



Conflict is on the rise - but is HR rising to the challenge?

By Peter Crush, 25 March 2026

Workplace conflict in on the rise – but are HR policies responsible for causing it, and are HR professionals not equipped to deal with it?...

In a career spanning more than 25 years – one which has seen her rise to be a former Group Director of Organisational Capability, an ex HR Director at Unilever and a VP of HR at GSK – Rochelle Trow, author of upcoming book 'Anchored', says she has seen more than her fair share of 'conflict' in the workplace.

But in the last few years, Trow says she's convinced that rather than it reducing, this oppressive workplace pollution has only gotten worse. New figures released by conciliation service ACAS prove this – with 44% of employees saying they have either witnessed it or were on the receiving end of conflict last year – up compared to 2024. Her problem, however, is that it was observing HR's broader failure to "do bigger picture thinking" and deal with it that was one of the reasons she decided to turn to writing instead.

"Rising worldwide instability – compounded by near-constant 'change' – these are the destabilising forces pushing everyone to want to 'protect' themselves," she says. "And given this, it's only natural everyone is more easily triggered by their immediate environment and for conflict rise." And yet, she opines, it's the very processes that exist in HR – those that push performance, and drive people to compete to be elite that not only create conflict in the first place, but then make HR professionals ill-equipped to then deal with it. "I burned out as an HR person," she says. "I had to leave."

HR's duty to do something about it

The notion that conflict now seems to be properly baked into people's working lives, is borne out by the detail of the ACAS data, which reveals conflict costs UK plc £28.5 billion per year. Some 34% of it comes from colleagues while 32% comes from line managers.

But as part-causers of the conditions for conflict, many commentators believe HR ought to have more processes in place to deal with it.

"Conflict at work is not novel, but thanks to tensions around performance expectations, pay, and working arrangements, it is becoming increasingly complex and increasingly visible," says Lisa Hallewell, former HR BP at Sage, now director of human capability consultancy, Hoomph. But

according to Alexandra Efthymiades, co-founder at mediation and conflict manager company, Consensio: “What’s missing is the guidance HR needs to provide managers, to then equip employees to be able to talk about disagreement and diffuse it in a way that builds relationships rather than destroys them.”

The irony, Efthymiades and others observe, is that cases of conflict have likely risen precisely because employees are much more likely to ‘go formal’ and lodge a complaint with HR, but this is the point where HR’s involvement just worsens things.

“A grievance process inherently follows a process that strips out the ‘human’ aspect, and looks to find a ‘wrong doer’,” says Efthymiades. “It then becomes all about revenge rather than trying to understand group dynamics.” The best policy, she and others argue, is to try and engineer-out the inevitable formality of conflict resolution processes, and try and create environments where honest conversations can happen.”

According to Phil Floyd, head of investigation at workplace relationship specialist, CMP, the trend of more conflict ‘going formal’ is one he certainly recognises. He says: “We have experienced a significant increase in requests for independent investigations over the last year or so, as well as for mediation and neutral assessment services.” But often, he says conflict arises unnecessarily and can quickly escalate because pre-formal conversations don’t happen: He says: “If an employee has had a personal disagreement with their manager and that manager subsequently initiates some form of Performance Improvement Plan, it’s natural for the employee to perceive that this was the result of their disagreement. What was ‘conflict’ in terms of a personal disagreement, may now have turned into conflict surrounding capability and performance with a clear risk of escalation.”

The need to go informal

According to Samantha Bonser, who until last year was Director of HR for the Federation of Small Businesses, HR must return to dealing with conflict informally – before it becomes something that is officially logged and becomes something much bigger than it arguably is.

“Twenty years ago, people would speak to each other directly, and move on,” she says. “Hybrid working has made it harder for people to develop relationships where they probably could just sort things out between them. So what HR professionals need to do, is create conditions for a return to this.”

She adds: “The problem with being very formal about things, and taking a ‘zero tolerance’ to conflict, is that everything becomes conflict, and conflated with all the really bad stuff, when most conflict is just a difference on opinion.” As Naomi Regan, author of soon-to-be-published book ‘Beyond Small Talk’ observes: “Connection is the foundation for everything at work, Without it, things can escalate fast. It’s only when people feel they can ‘wade in, that they have buy-in’.” In other words, HR has to facilitate the right environment where disagreements can be aired constructively.”

Informality is scary

It’s understandable why some HR professionals might well prefer to follow no-nonsense standardised conflict/grievance policies. They might well appear to be cold, and devoid of empathy, but it’s better than facilitating informality that could start to be unmanageable.

