![HRD theHRDIRECTOR logo]

GENERATION PAX

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 19 March 2025

Gen Z's arrival into the workforce has also brought with it a new set of values and expectations, including work/life balance and personal wellbeing. Gen Z is also more values-driven and socially conscious than previous generations. They seek leaders who share their values and expect organisations to take meaningful action. This can cause friction with other generations but, when managed well, generationally-diverse teams can bring a richness in approach, ideas and culture.

It appears that people now have less emotional resilience, with a recent multi-sector study reporting a 65 percent increase in burnout from 2021-to-2023. Ipsos's Global Happiness 2024 report revealed that although happiness has rebounded since the first year of the pandemic 2020, it still has not recovered to highs of 2011 and 2013. Declining emotional health reduces resilience, making it harder for employees to stay patient and calm during conflicts. With low emotional reserves, empathy - key to managing conflict - also becomes more challenging. While these trends make it more challenging to manage conflict at work, the principles of dealing with conflict do not change.

Ultimately, the manager plays a critical role in the conflict dynamic, yet many lack the skills and confidence to help team members deal with issues. A recent CIPD report found that under a third (29 percent) of employees experiencing conflict discussed it with their manager and/or HR and nearly half (49 percent) of employers said that line managers can be a cause of conflict in their teams.

With some conflict management skills development, managers can be central to a cohesive organisational approach to conflict. Their unique vantage point enables them to react quickly when conflict arises in their team, though the real value is in being proactive. So, what should managers look for if they want to shift from a reactive to a proactive approach to conflict management?

A rise in sickness absence can be a lagging indicator of workplace conflict, but the signs of conflict can be more subtle. Is there a pattern where a team member avoids team meetings? In remote or hybrid environments, this may not present as 'formal' absence, which makes it harder to spot. Regular check-ins with team members can help mitigate this.

Shifting team dynamics may also point to underlying conflict. Clique formation can be particularly concerning, because it suggests third-parties have been drawn in. Changes in how people interact within the team, such as when a colleague contributes less to meetings than before, can be an indicator of this.

Physical and verbal behavioural change may also be relevant. Body language is harder to spot on video calls, but the language and tone people use can be listened for. Is it more emotive, more critical, less patient and diplomatic? If there's a change in behaviour amongst the team, that's a good sign that it needs further exploration.

But how can a manager best handle a conflict once it's been identified?

Seek to understand, not to solve the problem: Efforts should focus on building a picture of the situation, without assuming all the facts. Checking in with team members individually can be helpful, allowing them to raise their concerns in a safe space. Don't take sides and be empathetic: Whether in a one-on-one meeting or facilitating a team meeting, it's important to show empathy and create a nonjudgmental environment. This will foster trust and create more collaborative communication.

There's much a manager can do to support team members to find their own solution. Know when to seek additional support: If parties are deeply entrenched, the best approach can be to bring in expert HR advice or third-party conflict resolution services such as a workplace mediator.

Managers should consider their role in the management of conflict: Managers set the tone of the team and influence how conflict resolution is perceived. For example, do they have a tendency to ignore the warning signs of conflict? Is there a culture of artificial harmony in the team, where people don't share their thoughts and feelings, so issues remain unresolved?

So far, we have examined how to handle conflict's negative aspects, but this misses the critical point. If conflict is a natural part of working life, how can it be harnessed to become constructive rather than destructive? While people are often hard-wired to see conflict as bad, there are many benefits to healthy difference, such as creativity and innovation. A healthy conflict culture can deepen workplace relationships and promotes personal responsibility for individuals to manage their own conflicts.

One way in which managers can start to develop this type of culture is through a team charter. A team charter includes guidelines that are co-created by the whole team - for example, how the team would like to communicate with each other - and how they want to manage disagreements. This can be designed in anticipation of potential issues rather than waiting for relationships to break down.

By talking openly about workplace conflict and agreeing to a set of guidelines together, team members will have clearer expectations of themselves and each other and feel more empowered to have conflict conversations themselves. This can foster a healthier team environment where conflict is viewed as an opportunity to learn, grow and build connections, rather than as a source of tension.

Leaders have a responsibility to ensure that the organisation supports and encourages a more constructive approach to conflict. Some organisations are now ensuring that people policies encourage early, informal resolution and are ensuring appropriate support services are in place for those who need it. Conflict management skills are being included in management training and forward-thinking organisations are looking to build awareness in all employees and provide training and resources to help people to navigate conflict and build resilience.

When conflict is avoided and treated as only negative, it can damage team dynamics and wellbeing. But if conflict it is reframed as an opportunity, it can be used to build connections and trust between individuals, strengthen relationships, foster innovation and improve performance - all outcomes that organisations crave.