



What Leaders Can Learn From High-Profile Conflicts Of 2022

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 7 December 2022

2022 has seen many interpersonal disputes, big and small, play out publicly on the global stage. It seems wherever you look, there's a celebrity, politician, or royal at war. From the corridors of power, to the inboxes of Elon Musk's Twitter staff, there's conflict. In a tech-connected world, events in the media reflect what's played out in offices, factories, shops, and home workplaces. A workplace mediator looks back at some of the high-profile conflicts of 2022 to help leaders understand the impacts on the workplace and embrace better ways to handle conflict.

Having your day in court

In 2022, the world watched celebrities battle it out in courtrooms. In the US, Johnny Depp and Amber Heard exchanged conflicting accounts of events in their libel trial. In the UK, Coleen Rooney won her High Court battle case against Rebekah Vardy in the 'Wagatha Christie' trial. The public saw millions spent as the parties aired personal details, wanting to be 'heard' and have their day in court.

High-profile conflicts such as these reflect how conflict is handled in workplaces. As celebrities take their issues to court, staff may view similar legal or procedural approaches as their best option at work. The employment tribunal is the direct equivalent in the working world, where workers turn to legal processes for resolution. The latest UK tribunal statistics, published by Her Majesty's Courts & Tribunals Service, recorded a 19% increase in the total tribunals received in 2021/22 compared to the previous financial year. Many organizations are also seeing a rise in employees turning to formal 'complaints' procedures – the Great Grievance – when they are in conflict.

Just as lengthy celebrity court processes can cost millions, legal or formal routes to address workplace conflict can also be long and expensive, increasing the stress and negatively impacting the well-being of those involved in conflict. On top of that, these processes are unlikely to resolve the dispute. Relying on a third party to decide 'for or against' is disempowering, the outcome will never satisfy both sides, and these processes destroy rather than repair relationships. Even though in some cases formal processes are an appropriate route, in most others, informal and early action is far more likely to get a positive result. Mediators will tell you that the route to resolution is not about deciding who is right or wrong; it's about creating a safe space for people to talk together, gain understanding, and work out how to find a way forward that works for everyone.

Have you heard the latest?

People often enjoy gossip, and technology has enabled the latest scandal to be shared on a daily, even hourly basis. 2022 continued the seemingly unquenchable public appetite for the latest news on Harry and Meghan, with a hotly anticipated Netflix documentary and Harry's forthcoming memoir, "Spare." The battle of the royals not only generates a lot of media attention, it also creates an "Us vs. Them" mentality.

The workplace is no exception. When there's conflict, people tend to look for things that back up their existing points of view, or find supporters to their 'side.' Cliques form, which can disrupt team dynamics and take up an increasing amount of working time.

Although there will always be office chatter, there are approaches that everyone can take to avoid fueling the fire of conflict. Instead of focusing on what others do wrong, self-awareness reveals the psychological baggage and existing perceptions that may contribute to conflict escalation. Seeing people as "good" and "bad" is deeply ingrained in our cultural and personal norms, so instead of trying to cast people in over-simplified roles, we can try to find ways to relate to the other person by seeing things from their perspective.

High-profile conflicts make good news stories and are clickbait, as 2022, and other recent years, have shown. Although it might be tempting to point at the media, they often play to the demand we, as consumers, create. Perhaps we need to look at ourselves, as individuals and business leaders, and ask what we can do to be more aware of how the news may be affecting how we deal with conflict at work. In 2023, instead of looking at which celebrities are fighting, or what Elon Musk has now said, we could look for different conflict role models. The football manager who is transparent and authentic with their team. The politician that doesn't join in the mudslinging. Or the empathic manager or colleague in our workplace who listens non-judgmentally and asks, "How can I best support you during this time?"