



Conflict Proficiency As A Company-Wide Asset

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 8 September 2023

When conflict crops up at work, the impact can be significant, not just for those directly involved, but for teams, and the wider organization. The task of resolving conflict often lands with leaders, or a few specialist staff. This usually makes the skills of managing conflict the responsibility of a small number of relatively high-cost staff.

Other factors, such as employee turnover, absenteeism, and legal fees, often lead to conflict and conflict management skills being seen in terms of costs. But this is only part of the picture. Imagine a workplace where conflict competence became an asset, where everyone – not just a few people – had the skills to manage conflict. This would allow organizations to reduce the prevalence of acute issues and equip staff with skills and competencies that add value to their employer.

Early resolution

When conflict arises, isolated instances can often be brushed aside. But over time, as disputes appear in different teams and departments, they start to add up. The compound effect, where destructive conflict festers and grows, will significantly impact the mental health of those involved, and have a detrimental effect on workplace relationships.

Once employees have a base level of conflict management skills, the first aspect of added value to the organization is that conflict will be resolved quickly and informally. This reduces the number of cases that end up in costly, stressful and time-consuming formal processes. And importantly, it will equip staff to manage relationship challenges and build better relationships at work.

Collective responsibility

Resolving conflict can be seen as 'someone else's job.' Indeed, some organization's processes suggest the first step is to speak to a manager, HR, or employee relations professional. Although staff trained in conflict management or mediation skills can be very effective in helping people move forward, the parties themselves would benefit from having the skills to resolve their own workplace challenges.

By equipping everyone within an organization with some level of conflict management skills, the responsibility and accountability for resolving conflicts are shared. Staff will feel more empowered and able to have challenging conversations at work, which will support a higher level of engagement and improve employee experience. This all contributes to happier, more productive people.

Transferable skills

Finally, conflict management skills extend well beyond addressing disputes at work. These skills, needed for many of our workplace conversations, include non-judgmental listening, understanding different perspectives, empathy and building trust. They are useful not only because they help to avoid destructive conflict, but because they give employees the competencies that are the foundation of improved business effectiveness, such as effective communication, relationship-building and collaboration.

Improving people's ability to communicate well with each other and navigate conflict will deliver value, both to the balance sheet and to workplace relationships. Everyone can learn these skills, from the cubicle to the corner office, so organizations need to evolve their approach to conflict management skills and recognize them as an everyday competence.