

Why ‘fighting it out’ is healthier than avoiding conflict

By Alexandra Efthymiades, Consensio, 7 November 2022

Turning a negative mindset into a positive one using conflict might sound counterproductive, but it can build resilience, find solutions and improve relationships in your workplace.

The idea of being in conflict conjures up unpleasant feelings – including stress, anxiety, anger, fear and hurt – for the majority of people. This explains why we often avoid it. We assume it’s going to be uncomfortable, difficult or painful, and that if we engage in a conflict conversation, it may make things worse. But conflict, under the right conditions, can lead to increased understanding, greater self-awareness, learning about ourselves and others, new ways of thinking, creativity, and stronger relationships.

Conflict avoidance can be more damaging

It’s no surprise that many of us avoid situations that involve conflict. We are conditioned to think of it as uncomfortable, negative and painful. Our parents probably modelled conflict avoidance, as did our teachers at school. Decades later, this deep-rooted mindset kicks in when we see conflict play out in the workplace.

Whilst avoidance may seem like a positive approach, it often allows conflict to fester and grow. And it’s not just those directly involved who are affected. Conflict can seep out into teams, whole departments, and even entire organisations. This impacts employees’ physical and mental health, their loyalty to the organisation, and their ability to be productive and enjoy work.

The pandemic and the pivot to more virtual working – with its many benefits – have not helped in this regard. Conversations over Zoom or corporate messaging apps can feel transactional, and moments of serendipity or understanding we get in person, are lost. Face-to-face interaction generates more bonding and a different type of conversation where it’s easier to build empathy for someone else’s point of view.

Taking the initiative

Too often, organisations deal with conflict reactively, after a situation has escalated and come to the attention of HR. This can happen at every level of the organisation. It’s uncommon, for instance, to see leaders or managers embrace strong differences of opinion or perceive a conflict situation as a learning opportunity. However, taking a more proactive and positive approach ensures a chance to learn from conflict, and this can be a potential gateway to better conversations and stronger relationships, as well as out-of-the-box thinking and new ideas.

When tension arises, engaging in dialogue early means managers can get useful feedback on their teams' relationships and find out quickly what team dynamics are not functioning well. Allowing people to openly express their ideas and points of view – even if controversial – rather than suppressing these due to a fear of conflict, is a more helpful approach.

However, these skills do not come naturally and have to be learned. Investing in training for managers on how to have difficult workplace conversations will save time and money. It also decreases the chance of a formal grievance or tribunal claim. Yet many businesses continue to promote managers for technical skill rather than people management ability, perpetuating conflict avoidance and reactive responses.

Relationships drive employee performance

There is huge pressure on managers to meet targets and support team members. Often, support for team members gives way to meeting targets. Yet research shows that managers need to focus on both because relationships drive performance.

As we face a 'great resignation', and employees re-evaluate their relationship to their work – including their perceptions of how they are treated by their managers – the focus on workplace relationships needs to be prioritised alongside meeting targets. When conflict is not dealt with early and informally, people's capacity to do their jobs is impacted, their relationships break down, and their overall wellbeing suffers.

Managers' self-awareness is a vital management skill that helps build strong relationships with team members. It also enables managers to understand their own and others' conflict management styles and how to adapt these to suit specific workplace situations.

Being more self-aware enables managers to deal with conflict situations informally and collaboratively. Training and conflict coaching allows managers to practise these skills in a safe space and learn how to embed them into their everyday interactions.

An agent for positive change in conflict management

Normalising and appreciating the learning opportunities that can flourish from well-managed conflict situations will drive a positive culture. By reframing how we view conflict, we can learn to change our negative mindset and focus on the more positive aspects of conflict, those that build more understanding, stronger relationships and teamwork, as well as creativity and innovation.

We can support managers by offering training that will support them to confidently and skilfully manage conflict by addressing issues early and informally to nip them in the bud. This will encourage people throughout the organisation to respectfully air differences of opinion and bring to the table new ideas that could help improve their working lives. Managed positively and collaboratively, conflict can be a door to creativity, new ways of thinking, and enhanced wellbeing through stronger relationships.