Research

Reframing Conflict Management:

Unique Insights from the Hidden Resource in Your Organisation

Consensio is a leading conflict management and workplace mediation provider.
Mediation, training, accredited courses, consultancy and coaching.

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Overview

When it comes to how to manage conflict, it's time to rethink your organisation's approach. **This is the message from our survey of over 100 accredited mediators, who come from all levels of the organisation.**

The respondents have undergone a thorough immersion in the theory and practice of conflict management, and many have gone on to conduct numerous complex workplace mediations.

Their insights have vast implications for productivity, well-being and growth in your organisation. If you haven't been listening to them closely, this is your chance.

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In a nutshell

Our survey respondents see the opportunity for a radical rethink of their organisation's approach to dealing with conflict. It involves three strategic shifts.

Conflict as Opportunity

What's going wrong
View conflict management purely as a way to cut costs.

What we could do better
Leverage opportunities to boost productivity, well-being, growth and creativity.

"Conflict is not an inherently negative thing, and we need to stop focusing on it as a negative and provide more ways of supporting colleagues to grow and work through it."

Senior Equity Innovation Officer

Take Early Action

What's going wrong
Wait until conflict blows up and use formal processes, such as grievances.

What we could do better
Take action to prevent escalation through tools that nip issues in the bud.

"You'd be surprised how simple it is for miscommunication to become something more and how easy it is to create an open and honest environment when you face the issues while they are still small."

HR Business Partner

A New Skillset for All

What's going wrong
Rely on third parties to make judgements and decide outcomes of employee disputes.

What we could do better
Empower more employees with the skills to disagree constructively and find resolution to their disputes.

"We need to move away from the language of grievances, and embrace facilitated conversations... we need to help people resolve their workplace issues."

Head of HR

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Findings

1. Conflict as opportunity

You might expect a report on conflict management to be bleak. In fact, the responses to our survey make for an uplifting read. The respondents stressed the importance of reframing attitudes to conflict to highlight the opportunities it can bring. They also pointed to the potential for conflict to result in positive outcomes, including better communication, enhanced well-being, and a healthier work environment.

"Work with it in a timely way. It can be used creatively to solve problems and bring more joy at work to staff."

Director of Quality Improvement

"It's not always a bad thing if detected early and discussed. Different viewpoints can bring growth."

Board Member

"Conflict is often an integral part of developing relationships, and if approached in the right way, is a source of personal and professional growth."