But – as counterintuitive as it may seem – it’s the pathway with fewer boundaries that is the one many say must be taken. Says Floyd: “Managing conflict will invariably require managers to have difficult conversations – not all managers may be comfortable with this, but they can be equipped with the knowledge and skills to do so. More experience will mean less escalation and less conflict.” Bonser adds: “I get it that HR fear they might not be dealing with things properly by taking a more down-to-earth approach. But to default to policy would be to deny first being able to nip things in the bud.” She continues: “In a lot of the conflict I’ve dealt with, most people are horrified to learn they’ve inadvertently upset someone, and would prefer a quick apology, and everyone could move on.”

Conflict can be good

One reason why conflict must be a part of everyday conversations and tackled outside the formality of an HR process is actually, say experts, because conflict is actually ‘good’ in some settings, and is even needed for progress and innovation to happen.

“The best decisions I’ve seen in growing companies came from teams that pushed back on each other properly,” says Robbin Schuchmann, Co-Founder, Employ Borderless. The key, he says is HR providing the right psychological safety to allow this: “Teams that agree on everything are usually teams where people have stopped caring, or where disagreeing feels risky. But if people feel safe to disagree openly, disagreement tends to be productive,” he argues. “If they do not, issues go underground and they become much harder to fix.”

But there’s one other area that commentators argue HR professionals also need to confront, and should not now be shy around debate – whether or not part of the reason conflict is increasing is because of diversity policies.

Does diversity cause conflict?

Dr Poornima Luthra is a globally-recognised expert on developing inclusive workplaces, a Principal Lecturer at Imperial Business School, and an award-winning author – including her latest title *Can I Say That?*, which explores the fear behind today’s DEI backlash and seeks to empower staff to have more courageous workplace conversations. She says: “The only narrative that seems to exist right now is that diversity is a positive. But this is a view that has been so simplified it does allow for a nuanced conversation.”

She adds: “If you bring diverse people together, with different perspectives, then yes, it can breed innovation, but there’s also an increased likelihood of division and desired outcomes – and yes, conflict. More perspectives can only lead to improved decision making but only if they’re managed properly.” Regan agrees: “Without careful management, diversity increases the likelihood for difference, which increases the likelihood for disagreement. In this scenario, what’s more important is how organisations equip their people to deal with difference constructively.”

What should HR do?

So where does HR fit into all of this? “HR has a critical role,” argues Advita Patel, founder of CommsRebel. “Conflict doesn’t suddenly appear from nowhere. It usually results from ongoing unclear expectations, inconsistent communication and leaders avoiding difficult conversations instead of reacting to disputes, it’s HR’s task to build communication capability across the organisation. This means training managers to lead with clarity, modeling psychological safety and embedding confident communication into everyday culture.”

Adds Duncan Lancashire, Director, Fusion Coaching: “HR’s role is twofold. First it needs to equip managers and teams with practical skills for conflict resolution and emotional regulation. But secondly, it must help teams develop clear norms for ‘how’ they disagree, framing conflict as a useful decision-making tool when handled well. The aim should not be to eliminate conflict, but to make it a constructive tool for creativity.”

An additional duty, suggests Ben Baginsky, Programme Director, at Roffey Park Institute, is to re-examine policies that create more likelihood for conflict in the first place. He says: “Traditional equality, diversity and inclusion training helps teams understand differences that arise from ethnic, religion, gender or disability, but it rarely addresses other sources of difference that trigger friction, like generational expectations, communication styles or work preferences. Knowledge alone doesn’t help people find common ground.” He adds: “HR should also examine incentives. Competitive reward structures and individual targets can unintentionally fuel unhealthy conflict by pitting colleagues or departments against each other.”

But is something much more fundamental needed than this?

Sarah Henson is a Senior Behavioural Scientist, at CoachHub and bewails what she says HR has “consistently failed to do” – which is to promote people into leadership roles based on the skills of their previous (sometimes unrelated roles).

“I never see new leaders assessed for their ‘human’ capabilities – and this,” she says, “is where HR professionals need to stand their ground.”

She adds: “I get fed up when I hear that HR needs pulling in to clear up a mess - when HR is expected to somehow act like mum or dad over an issue. Instead of HR having to come in to apply the bandages after the event, they need to insist on setting the standards they require of leaders from the outset.” She continues: “Clearer insight into people capability to lead is needed, otherwise they’re putting people into positions that their skills can’t cope with.”

Pressure is undoubtedly piling on employees to adapt and upskill. Rising remote working is reducing connection. Fears abound about job security and AI. Against all this commentators agree that it’s only going to be ‘more’ likely that at-work conflict will grow. And that’s why proper HR planning is needed to deal with it.