

Helix Top Tips for dealing with conflict at work - Crunch Time

Conflict seems to be an inevitable part of our working life, whether it be a personality clash with a colleague or a dispute between the shop floor and management. It's all too easy to put our heads in the sand, or to become aggressive, which only escalates the dispute. So in this issue we've compiled our top tips on managing conflict in order to maximise the chance of speedy and pain free resolution.

The conflict dilemma - do you avoid at all costs, go in all guns blazing or use a third way?

I recently attended a talk delivered by ACAS on workplace mediation. The speakers were excellent and the subject matter was interesting, authoritative and useful. So why this subject here? Well, excellent though the talk was, I was left thinking that so much workplace conflict goes unchallenged, unmanaged and left to fester. ACAS and other mediators pick up the pieces when the situation has reached meltdown. But if dealt with earlier, the individuals and the organisation may well have been able to resolve it themselves.

Conflict is common, and indeed is to be expected. But all too often it is left unmanaged. In my experience working with managers across sectors, the most common response to conflict is to avoid it at all costs. Why? Because it is personal, difficult and we don't always have the skills to deal with it.

The Oxford English Dictionary describes conflict as (amongst other things) "A state of opposition or hostilities; the clashing of opposed principles; the opposition of incompatible wishes or needs in a person; the distress resulting from this".

A common misconception is that conflict is obvious and loud. Most of it isn't, because when it isn't tackled, it simply festers, quietly.

Both ACAS* and the CIPD* regularly study the impact of conflict in the workplace - and if you'd like to delve deeper, their website links are at the end of the Top Tips. Both organisations would agree that conflict needs to be addressed. More commonly it is ignored, or sometimes aggressively challenged. They would also agree that you need to understand the causes of conflict in order to resolve it.

So - here are our top tips for handling conflict in a work environment:

1. Get used to it

First of all, accept that conflict will happen. It is inevitable. Sometimes it may be a one-off difference of opinion. It could be a long standing, lingering rivalry between individuals. It might involve team disputes. It might be within the hierarchy. The details will vary, but it will occur.

And it's OK that conflict happens. It's what human beings do. We form opinions, likes and dislikes. That these will differ from those of others is almost a certainty.

Whilst we're here - it's also worth highlighting that conflict can have a positive effect. If a debate is needed to find the solution to an organisational problem, then it should happen. It can strengthen relationships, develop a clearer understanding of ourselves and others, and develop our skills and abilities to deal with conflict in the future. It can also spark creativity, help develop new ideas and is a healthy part of business growth.

2. Procedures can be your greatest ally

If we accept that conflict is inevitable, then we might as well have the mechanisms to deal with it. Put some good, solid procedures in place; grievance, disciplinary, and importantly (if often neglected) - dispute resolution procedures.

Those organisations who have good conflict resolution procedures report some very good results. Those who don't, well, they may not even know the conflict exists.

Some conflict resolution procedures are a statutory requirement anyway, so best done as a matter of course. But rather than having procedures simply to put a tick in the box to satisfy an employment tribunal (should you be unlucky), why not use them as a proactive tool to avoid a tribunal and to strengthen relationships within your workplace?

Most HR practitioners would support this view I'm sure. It's often line management who might need to re-think their approach to both conflict / dispute and the existence of policies. From a legal standpoint, if you have policies in place, follow them. They are designed to help not to hinder.

3. Help managers understand the causes of conflict

Managers need to be able to recognise conflict, or the potential for conflict so that it can be handled effectively. Causes include personality clashes, perceptions of unfair treatment, lack of understanding of other peoples' views or needs. Only when you recognise these can you do something about them.

Train and coach your managers. They need encouragement, authority, freedom, the mediation and feedback skills, as well as the confidence to deal with conflict issues. I think it is safe to say that in most organisations, this doesn't happen.

Take away these ingredients, and you have a good explanation for the most common approach to conflict at work: Avoidance. Walking away from, or failing to recognise the issue, simply leaves it to resurface or fester. Ignoring it or being passive (which is slightly different, and the second most common response), runs the risk of passive aggression - unlikely to resolve anything!

The third most common way is to tackle it - head on. Now, this might work, but again runs the risk of being perceived as aggressive behaviour. Aggression has a habit of breeding aggression, and the conflict escalates.

The fourth way - is to face the situation in a calm and mature manner. So we're probably back to the need for some skills development.