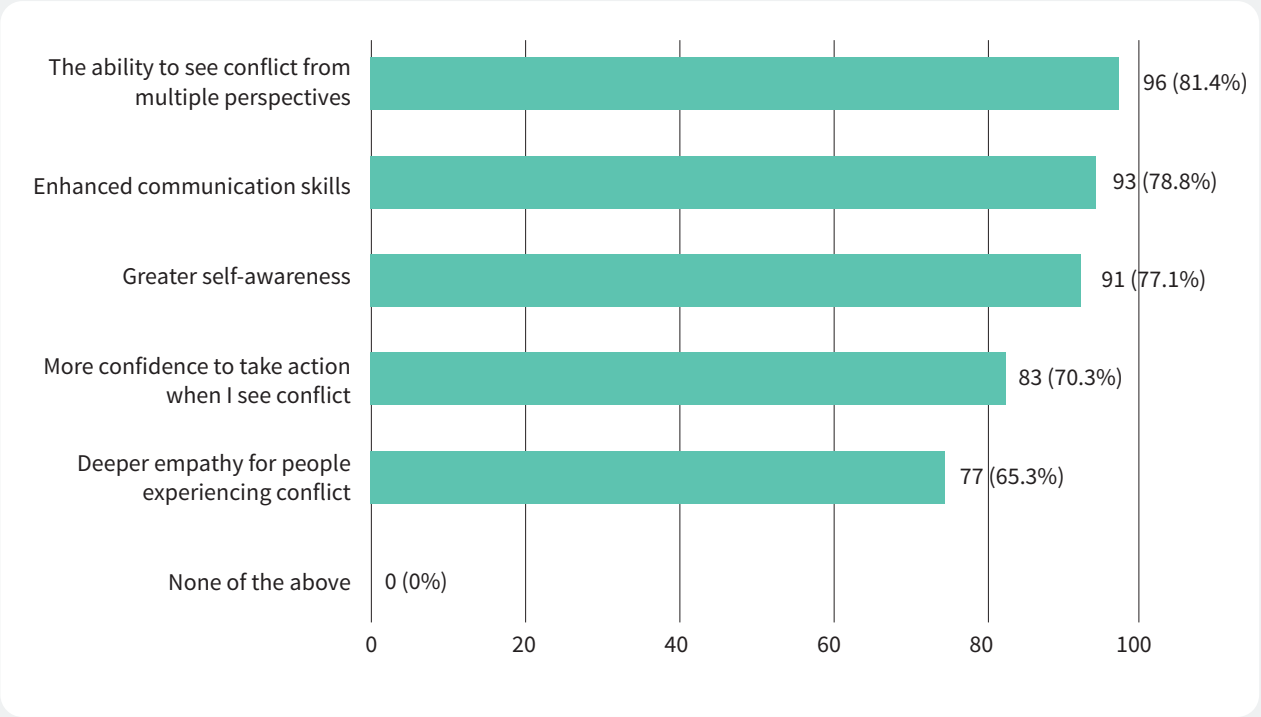
Lead Clinical Nurse Specialist

They also pointed out the perils of failing to manage conflict in this way.

"There's healthy and unhealthy conflict, the former allows respect and trust, the latter results in dictatorship and disengagement."

Staff Counsellor

Figure 1: We asked what people gained from attending the accredited mediation course



Case study 1: The business case for early action (Alex, Head of Talent)

One respondent introduced mediation in their organisation to offer an alternative to formal processes. The result? Less cost and better outcomes for all.

Mediation has totally transformed the way we manage Employee Relations. Now, when there's a grievance, instead of it automatically going to an investigation, they come to me, and we work out whether mediation might be suitable. I'm clear that it's voluntary, and we don't push anyone into it.

I've done a lot of research on the impact of mediation, and its return on investment. So, I've calculated the cost of my time and the individuals' time spent doing the mediation, and compared that to the time and cost of a formal investigation. And the difference is compelling, demonstrating a clear financial case for mediation.

100% of the cases I mediated were successfully resolved with no need for an investigation afterwards. At the end of one of them, a party said ***"I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders."***

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2. Early action

Organisations would benefit from thinking more strategically about how to manage conflict. Most organisations act as if nothing can be done until things have escalated, at which point formal processes, such as grievances or investigations, are instigated. These processes leave much to be desired in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.

"It's not cost-effective, the grievances, it's time-consuming, and nobody comes out happy at the end of it, there's a winner and a loser."

HR Business Partner

A more beneficial approach is to allow issues to be aired and addressed as soon as possible through quality dialogue.

"Although the natural instinct might be to avoid conflict or ignore it, that often doesn't help and things fester and get worse. It's far better to have a culture where disagreements are managed quickly and sensitively before they escalate."

HR Co-ordinator

Mediation is one way of doing this.

"So much can be gained from an earlier intervention through the use of mediation."

Director of Administration

Another is to train managers to spot the early signs of conflict and address it through informal conversations.

"Training for frontline managers would clear a LOT of the issues up very quickly."

Head of Risk

The third and optimal solution is for employees to have these conversations themselves.

"Nip it in the bud by talking about it. ... It's like a weed which flourishes with time, and becomes bigger and more complex if left to grow by itself."

HR Business Partner

"You can use these skills in everyday life to get people thinking about other perspectives and help diffuse early on."

Board Member

Case study 2: Helping managers move from conflict-avoidance to conflict-competence (Louise, Deputy Programme Manager)

One respondent reflected on the role of managers and why they can be reluctant to get involved. With training in a few key skills, managers have the ability to step in and help people communicate effectively.

