



The Niceness Trap: The Costs Of Avoiding Workplace Conflict

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 28 August 2026

Leaders sometimes avoid addressing difficult issues for understandable reasons, especially when they worry the conversation might affect a working relationship. That can mean softening their feedback, hinting at concerns, or delaying the conversation altogether. While being “nice” may ease the initial discomfort, the underlying issues remain. Over time, the consequences of avoiding conflict can be significant, not just for leaders, but for their teams and the wider organization.

The costs of avoiding workplace conflict

The cost to the leader

Delaying an uncomfortable conversation rarely makes it easier to have later. Behaviors can become established, and team members may become defensive when challenged on something that seemed acceptable in the past.

Seeking to be “nice,” a leader might raise concerns indirectly rather than giving explicit feedback, thinking this will communicate expectations adequately. When nothing changes, frustration and resentment build up.

The cost to the team

Workplace conflict rarely affects just one or two individuals. Left unaddressed, conflict can spread across the team; people may take sides, cliques form, and time is spent discussing the problem rather than resolving it. Stress and resentment can also develop as other team members take on extra work when a colleague’s performance suffers because of the conflict.

Trust in the manager may begin to erode. Team members who have voiced concerns may feel they aren’t being listened to or supported, particularly if they perceive that issues are handled inconsistently. What starts as task-focused conflict can turn into relational conflict, contributing to disengagement, reduced collaboration, and lower productivity within the team.

The cost to the organization

Over time, if conflict avoidance persists across the organization, it can become embedded in organizational culture. Tensions within individual teams can accumulate and eventually affect wider organizational performance. When people don’t take responsibility for resolving conflict when it first occurs, greater pressure falls on HR. Matters that might have been dealt with through an informal conversation may then end up in resource-intensive formal processes, including grievances.

There are other less visible costs. When employees feel that raising concerns will make little difference, they may stop speaking up. This can create an appearance of harmony, while issues remain hidden from an organization's leadership until they escalate. Organizations also risk losing the opportunities that come from healthy conflict, such as process improvement, innovation, and better relationships.

Steps to reduce the costs of conflict avoidance

How to change the narrative

Effective change requires action at three levels: individual, team, and organization. For leaders, the first step is to recognize that by avoiding a difficult conversation, they are not mitigating pain, but transferring it. At a team level, the aim is not to eliminate conflict, but to create an environment where issues are discussed early, openly, and constructively. Underpinning both is the organization, which can provide the education and conflict-skills training to support both leaders and staff.

A conflict-competent culture is one where people have the confidence and skills to address issues early and informally, rather than avoiding conflict. In that kind of culture, recognizing when being "nice" has become a substitute for being clear can help leaders resist the niceness trap.