



How to have positive conflict at work

By Alex Efthymiades, Consensio, 12 June 2023

Workplace conflict happens in all organisations. Contrary to what many of us believe and often experience, conflict is normal, inevitable and not inherently negative.

Under the right conditions, conflict can be positive because it can offer us the opportunity to have more honest conversations that will strengthen our relationships and lead to more innovative ways of working.

Conflict mindset and response determines the outcome. A positive mindset and a collaborative response help us to proactively approach the difficult yet necessary workplace conversations that we all need to have.

Most of us have a default negative conflict mindset due to the stress, anxiety and relationship breakdowns conflict can cause.

This mindset leads to the avoidance or repression of disagreement and conflict, or an attempt to deal with these through punitive processes, such as formal complaints.

This mindset is unhelpful because it tends to inhibit collaborative dialogue, which is key to achieving a constructive result.

If we shift our mindset to view conflict as an opportunity to reflect on how we can improve our communication and ways of working, then we can use this knowledge to forge stronger workplace relationships that will drive improvements in our wellbeing and performance.

This shift is not easy but entirely possible.

We can think about some of the beneficial outcomes of our past conflicts and revisit instances where conflict conversations – with family, friends or work colleagues – ended constructively. Did they clear the air? Did they result in more understanding and learning? What can we take from those experiences that we can apply to current or future situations?

How we respond to conflict will also influence its outcome. If our default response is to blame others, we decrease the chances of a collaborative dialogue.

When we become more self-aware about our tendency to blame, we are more likely to take responsibility for how our own behaviour might be contributing to the conflict dynamic.

We can then think about what assumptions we are making about those we are in conflict with, and how our behaviour might be impacting them.

When we respond to conflict with openness and curiosity about what might be going on for others as well as ourselves, our behaviours become less attacking and our views less entrenched.

My experience as a conflict management practitioner is borne out of academic research: conflict can be useful because it can impede groupthink and uniformity.

Conflict brings dynamism, which is helpfully disruptive and makes us question our ways of thinking and how we work.

This in turn leads to the acceptance and encouragement of different opinions and challenges our assumptions.

Conflict is also a powerful tool for creativity, change and innovation. And it can strengthen workplace relationships when we approach it with a positive mindset and the goal of informal resolution.

This can be achieved through management development training, conflict coaching or mediation, as these processes allow people to learn to view and respond to conflict in a healthier way.

The conversations required for this are not easy, and they entail that we lean into the discomfort of conflict with the knowledge that having these conversations is more productive than avoiding, repressing or punishing them.

For leaders and HR, this means making sure that people are equipped with the self-awareness and tools to manage these conversations with confidence and skill.

The realisation that conflict can be healthy paves the way for us to engage in these challenging, valuable and essential workplace conversations.