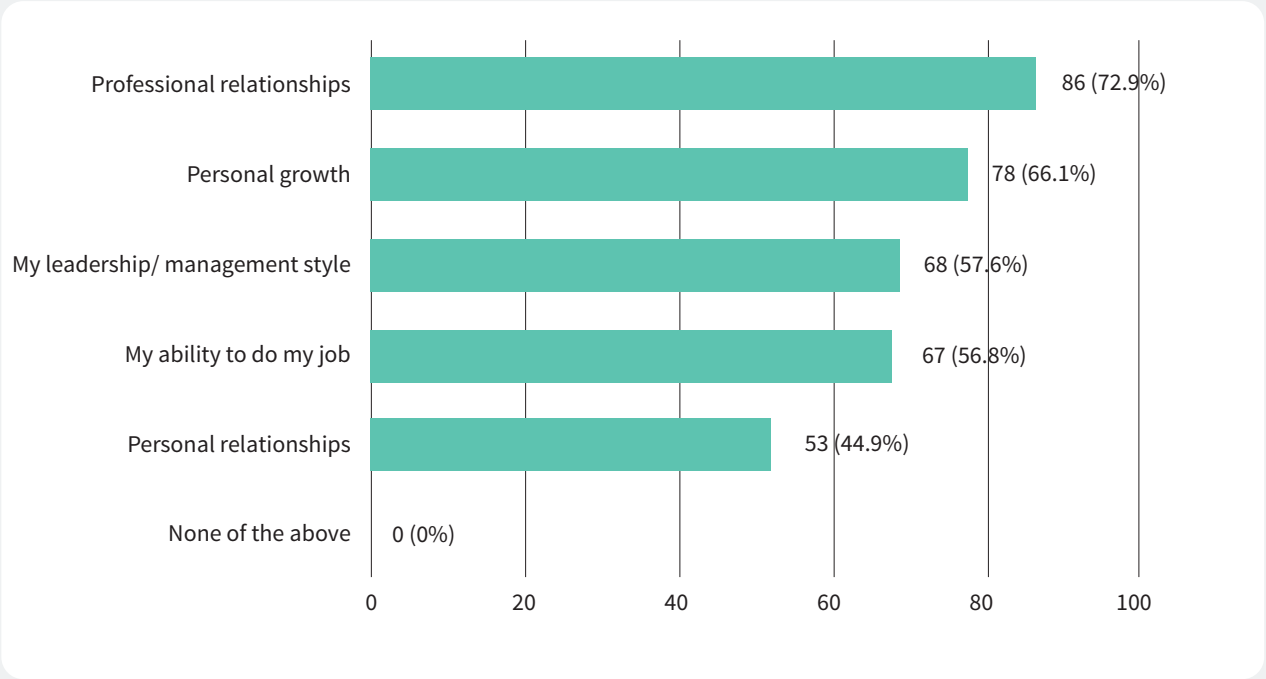
I think it's about the quality of conversation that we have with people.

In my day-to-day role managing people, there are lots of areas where conflict can arise. I think what was really helpful about the training was the reminder that, actually, I probably have the ability to step in early to diffuse situations and help people communicate effectively before things escalate.

What can easily happen is that either people don't feel they can speak to more senior people, such as their manager, because they always look incredibly busy and stressed. Or that when they do, it's very much a quick problem-solving exercise, or they're rebuffed and made to feel like what they brought up isn't relevant or worthy of an investment of time.

Also, I think managers are scared of getting dragged into long, complicated HR situations. They're scared that their own behaviors are going to get called out, or a team member might decide that they're siding with the other party, and that might lead to discrimination claims. So I think often managers stick their heads under the carpet and pretend people aren't in conflict because avoidance feels like the easier option.

Figure 2: We asked where the greatest impact has been from the skills learned on the course



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3. A new skillset for all

These conversations require a specific set of skills which are scarce in the workplace because their value has not been recognised. It is now an important strategic imperative to introduce these skills into the workforce because they are the bedrock of effective communication. The more widely they are spread, the greater the benefits.

When we asked our respondents to name the most valuable skills they acquired through the training, their answers fell into three categories:

- **Connected listening:**
  How to remain open and connected to the speaker even when it is difficult to do so.

