seen the bigger picture

Conflict doesn't take place in isolation. Mediation parties often identify broader issues that contributed to the situation, such as other colleagues, their manager, or the underlying organizational culture.

There are practical ways to address this. One way is to ensure that the right people are involved in informal conversations or mediation from the outset. Another is encouraging teams to develop a conflict charter, which details how they would like to communicate with each other and how they will handle any conflicts that arise. This approach can lead to a healthier team environment, where conflict isn't seen as negative and stressful, but rather an opportunity to learn, improve and get to know each other better.

A final theme, not cited in all mediations, but in those who have reached a particularly stressful place, is "I wish the other person would disappear." Parties can get to a point where they don't want to see the other person again, wishing they or the other party would resign from the organization. Mediators aren't magicians, but they can provide a safe space for conversation and deeper understanding, which can significantly help to alleviate the stress of conflict. However, the largest gains in reducing conflict-related stress are to build organizational resilience proactively. This is achieved by having the right support, processes, and tools in place, and by working together – as individuals, teams, managers, leaders, and specialist professionals.

For support in managing stress, the ISMA has several free downloads. There is a free guide on how to calm yourself and your team in conflict available on the Consensio website.