4. Assertiveness skills

Perhaps the most valuable skill set required by managers is that of assertiveness. It's the behaviour pattern most likely to get results that matter - i.e. resolving the conflict. Now we can't be assertive all the time. It takes effort to stay assertive; our emotional responses are important and it is not healthy to constrain them too much. However, anger, frustration, fear etc are unlikely to be of help when trying to resolve conflict.

Assertiveness requires certain knowledge and skills. Key amongst them are these:

- Managers need to know that it is both their right and their responsibility to deal with conflict. And rights need exercising or they lose effect.
- Self-esteem and self confidence - this one can take time and practice.
- Positive thinking patterns. You need to think of success for it to happen.
- Assertive behaviour skills. Being assertive is not a natural behaviour pattern when dealing with stressful situations - it is learned behaviour.

Some good quality, practically focused training can help here.

5. Aim for resolution

Two chefs in a kitchen each need an orange for their dish. Only one orange is available. An argument erupts about who should have it. They eventually ask the head chef to intervene. With a flourish and a very sharp knife, head chef solves the problem by cutting the orange into two, giving each chef half an orange. Problem solved with a classic compromise. It turns out that chef number one was making an orange cheesecake and needed the zest. Chef number two was making carrot and orange soup and needed the juice. Both chefs got exactly half of what they needed. With some discussion however, each could have got exactly what they wanted.

Most people aim for compromise; agreeing to disagree, not talking about certain things, avoiding contact with people, "I won't do this if you agree not to do that". There is a place for compromise, but not yet.

If you aim for compromise - what is your fall-back position? Probably stalemate. Aim for resolution. Firstly, with the right approach, it is often achievable. The results are received positively by both parties. People get to understand the other person's viewpoint - even if they don't agree, and the solutions are likely to stand the test of time.

If you aim for resolution, your fall-back position becomes compromise, which might be the last resort for an acceptable, workable solution.

South West Airlines has a fairly robust approach to conflict, and resolution is always the target. When employees are in dispute, they are asked to attend what are (tongue in cheek) called 'come to Jesus' sessions. Both parties are pretty much locked in a room and required to 'bare their souls' to each other to generate a sufficient degree of understanding that resolution can be achieved. And it works. Most of the time.

6. Be resilient

Conflict will keep on happening to some degree. New approaches might not be easy. They won't work overnight, but given time to become accepted, they can have long lasting positive effects. So stick with it, and demand that your employees, managers included, do so too. It's very easy to revert to the familiar territory of conflict avoidance.

7. Build a conflict friendly culture

This isn't about encouraging conflict. It's more about making it OK to deal with conflict and disputes.

It's a bit of a soap box of mine I know, but the culture of an organisation really is so important. If 'the way we do things round here' is to avoid conflict, you'll get one set of outcomes. If it is to accept and handle disputes as part of life - you'll get another. I know where I'd rather be.

To achieve this sort of cultural mindset is no mean feat, and is certainly reliant on all of the preceding tips, and those that follow!

8. Talk to your staff - honestly and openly

Poor communication is high on the list of gripes from staff in many organisations. Poor communication encourages tittle-tattle and rumour - food for disputes. Open communication deals with facts in abundance - making it more likely that people will listen and understand. The more that is known, the less room there is for conflict. It will still happen though! Probably at a personal level.

9. Make your managers role models

I was once asked by a senior manager in a client organisation to help facilitate a series of workshops designed to build team effectiveness and cross-functional working. I didn't see it at the time, but that senior manager was the worst role model his team could have. He would incite arguments, wind people up, and then watch the spectacle. Needless to say, the culture of management followed suit. Management style is infectious after all. Senior management are key role models, setting the scene as to how conflict, difference of opinion and disputes are resolved.

So build their skills too. Help them be assertive. Get them to encourage and enable conflict resolution within their teams.

10. Get some therapy

Finally - some nuts are very hard to crack. If you can't do it yourself, call in the experts. ACAS can help with very well qualified and talented mediators. There are some independent operators too. More importantly - train your own staff and managers as mediators. You'll save time, effort and lots of money.

* For further reading visit:

http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/5/0/B19_1.pdf

<http://www.cipd.co.uk/NR/rdonlyres/2A206FFD-CF79-4F2A-9B8A-FA7F2A05CE07/0/manconflwrk.pdf>

http://www.cipd.co.uk/publicpolicy/_scswrk.htm

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