"Conflict often arises from people feeling that they have not been listened to."
Deputy Programme Manager

"We always need to try to understand what is beneath the surface."
Head of People

"The main surprise for me was learning not to give advice, but just listen and focus on not being judgemental or interventionist. This did not come to me naturally."
University Professor

- **Perspective-taking:**
  The ability to listen to other perspectives, even when we disagree.

"There is no right or wrong, there is each person's different perspective of what is happening."
Freedom to Speak up Guardian

"Take the time to appreciate that your perspective is your reality, and it may differ from those you are communicating with."
Senior HR Consultant

"Don't judge - a situation isn't always what it appears to be on the surface."
Executive Assistant to CEO

- **Non-directiveness:**
  How to respect the autonomy of others, and the ability to withhold one's own opinions, even when you think you have the answer.

"I am naturally a solver of conflict, and the course taught me to listen more and allow people to come to their own resolution. They are then more accountable for the outcome."

Business Support Team Leader

"The key is being non-directive. You've got to trust that people have the ability to identify what they need and what action they want to take."

HR Business Partner

Case study 3: The power of silence (Kieran, HR Consultant)

One respondent spoke about the skills required to manage conflict constructively, in particular the ability to hold back on giving advice or opinions. When these skills are lacking, attempts to intervene are likely to make things worse.

"It's about being comfortable with silence, and realising that solutions can come from silence.

Before doing the course, my more natural way would have been to try to intervene, or try to sort of influence action out of people.

But I realise now that it's about taking a moment. Let's hear the words, and try to understand, even if we don't agree. Where are they coming from? What might be going on for them?

So instead of intervening, it's about not taking action, remaining neutral and independent. Having done mediations since the course, I've seen how that pause, that breath, really letting them hear each other, has a big impact and can really help people to move on."

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Conclusion

The good news is that there are many ways to make things better, and small changes can have a big impact.

Our research participants shared their unique perspectives on the untapped potential that exists within the workplace: how to see conflict as an opportunity, take early action, and understand that these skills benefit employees throughout the organisation.

People often describe training to become a mediator as life-changing. As well as equipping participants with key skills to support others in managing conflict, the greatest impact of the training was felt in the wider professional relationships, as well as significant impacts on leadership style and overall ability to do their job. These are the foundational skills of working effectively with others.

Respondents stressed that these skills are not just about organisational enhancement, or the next new business fad: they create better environments, fulfil human potential and enrich people's lives.

Whilst not everyone needs to become a mediator, many core conflict resolution skills help managers lead more effectively, and enable all employees to communicate and work together better. These skills play a vital role in supporting employee well-being, enhancing productivity, and driving organisational growth.

With many thanks to all the contributors to this research. We will leave the final words to one of them.

"The course gave me more insight and education than I've had through GCSEs, A-levels, two degrees, a PhD, a Master's & leadership qualifications.
It felt like a seismic shift; one where I was able to join up all my values & mobilise them in meaningful ways across all manner of situations, both with a calmness and a newfound confidence.
Behind conflict, someone is asking for help... what fear are they experiencing and how can you lift them up to overcome that fear and be the best version of themselves?"

Strategy & Transformation Lead

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How we can support you

Consensio is trusted by many leading organisations to support them in navigating workplace conflict. Wherever you are in your journey, our experts are here to help.

A useful starting point is to develop your own insight and awareness about conflict:

- Attend one of Consensio's complimentary webinars on conflict management, or read our monthly column on Forbes.
- Explore our thought leadership on organisational conflict, including practical guides filled with tips and guidance.
- Take our conflict audit to get a better picture of the conflict competencies in your organisation.

If you're ready to build skills and capacity in your workforce, these Consensio services may be of interest:

- Manager and leadership development training to give people leaders the skills and confidence to spot conflict early and support their teams.
- Facilitated conversations and conflict coaching to upskill selected staff in supporting others in having open, constructive dialogue.
- Accredited mediation training and outsourced mediation services.

And if you're looking to further deepen the conflict expertise within your organisation, we can support you to:

- Reach more employees at scale, to help everyone manage conflict and build stronger relationships.
- Build organisational learning and develop your employees' conflict resilience with our conflict management experts.
- Review and enhance your conflict resolution pathway to ensure all employees are supported in early, informal resolution.

