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3 Workplace Conflict Trends Leaders Can't Ignore In 2026

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 8 December 2025

Conflict is everywhere you look. Disputes between heads of state and sparring between political leaders on a domestic level are a daily occurrence. Whilst workplace conflict rarely makes front-page news, the impact on the individuals involved and their employers can be significant. As businesses navigate another year of change, there are three workplace conflict trends leaders can expect to see in 2026.

1. Employees are turning to AI to help manage conflict

It will come as no surprise that AI is among the key trends affecting workplace conflict. PwC's Global Workforce Hopes and Fears Survey 2025 reported that 54% of workers have used AI in the last 12 months. When it comes to AI and workplace conflict, employers are encountering an extension of that trend: a rise in AI-generated grievances. Whilst AI tools may enable some employees to express their concerns more clearly, they often generate long, detailed reports that are not always easy to decipher. The volume and complexity of AI-generated grievances are also forcing HR and managers to rethink how they triage and respond to complaints.

2. Conflict at work is taking up more management time

This leads us to the second trend in workplace conflict: that conflict is taking longer to manage. Research by Myers-Briggs found that time spent on workplace conflict doubled between 2008 and 2022, and that managers spend over four hours a week dealing with conflict. As many managers don't have the time, skills, or confidence to manage conflict, issues can end up in formal processes, often handled by HR. And with more than two in five HR teams reporting feeling overwhelmed, the capacity for specialist conflict resolution support is likely to remain under pressure in 2026.

3. Employee rights and expectations are expanding

And finally, as employee rights evolve, so does their desire to speak up. In the UK, the incoming Employment Rights Bill includes proposed 'day-one' rights to claim unfair dismissal. Meanwhile, the National Guardian's Office, which helps UK healthcare workers speak up reported 38,158 cases in 2023/24, compared to 25,000 in 2022/23. In addition to improved rights and greater awareness of them, other factors are at play, including generational dynamics. Gen Z workers tend to have different values and expectations of work, such as a desire for more work-life balance, flexible working arrangements, and a willingness to advocate for themselves.

Understanding the trends in workplace conflict for 2026 and beyond

While conflict may indeed be everywhere you look, this may be no bad thing. In the workplace, as in the wider world, conflict is a natural part of life. Humans have many differences, bringing richness in

approach, opinions, and ideas, all of which can bring value to employers. Awareness is the first step to change, and there are signs that organizations and their employees are recognizing the increasing importance of conflict management skills. In 2025, LinkedIn revealed that conflict mitigation is the second fastest-growing in-demand skill companies are hiring for. So, in 2026 and beyond, perhaps one of the emerging workplace conflict trends will be organizations seeking more constructive ways to manage conflict, even if those efforts never make the news headlines.