

How to build skills to reduce the stress of workplace conflict

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 23 April 2026

Conflict at work is at a record high. According to a September 2025 survey by Acas, 44 per cent of working age people in the UK had experienced conflict at work in the past 12 months, the highest ever reported in a survey of British workers.

More than half of workers who had been involved in a dispute said they had experienced stress, anxiety or depression as a result, while 49 per cent felt a drop in their motivation or commitment.

The right set of skills

There are both personal and commercial costs to high levels of conflict at work, from the impact on employee wellbeing to reduced productivity.

Not only that, but conflict can have a ripple effect that extends far beyond the individuals it immediately concerns. Team dynamics shift as colleagues feel obliged to take sides or pick up others' tasks because they have taken time off or are preoccupied.

Unsurprisingly, managers and HR teams are facing increasing demand to support employees in conflict, either informally or through formal processes.

This places additional pressure on already stretched teams and pulls them away from strategic priorities.

As a result, many organisations are looking at ways to help employees address issues earlier. This is where building employees' skills to handle conflict can lead to greater wellbeing, less stress and better working relationships.

Yet conflict itself is not a problem, it's a normal part of life. Left unaddressed, however, it is more likely to negatively impact relationships and wellbeing.

To mark Stress Awareness Month, here are five ways to build skills to handle difficult situations promptly and effectively and help reduce the stress of conflict.

1. Prioritise early, informal intervention

Many organisations still default to formal processes when conflict arises. But this approach often intensifies feelings of anxiety or stress.

A grievance or formal complaint can take months to resolve and involve multiple meetings, interviews and investigations.

Supporting employees in understanding the value of early and informal action is crucial, as is providing the support services and processes to help them resolve conflict.

L&D teams can build internal capability in areas such as facilitation, conflict coaching and mediation, giving employees access to support before issues become entrenched.

2. Build direct communication

When employees experience conflict, their first instinct may be to seek advice from a trusted colleague or friend, in the hope that this person will 'side' with them and validate their point of view.

While understandable, it can reinforce a singular perspective and discourage taking action, which can elevate stress levels in the long term. Formal processes can further entrench this dynamic by separating the parties involved and reinforcing opposing points of view.

Instead, it pays to adopt a direct-first approach, providing the training and support employees need to have direct conversations with others.

When handled well, early direct conversations can defuse conflict and reduce the associated stress. This also allows employees to regain a sense of autonomy over the situation.

3. Create self-awareness and empathy

Being self-aware about conflict means understanding our own triggers, assumptions and biases. It also means recognising that workplace conflict is rarely one-sided, and we often carry at least some of the responsibility for tension in a relationship.

Understanding our role in conflict opens the way for a more empathic approach, helping us to see the issue from a different perspective. That shift alone can go a long way toward diffusing tension and opening the door to resolution.

Developing these skills can be as simple as encouraging people to ask themselves questions such as: 'How might my behaviour be contributing to this situation?' or 'What impact might this conflict be having on the other person?'

These reflections can help individuals understand what might be fuelling the conflict and the benefits of reducing its impact, and associated stress, on all involved.

4. Develop positive language skills

The language we use during conflict situations can inadvertently make matters worse. If an employee makes a comment such as 'Your email was rude' or 'You undermined me', this will be heard as an attack by the person on the receiving end. The likely response is defensiveness, retaliation or avoidance.

A more constructive approach is to begin with positive intentions and then describe the impact. When people explicitly signal that they value the relationship or want to understand what happened, the other person is far more likely to stay engaged.

Examples of conversation starters might be: 'I appreciate working on this project with you... I feel upset about the comment made at the team meeting and wanted to hear your perspective', or 'I value our working relationship, so I wanted to discuss the email you sent and how it landed with me.'

5. Think about organisational culture

Any interventions will fall flat if the organisational culture doesn't align. Conflict does not take place in isolation. In workplace mediation, parties often identify broader business issues that contributed to the situation. These could be unrealistic expectations or deadlines, or inconsistent leadership behaviours.

As culture starts from the top, recognising the importance of conflict resolution skills and ensuring they are on the organisational development agenda is a key priority.

Conflict management training for leaders also helps embed and role-model healthy conflict behaviours, which can then cascade down the organisation.

One way to support a healthier conflict culture within teams is to develop a conflict charter in which teams agree on how they will communicate when issues arise. This normalises conflict, and provides an opportunity to learn, improve and get to know each other better.

Ultimately, the most effective way to reduce conflict-related stress is to build organisational resilience.

Alongside training, businesses should ensure they have the right support, processes and tools in place so employees can be proactive in managing conflict, access specialist help when needed and navigate tension with confidence.