

FRACTURES

The saying “people join a company but leave a manager”, points to the importance of the manager/employee relationship and how essential it is to engagement and performance. During a time of continuing uncertainty and increased attrition, maintaining workplace morale and wellbeing is essential. But the after effects of the pandemic - along with economic uncertainty and a re-evaluation of what people now expect - has created an environment of increased conflict.

"IF WE JUMP IN WITH A SOLUTION WITHOUT LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING THE MULTIPLE SIDES OF A STORY, WE DENY SOMEONE THE OPPORTUNITY TO VENT AND PROCESS THEIR EMOTIONS AND THOUGHTS"



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Unresolved workplace conflict is one reason why people leave their employment. This article will explore some of the techniques used by workplace mediators and conflict coaches that can help managers support team members who are experiencing conflict in a more helpful way. It's natural for HR or managers to want to step in and "fix" things when they see members of their team in conflict. It's a natural reaction to have - we see that someone is in difficulty and we want to help them out. We may have been trained or socialised into believing that this is the right thing to do, but this tendency can do more harm than good, with the unintended consequence that it takes away the opportunity for the individual to explore their situation, understand it better and then come up with a solution over which they feel ownership and accountability.

When an employee approaches HR or a manager with a problem, they're not necessarily looking for someone to find and impose a solution. Often, employees are looking for a sounding board to talk through what is going on for them, or they want their views and feelings to be validated. Venting is a healthy way for us to let go of some of the emotion of conflict and it allows us to process our feelings in a more useful way. If we jump in with a solution without listening and understanding the multiple sides of a story, we deny someone the opportunity to vent and process their emotions and thoughts. There are practical steps that HR and managers and indeed all of us, can follow to support people who are experiencing workplace conflict.

Self-awareness: The first step is to become aware of the tendency to step in and "fix" things. When we understand why being a "fixer" is not helpful, we are less likely to do it. We can then become more intentional in how we interact with people and adapt our attitudes and behaviours accordingly. In practice, this means that next time someone comes to us with a problem, we will consciously resist the urge to tell them what to do. *Listen:* When someone comes to speak about a challenging issue they are facing,

we often take over the conversation and give advice rather than simply listen. This may be because we want to "help" them, or because we don't have the patience to listen to them. Everyone has a desire to be heard and when we are experiencing difficulties, we want someone to simply listen to us. The mere act of listening will allow the person to explain what they are experiencing and thereby process their feelings about the situation more constructively. *Show empathy:* Put simply, empathy is the ability to understand the feelings of others. We can show empathy through non-verbal and verbal communication and both are useful. When we show empathy, people feel heard, understood, respected and validated. We don't have to agree with someone to show empathy, but it builds connection and trust, which are important to all workplace relationships.

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Remain impartial: It can be tempting to take sides, especially if we have ambivalent feelings towards one or more people involved in the conflict. Remain impartial and open-minded and cognisant of the fact that there are always multiple and often contradictory sides to a story. In practice, this means avoiding statements that sound critical or judgemental. There are certain questions that can help, such as "What might be going on for them that makes them speak with you like that?" or "Could there be another way of interpreting the tone of that email?" *Ask questions:* Open-ended questions help people in conflict to better understand their situation, why they feel the way they do and what kind of support - if any - they need to reach a resolution.

Useful questions include: "What triggered you to feel so upset? What feelings are underneath your anger? How did you expect your colleague to behave in that tough team meeting? If someone came to you with the same issue, what would you tell them?" Guide them to their own solution. When we try to fix a situation of conflict, we usually base this solely on what one person has told us. However, there are always multiple perspectives and perceptions of what actually happened. By imposing a solution, we may end up making the situation worse, because we haven't explored the wider context and the feelings and perceptions of everyone involved. In practice, this means asking people what they would like to do about the situation they are in. You could ask questions such as: "What would help you in this situation? What choices do you have? How would the other person react if you came to them with that idea? Do you feel able to speak with them about what happened in that team meeting?"

An employee in conflict, who comes to a self-determined outcome, will feel empowered because they will have ownership of the decision, they have reached to resolve their conflict. Organisations will do well to invest in building a culture where there is psychological safety to speak up about conflict, to discuss challenging issues with colleagues without fear of repercussions and to support them to come to a resolution - increasing engagement and reducing attrition in the process. It's hard to tackle our tendency to go into "fixing" mode when this is so ingrained in how most of us support people who are experiencing conflict at work. Recognising our tendency to do this and understanding that this will not lead to a self-determined outcome, is a helpful way of framing this issue. The steps outlined above will strengthen the manager-employee relationship, which is a key driver of wellbeing, engagement and productivity.

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