To find out more about any of these services, or to discuss what might work best for your organisation, get in touch with our team on: **020 7831 0254** or **info@consensiopartners.co.uk**

"I think it's really helped shape the way I see functions such as HR and in particular, the role they have to support cultural change through reliance on less formal mechanisms for resolving conflict. Powerful stuff!"

Head of Risk

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About the research

The findings in this report are based on 118 survey responses from mediators trained on Consensio's accredited mediation course and eight follow-up telephone interviews.

With thanks to the mediators in the following organisations for participating in the research:

Addleshaw Goddard
BBC
BMW Group
Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner LLP
DLA Piper
Dulwich Prep & Senior
East Lancs NHS Trust
General Dental Council
Guy's & St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust
Haringey Council
HR, Coaching & Communication Consultancies
Jewish Care
Kings College Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Lancashire Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
London Borough of Lambeth
London City Airport
Make UK
Mind
Notting Hill Genesis
Queen Mary University of London
Reverze
Ridge and Partners LLP
Royal Brompton and Harefield Hospitals
South East Coast Ambulance Service
Seddons
South Cambridgeshire District Council
South London & Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust
Southern Housing
St George's Universities NHS Foundation Trust
Standard Chartered
Surrey County Council
Thurrock Council
University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust
University of Cambridge
University of Oxford
Westminster City Council

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About Consensio

At Consensio, we empower our clients to informally manage workplace conflict and build resilient workplaces, enhancing the well-being of organisations and their people. We offer support in all areas of conflict management, providing consultancy, leadership development, training, e-learning, coaching and mediation services.

This is why organisations such as **American Express, BBC, British Gas, Bupa, Cancer Research UK, Cult Beauty, Gatwick Airport, Independent Office for Police Conduct, Lloyd's of London, Nespresso, Net-A-Porter, NHS Trusts, Ogilvy, Rank Group, Sony, Standard Life Aberdeen, Unicef, University of Cambridge, Virgin Trains, Westminster City Council** and **WWF** choose Consensio.

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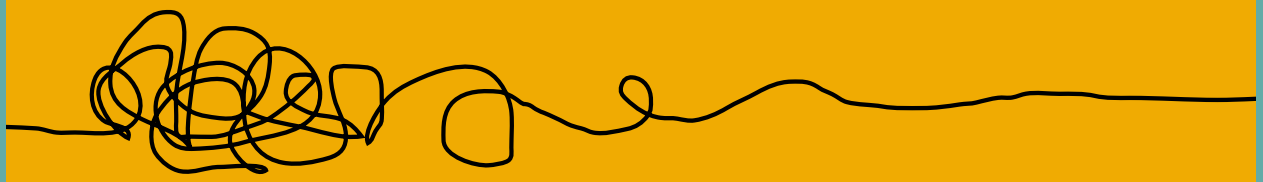
Consensio Thought Leadership

We have published a range of helpful guides, factsheets, case studies and white papers to benefit workplaces and increase employee well-being.
All are available to download free from our website or by contacting us on 020 7831 0254.

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Take Two: Workplace mediation from each party's perspective

This is the real life story of how mediation helped two colleagues whose working relationship had fallen apart, which led to stress, illness and a breakdown in communication.



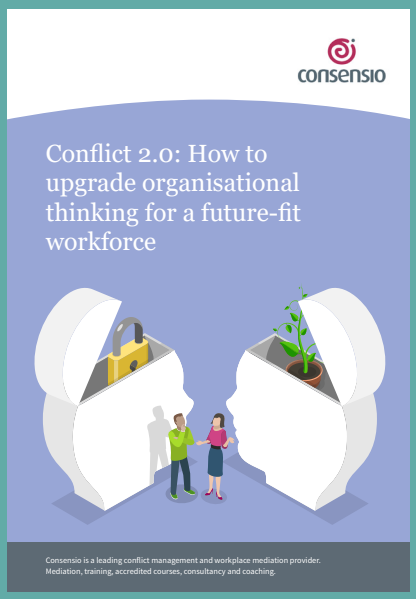
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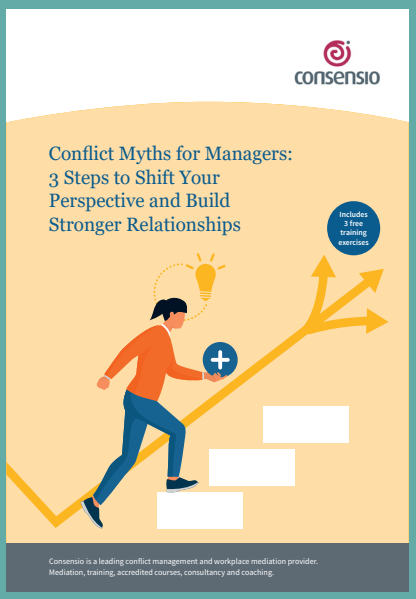


