

The loneliness-conflict loop: How HR can break the cycle

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 1 July 2025

In the last five years, it's become clear to many HR experts that an increasing number of employees feel 'disconnected' at work. Where offices were once hubs for collaboration and social interaction, many now stand partially filled. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, Dr. Vivek Murthy, the 19th US Surgeon General, observed that isolation and social disconnection were posing a significant public health crisis.

Fast forward to today, and we see how this is playing out in workplaces across the UK. According to Gallup's 2024 State of the Nation Global Workforce Report, a quarter of remote employees report feelings of isolation and/or loneliness daily.

This rise in social isolation has coincided with another equally worrying trend: a rise in workplace conflict. The two are intertwined: conflict at work can cause feelings of isolation, and isolation can also exacerbate workplace conflict. Both negatively impact the mental health of employees across the organisation.

Are we headed for a perfect storm? Not necessarily. The good news is that there's plenty employers can do to help employees navigate their way through conflict, build stronger working relationships and support a healthier work-life for everyone.

Technology, disconnection and conflict

One major driver of disconnection is our growing reliance on digital communication. When we communicate digitally, our comments are more likely to be misinterpreted or misconstrued. The directness and lack of nuance of how many of us communicate via email or messages means that we can easily interpret meaning into these exchanges that isn't there. Over time, these small miscommunications can snowball, straining relationships and exacerbating workplace conflict.

Declining emotional intelligence (EQ) reduces emotional resilience

Another factor is a noticeable drop in emotional intelligence (EQ) across the workforce. EQ has declined significantly since the height of the pandemic, affecting emotional health and reducing employee resilience.

Overall, 'happiness' in Western countries fell 13% between 2022 and 2023, according to Ipsos's 2023 Global Happiness report. As EQ declines, so does our ability to manage conflict constructively. When encountering a difficulty with a colleague, we are less likely to be patient, remain calm and respond constructively. Empathy, which we need to resolve conflict, is also more difficult to tap into when our EQ has decreased.

How can HR address workplace conflict?

Conflict competence is a skill that can be taught. One of the most important elements for leaders is to identify and support isolated workers and intervene at an early stage. UK-wide initiatives, such as Mental Health Awareness Week, have successfully increased awareness of mental health. But beyond this, managers need to be equipped to spot the subtle mood shifts, communication patterns, or warning signs of conflict and isolation.

The key is to find ways to upskill managers and employees to help them gain the confidence and skills to intervene with empathy and address challenging issues directly. By investing in conflict resolution training, organisations empower managers and their teams to address issues early, communicate more effectively, and strengthen relationships at work.

Practical strategies include:

Strategy one: Self-awareness and perspective-taking

Awareness training helps employees to explore their conflict ‘narratives’ – the beliefs, assumptions and biases that they bring to their interactions with others.

Help your employees explore situations from different perspectives, and learn to approach issues with curiosity rather than criticism. This will help them gain clarity and engage more constructively with their colleagues, including when tension arises in their workplace relationships.

Strategy two: Exploring choices in workplace conflict

People who are in conflict tend to feel stuck and adopt a fixed mindset, often blaming the other party for the relationship breakdown. They perceive that they have limited options, leading to a sense of helplessness and loss of control.

But the reality is that for most of us, there are always choices. Provide training to help your employees reframe their thinking, see the options available to them and feel more empowered to take action.

Strategy three: Equipping managers with facilitation skills

Managers play a key role in creating a positive working environment and fostering healthy team dialogue.

Consider offering facilitated conversations training to help your managers learn the key skills of workplace mediators and implement a structured process to support their team in dealing with conflict. The training provides managers with the practical tools, self-awareness and confidence to navigate issues in their team.

Final thoughts – self-managing conflict

Leaders are starting to see the link between isolation, poor mental health and workplace conflict. When possible, organisations should focus on helping workers to connect and build relationships based on face-to-face or video communication, rather than solely relying on technology.

Another solution lies in giving employees the skills they need to connect, communicate and resolve issues with confidence – without the support of HR. This will nurture connections, forge trust, build more resilient teams and help to navigate conflict when it arises.