



How to have less stressful conflict conversations

By Alexandra Efthymiades, Consensio, 30 October 2023

Workplace conflict can cause significant anxiety, but difficult conversations can be managed in ways that minimise stress for all involved, writes Alexandra Efthymiades.

Stress Awareness Week (30 October – 3 November) gives us an opportunity to reflect on the causes and consequences of stress, and to think about how we can better manage it.

Undoubtedly, one significant stress factor relates to unresolved conflict, in and out of work. Conflict is part of all relationships, yet most of us shy away from it because we feel we lack the courage, skills and confidence to constructively address it. When left unaddressed, conflict raises our stress and anxiety levels, and decreases our engagement, productivity, and overall wellbeing.

The knowledge and skills required for conflict conversations can be practiced and learned. They will not only help with conflict resolution but will also support us in having better relationships at work. Here are three ways to optimise a collaborative and restorative outcome to these often challenging and uncomfortable conversations.

1. Self-awareness

Greater self-awareness allows us to appreciate that we are part of the conflict dynamic – that we contribute and carry at least some responsibility for the tension in our relationships. It is easy to blame others, but blame doesn't resolve conflict; it fuels it. Here are some self-awareness questions you can ask yourself and others who are in conflict:

- What is it about the other person that is triggering me, and why?
- How might my behaviour be contributing to this conflict dynamic?
- How am I interpreting the other person's behaviour? How might they be interpreting mine?
- What can I do differently if I feel stuck but want to restore this relationship?

2. Empathy

Empathy – the ability to imagine the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions of others – enables us to view a conflict from a perspective different to our own. When we have empathy, we try to understand what others might be going through, and which of their and our underlying needs – such as the need to feel respected or valued – are not being met.

When we approach a situation of conflict with empathy, we are able to cast away blame and instead listen to the other person and hear what is going on for them. This allows us to understand the triggers that are fuelling a conflict, and leads to increased understanding and connection, which, in and of itself, is a restorative process.

These are examples of questions that will support us to approach a conflict with more empathy and view the situation from multiple perspectives:

- What assumptions am I making about the other person? What assumptions might they be making about me?
- What might be going on for the other person that I don't know about?
- If this conflict is having a detrimental impact on me, how might it be impacting the other person?

3. State your positive intention

When we use blame and anger to start a conversation – “Your comments at the meeting made me livid!” or, “Your email is rude and undermining!” – this will be heard as an attack. The reaction is likely to result in defensiveness, retaliation, or avoidance. For that reason, it is beneficial to state our positive intention from the outset to establish a collaborative tone.

By explicitly stating that the purpose of the conversation is to try to reach a constructive outcome, the other person is much more likely to engage with us calmly and productively. This will allow for a dialogue where we can listen to each other and actually hear what each is trying to say. This will facilitate a conversation where we can explore what has led to the communication or relationship breakdown and optimise the chances of a restorative outcome.

Here are examples of how we can do this:

- “I really appreciate working on this project with you. I feel upset because of the comment made at the team meeting. I'd like to speak with you about this, and also hear your perspective.”
- “I value our working relationship. I feel troubled about the email you sent me. Can we have a chat so that we can both understand what happened?”
- “I know that the meeting last week didn't go well. I feel confused about your reaction to what I said, and I'd like to speak with you about it. I think this will help both of us work better together.”

It takes courage, skill and confidence to speak directly with someone we are in conflict with. By applying self-awareness and empathy, and stating our positive intentions, we reduce the instances of destructive and harmful workplace conflict and replace them with conflict conversations that lead to increased understanding and better relationships. This will enable us to transform instances of conflict into opportunities for growth and learning, as well as build stronger and more meaningful relationships, in and out of work.