



## Embracing Complexity: 3 Things To Accept About Workplace Conflict

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 29 June 2023

At work, most of us follow clear guidelines in the hope that our actions will yield predictable outcomes. Yet when it comes to working relationships – especially challenging ones – things are more complex, because we all have diverse personalities, behaviors, and communication styles, which makes it tricky to control the outcome of our interactions with others. By understanding three features of conflict, this can better prepare us to deal with workplace disputes and increase the likelihood of finding a way forward.

### **Accept there are no shortcuts**

With the many competing demands on our time at work, it is easy to put off addressing tensions with a colleague. This is a false economy, because when left unaddressed, issues tend to fester and grow, and subsequently take more time to resolve. Even if we decide to act quickly, there can be a desire to get issues superficially sorted and move on. This too can be counterproductive, because this approach can make people feel they haven't been heard or understood, which can lead to frustration and resentment.

There aren't any shortcuts because conflict takes time to resolve. One way forward is to explore people's perspectives of a situation, and how the relationship breakdown has impacted them. What might initially appear to be the cause of conflict may not actually be the reason for the relationship breakdown. Parties in conflict need to have sufficient time and space to come to a clearer understanding of each other so that they can see each other's perspectives and find a better way of relating to each other.

### **Accept it might be uncomfortable**

Most of us avoid having conversations about difficult issues because they tend to make us feel uncomfortable, at least initially. This is partly due to a lack of skills and confidence to manage these conversations. We worry about how others will react, and we fear that we may make the situation worse.

It's useful to be prepared for the potential discomfort of these conversations because what we hear from the other person might challenge how we view ourselves, and might upset us. Yet ultimately, these conversations also bring clarity and more understanding. Through these conversations, we better understand why a colleague has behaved a certain way, for example, due to pressures outside of work we were unaware of. We may also discover that we have a role to play in aggravating the situation, and this will help us gain insights into how our actions or words are perceived by others. Although this can be hard to hear, the new awareness we gain from conflict conversations will help us think about and, if necessary, change our behavior.

## **Accept you are part of a bigger structure**

No matter how much time we allow or how well-prepared we are, there may be other factors that make resolution difficult. Many disputes don't have a neat 'structure' involving just two people. In workplace conflict, there's a whole ecosystem that influences those involved in conflict. The colleague who left last year, the boss's boss who never seems to be around, or other people who get involved to add their support or stir things up.

Organizational culture also has an influence. In some organizations, the typical way to manage conflict encourages formal processes, such as raising a grievance, and staff aren't sufficiently trained or supported to have early and informal conversations. In this case, expecting colleagues to want to resolve an issue informally might be unrealistic because they don't yet have the skills or confidence to do this.

Conflict conversations require time, self-awareness, and a recognition that the wider organizational culture will influence how people in conflict behave. As a workplace mediator who regularly supports people to have informal conflict conversations, I know it's not easy to embrace the complexity of conflict. However, time and again, I see the relief of people who took the brave step to informally discuss a challenging issue and thereby gain clarity and understanding about why their working relationship has broken down. This paves the way for stronger and more trusting working relationships.