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Conflict Avoidance: The Hidden Driver Behind Workplace Conflict

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Many organizations invest in communication training, psychological safety initiatives, and speak-up cultures, yet workplace conflict continues to rise. Leaders often assume that developing confidence and conflict capability will improve how employees handle disagreement, but they may be overlooking another dynamic. In many cases, the real problem is not conflict itself, but people's tendency to avoid it.

When tensions arise, the instinct to retreat often shapes how people communicate. As issues remain unresolved, conflict escalates, and by the time leaders get involved, working relationships have often broken down beyond repair. Leaders looking to manage workplace conflict more effectively need to understand the impact of conflict avoidance and how to support staff in raising concerns earlier and more constructively.

Why workers avoid conflict and how it affects organizations

The causes of conflict avoidance

Conflict avoidance is often rooted in early childhood experiences and is influenced by factors such as parental role modeling and criticism. Many people learn at an early age to associate conflict with risk or negative outcomes, and this belief system accompanies us into adulthood and the workplace.

This helps to explain why employees may avoid raising concerns or speaking up, due to a fear of damaging relationships, being viewed negatively by their manager, or harming future career opportunities.

Conflict avoidance at work can take many forms: staying silent in meetings, not voicing concerns, delaying difficult conversations, or withdrawing from disagreement altogether. While these behaviors may reduce discomfort in the short term, they often lead to conflict escalation.

Employees also pay close attention to how disagreements are handled inside organizations. If challenging ideas lead to defensiveness, political fallout, or career risk, avoidance is quickly reinforced, regardless of official messaging about open communication.

The impact of conflict avoidance in the workplace

When tensions are left unresolved, small frustrations can turn into resentment, and a lack of communication can create mistrust. This often leads to stress and anxiety for those involved, while tensions spread through teams as people take sides. As conflict grows, so does avoidance, as a bigger issue appears more onerous and risky to address.

By the time HR becomes aware of the situation and steps in, resolution is both more costly and difficult. Support services, such as facilitation or workplace mediation, can be effective, particularly if used early. However, formal processes, such as grievances, are costly and draining; they not only take many months to complete but also rarely lead to the restoration of the working relationship.

When employees feel able to raise concerns, this brings a host of benefits, from new ideas and better ways of working to learning about oneself and one's colleagues, avoiding groupthink, and building trust.

What organizations can do to reduce conflict avoidance

An effective organizational approach to addressing conflict avoidance starts at the top. Conflict needs to be normalized, and leaders play a key role in defining expectations and role-modeling healthy conflict management behaviors. Building a culture of accountability around conflict involves developing conflict capability at all levels and empowering individuals to handle issues directly rather than relying on others to provide all the answers.

Managers also need support to address difficult conversations early and encourage employees to do the same. Fostering a positive conflict mindset in individuals begins with greater self-awareness, openness to different perspectives, and viewing conflict as a learning opportunity.

From conflict avoidance to conflict resilience

Conflict is a normal consequence of people working together. Problems tend to arise when concerns go unaddressed, difficult conversations are avoided, and frustrations build beneath the surface. Organizations that manage conflict well are not those without disagreement, but those where employees feel able to raise concerns early, challenge ideas constructively, and navigate tensions before they escalate. While conflict itself can strengthen relationships, improve decision-making, and encourage learning, conflict avoidance never does.