

Managers may be making workplace conflict worse: Try non-directiveness instead

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 5 October 2026

A quick and direct ‘fix’ for conflict situations, whilst tempting for all involved, is not always the best route for individuals or teams. How can organisations build non-directive skills in managers so that employees can take greater ownership of resolving workplace conflict? Anna Shields sets out the benefits of non-directiveness.

When it comes to conflict at work, the most natural solution often seems to be the most direct one. Employees often look to their managers or the HR team for a solution; they need the situation to be resolved and may lack the skills or confidence to do so themselves.

But what if not giving a solution, in other words, non-directiveness, was a more powerful way to resolve a dispute? According to Consensio’s research with professionals trained as mediators, non-directiveness is one of the most valuable skills employees need to manage conflict effectively. Our research found the two other top skills were listening and perspective-taking.

Guiding not leading

Non-directiveness refers to the ability to withhold personal views and opinions about the situation and to respect others’ autonomy, even if the solution seems obvious. Rather than avoiding issues, it is about helping someone to find their own route through a challenge.

Non-directiveness can feel counterintuitive for a reason: we live in a society that expects those in authority to have all the answers. Many workplaces still operate with a top-down management approach, and this can filter through to how conflict is handled. Rather than empowering employees to defuse difficult situations themselves, the expectation is that a problem will be escalated to a senior manager or HR professional who will then “fix” it.

In contrast, upskilling managers in non-directiveness can have benefits for workplace culture, productivity and creativity.

- **It builds better relationships**

When managers encourage and support team members to navigate disputes directly, this can forge more open and trusting relationships.

Using a non-directive approach means asking questions rather than supplying answers, which in turn helps colleagues learn about themselves and others, building trust.

This not only helps to resolve disputes more effectively but also forms the foundations of high-performing teams.

- **It promotes accountability**

When managers are less directive, it can help employees recognise that resolving conflict is not solely the manager's responsibility; they have a role to play too.

This can help create and nurture a team culture where accountability for managing conflict is embedded at every level, rather than sitting just with managers or HR.

Rather than relying on formal processes that can escalate feelings of mistrust, employees can work together to resolve conflicts at a much earlier stage.

- **It fosters innovation**

A non-directive approach to conflict encourages team members to come up with their own solutions, often revealing more creative ways to solve a problem, or identifying a better way of working.

It can also build a culture where colleagues feel safe to challenge assumptions and share ideas.

- **It encourages buy-in**

The parties involved in a conflict are likely the best placed to come up with a solution because they are living the situation.

When they are supported to have an open discussion, they are more likely to commit to the solution they arrive at because they played a part in getting there.

How to train non-directiveness

Training managers in non-directiveness means building skills to avoid taking over a problem or steering employees towards a particular outcome. That means practising listening without trying to influence others' actions based on their own opinions. When we develop this skill with managers, we focus on leaders becoming the compass rather than the map: they help their team members navigate a difficult situation themselves rather than relying on their manager to direct them.

This can be achieved through management development programmes or other dedicated conflict management training sessions. Because the instinct to step in and solve is often so deeply ingrained, the skill needs to be practised, not just understood in theory.

One goal should be to help managers become more comfortable with silence. Many leaders instinctively feel the need to jump in with an opinion or advice based on their own experiences, when it is more constructive to allow others to reach their own conclusions in that silence. This can be as simple as training managers to pause before responding and listen carefully to better understand what is going on.

Trusting the process

Building trust is crucial. Many managers may be wary that a non-directive approach will let conflict fester. Non-directiveness does not mean stepping back in every situation. Where informal resolution is appropriate, however, managers need to trust that people can identify what they need and the action they want to take.

Training modules can focus on self-awareness: knowing why jumping into a situation could do more harm than good and therefore there is a need to learn how to resist the temptation to “fix” things. Furthermore, if employees and managers see senior leaders role-modelling this behaviour, this helps to embed it as an approach.

Financial benefits

Effective conflict management training will also help managers understand the wider benefits of resolving issues early and informally. Statistics from Acas show that managing formal disciplinary procedures costs up to £2.3 billion per year, while the costs are significantly lower when employees take more informal routes. When someone chooses to escalate a situation to a more senior member of staff or HR, it can entrench strongly held beliefs and make the situation even harder to resolve.

A key takeaway for many people who undertake conflict management training is how they can use these skills not just in conflict situations, but in their day-to-day lives. At work, they are better able to deal with complex client situations or handle feedback more constructively, while at home they often report finding it easier to think about others' perspectives. The impact is therefore not only a reduction in the costs of handling workplace disputes, but wider improvements in wellbeing, engagement and working relationships.