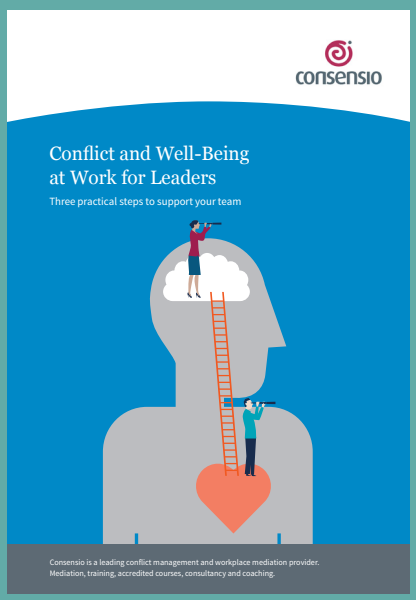




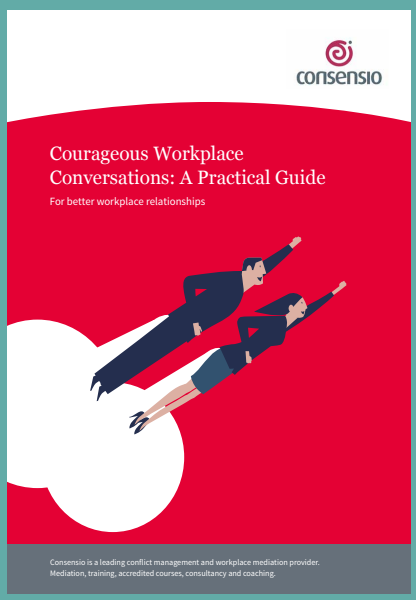


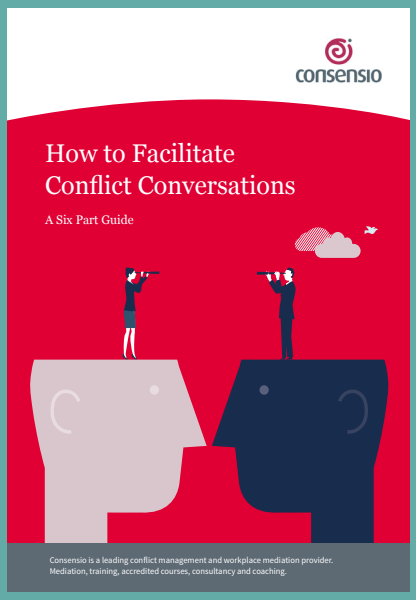


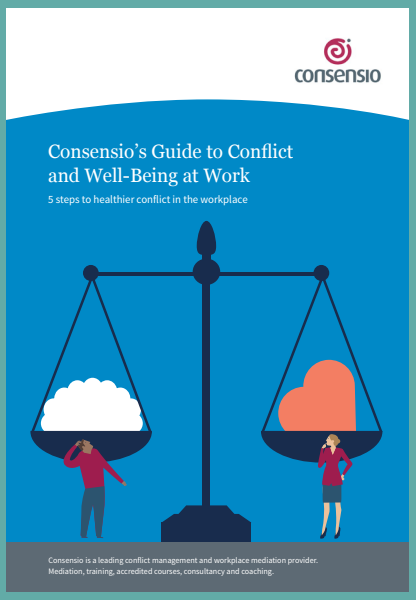














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