Understanding and managing conflict in hybrid teams

By Alex Efthymiades, Consensio, 10 February 2023

All teams experience conflict – whether they work together or remotely – and this is normal and inevitable. When managed well, conflict can even be beneficial and healthy. However, for many of us who don't have the skills to manage conflict constructively, our perception of conflict as predominantly stressful and intimidating leads to conflict-avoidance.

There are various interconnected causes of conflict common in hybrid teams:

- Transactional relationships. The less interaction hybrid teams have, the more transactional their relationships become. This makes it harder to build strong and positive relationships – important for cultivating a sense of connection and common purpose – and it erodes unity, trust and culture. This doesn't bode well for the informal and proactive resolution of conflict, because it is harder to have collaborative conflict conversations in low-trust teams.

- Limited opportunities for socialising. Informal socialising, which happens more easily when we work physically together, helps build positive and trusting relationships. Physical proximity can also be a buffer for conflict because casual encounters in the workplace are key to clearing up misunderstandings. We can walk over to someone's desk or invite them for a coffee to chat about something that has upset us. These everyday encounters allow us to quickly clarify issues that feel amiss.

- Less communication. The tendency for less verbal communication when we work remotely lends itself to weaker personal connections, as well as less positive and empathic communication. Less communication can lead to more isolation and disengagement.

- Video and text-based communication. These communication tools are ubiquitous for miscommunication and misinterpretation. They also reduce our ability to read essential nonverbal cues, such as body language and tone of voice. This impacts our ability to communicate effectively, which gets in the way of forging positive workplace relationships.

- Hidden conflict. It is easier to hide, avoid, or not notice conflict when we're working remotely. This makes it more difficult to nip issues in the bud, so conflicts are more likely to fester and grow.

Tips for managing conflict in hybrid teams
There are ways to mitigate some of the challenges of managing conflict in hybrid teams:

Build relationships and prioritise social interaction
In high-functioning teams, people have strong and positive relationships with each other, which enhance trust and unity. Regular check-ins, which focus on how people are feeling, not just how they are performing, will facilitate this.

Team leaders can support team building by prioritising and encouraging more interaction within hybrid teams. Creating opportunities for face-to-face interaction, either in-person or virtually, will allow people to discuss work and clarify shared goals, as well as get to know each other personally, which will engender more trusting, empathic and connected teams.

More and better communication
Regular check-ins, including one-to-ones, will help team members, even those who work remotely, feel that they are valuable and important members of the team. These check-ins will strengthen relationships, and enable team leaders to find out more quickly whether there is conflict in the team that can be informally managed.

Not relying on video and text-based communication is another useful tip. Instead, schedule regular face-to-face time, preferably in-person, or pick up the phone or have a video call with your team members.

When team leaders need to communicate in writing, it is important to put more context around these messages to keep misunderstandings to a minimum.

If you do need to address conflict in a hybrid team, do so proactively and use the right communication tool. In-person conversations are always best because they allow us to read non-verbal cues. Never use email or text messaging to address a potential conflict.

Use appropriate language
When you introduce a conflict conversation, start by stating your positive intention. Instead of: "I need to speak with you about the email you sent me that undermined me," try: "Are you free for a coffee? I'd like to speak with you about the email you sent me and how I felt about it. I'd also like to hear your perspective on it, because I value our working relationship." The way you introduce the conversation will set the tone and clearly signal your positive intention.

Collaborative conflict conversations are about engaging in dialogue. This means using collaborative language – "I value being part of this team" – and a willingness to listen to what the other person has to say – "I'd like to hear what's going on for you." Being open-minded and non-judgemental, even if we feel upset and angry, will signal that we are curious and interested in their side of the story.

Many team leaders and HR professionals are feeling the pressures of working with hybrid teams. However, organisations that support their leaders in doing so – through bespoke training or coaching – will be investing in a model of work that can reap many benefits, such as access to a larger talent pool and the retention of staff who want to work flexibly. Considering that the quality of our workplace relationships is paramount to creating high-functioning and engaged teams, those hybrid teams are well worth investing in.