



Embed inclusion into
everyday work systems

Why good conflict management is all part of inclusion

By Jo Faragher on 12 October 2026

Conflict management and resolution may not feel like a natural part of an inclusion strategy, but getting it wrong can have huge implications for whether people feel a sense of belonging with their employer. According to research from Acas, the conciliation service, 57% of people who experienced workplace conflict reported stress, anxiety or depression as a result. Almost half (49%) said the conflict led to a drop in motivation or commitment, and a quarter reported a drop in productivity.

This has tangible implications for a business and how it operates, according to Emily Starling, senior Acas advisor. “One in ten people took sickness absence or resigned from their job as a result of conflict, while 5% changed their job role. Fewer than one in five (17%) said the conflict had no impact on them at all,” she explains. “The research also shows that disabled workers whose disability has a major impact on their daily life experienced conflict at much higher rates (68%) than the average (44%), and were also more likely to report conflict linked to bullying, discrimination and harassment (40% compared with 22% overall).” Acas estimates that conflict costs UK employers between £590 million and £2.3 billion per year in lost productivity as employees either take time off or are “present” but experiencing stress and anxiety.

Acas’ research shows that conflict is not rare, either, with 44% of UK workers having experienced it in the last year. Neither is it experienced equally across the workforce, adds Starling. “Workers with disabilities that significantly affect their daily life face conflict at a much higher rate and are more likely to experience bullying, discrimination and harassment. Resolving conflict is a key part of ensuring employees, including those from underrepresented groups, feel safe, valued and fairly treated.” In 2025/26, Acas received more than 28,000 disability discrimination early conciliation notices, which employees and companies are required to file before proceeding to tribunal.

Leaning on tech

Alex Efthymiades, director at resolution consultancy Consensio, attributes much of the rapid rise in grievances among workers to AI, as many are using tools such as ChatGPT and Claude to draft complaints or document what’s happening without talking to a manager first. “People’s appetite for informal conversations is decreasing because of reliance on technology, and AI tends to be influenced by what you feed it so will give a biased view,” she says. “We’ve lost the sense of community we had by going into the office, so businesses need to think more carefully about how we create a sense of belonging even when people are not physically together.

Efthymiades explains that social interactions and togetherness help to foster a sense of psychological safety at work, which in turn helps people to be more open to discussing disagreements or minor issues before they spiral. “People’s workloads and pressures are getting in the way of people having these conversations, too, so we need to build that sense of trust that comes from interactions that aren’t transactional,” she adds. She argues that managers need more support in building environments where their teams feel comfortable airing

issues, but their training often focuses on areas such as meeting targets or performance management, rather than investing in the human side.

Starling at Acas agrees that managing and resolving conflict is a key skill for managers. “Building the skills and confidence to intervene earlier and proactively can help create a positive employment environment and healthier relationships,” she says. “A lack of confidence among managers can lead to inaction and could exacerbate conflict. Our report showed that 35% of managers did nothing when they experienced conflict with their own reports, and 14% did nothing when in conflict with anyone else. Encouraging and supporting informal resolution is an effective solution, with nearly half (45%) of people surveyed saying they attempted to resolve conflict through a discussion with their manager, and 30% through informal discussion with the other person involved.”

Informal dispute resolution

A draft code of practice from Acas on disciplinary and grievance procedures places much stronger emphasis on resolving issues before they escalate into formal processes or tribunals. The organisation argues that early resolution can reduce costs for employers, improve workplace relationships and even boost wellbeing. A consultation on the draft code concluded on 23 September and it is in the process of reviewing responses, but there is a clear push to boost informal resolution and reduce the burden on the tribunal system, which has a backlog of more than 70,000 single claims.

David Liddle, CEO of The TCM Group, has advised major employers on informal resolution models for many years, and has set up ‘resolution centres’ in a number of organisations that bring together managers, HR and unions to build more resolution-focused cultures. “When we disagree or make a mistake, it becomes a defining moment in our culture,” he says. “The opposite is someone feeling their voice is being heard, they seek positive resolution through dialogue, and the manager is curious about what is underneath. If people disagree, it can become dysfunctional, hurtful, even traumatic – people don’t feel included and they don’t feel safe.”

Liddle argues that managing disagreement well is the most important element in creating a culture of inclusion, but organisations must work harder to get there. “You need to mobilise your skills and capabilities to help people to disagree well, this has to be the driving force,” he adds. “This is aligned to people’s wellbeing and psychological safety, and so underpins productivity and performance.” When faced with AI grievances, managers should see this as a cry for help, he suggests: “This person is trying to tell me something, so why don’t I sit down and talk to them? Go and listen.”

Efthymiades believes employers need to step back and think about whether their culture promotes this approach to dispute resolution, and how they sustain it. “Managers should receive training on how to have psychologically safe teams, to have better conflict conversations. But we also need to think about whether leaders role model this behaviour – it’s not just about policies and procedures, it’s how we work together that positively or negatively impacts people’s wellbeing,” she says. In turn, this will promote better indicators in employee engagement, reduced absence and staff retention, making it a business imperative as well as a human one.