

Distance learning

The pandemic has presented challenges for all of us, and the heightened stress has led to an increase in conflict – exacerbated by not being physically together. Julian Hall looks at conflict in the workplace, and how to foster healthy conflict



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Healthy conflict takes bravery, but it is worth it

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has brought more than its fair share of issues to challenge law firms. Logistical issues of how we continue to work when we should not be in the workplace. The government changing its mind about whether we should be in the workplace or not. For some, worrying about whether our business model will last through the period of turmoil, and for others, finding clients needing their services even more, just at a time when resources are precious. Partners had to consider whether to furlough or not to furlough, and if they did so, they created two teams: one that felt helpless and sidelined, and the other that felt overburdened with keeping things going. Video conferencing has gone some way to smooth communication, but it is not a good long-term alternative, as we miss vital human body language signals that are essential for healthy communication. Video calls also reduce time for rapport-building that strengthens relationships and improves team cohesion. Finally, flexible working often reduces informal conversations that happen in the kitchen or over lunch that serve so well to reduce tensions. By the time you add in home-schooling, if you were not stressed before March, there is a good chance you are now. Little wonder that we are experiencing more firms talking about internal conflict and tension than ever before. In this article, I'll take a look at different types of conflict, what healthy conflict looks like in the workplace, and how to reduce unnecessary conflict, taking into account our new working practices.

What conflict looks like in the workplace

Conflict happens in the workplace, no matter how much people try to deny its existence. If it is not given the space to play out healthily, then it will play out in the following three ways.

Aggression

We all recognise this: it is the stereotype of those that may have had the “you need anger management” insult hurled at them by the less aggressive. Extreme workplace behaviours can include raised voices, throwing objects and slamming doors, as well as generally intimidating and fear-evoking behaviour. The less extreme example can be the team member who

talks through gritted teeth and has a generally menacing “I’m just on the edge of losing it” energy about them.

By its nature, aggression is overt and has a certain brutal honesty about it. The perpetrators will cling on to the words “at least I’m honest”, in order to justify their behaviour.

But it has an immense downside, in that it spreads anger elsewhere, scares people, and diverts mental and emotional energy away from the focus on work and productivity. In our experience, there are not many openly aggressive workplaces.

Passive aggression

Conflict is not valued in a lot of workplaces, and people are scared by it, so it goes underground. It then leaks out in colleague behaviour.

Passive aggression is the most common or popular way of expressing ourselves in the workplace, possibly because it takes a degree of intelligence to communicate passive-aggressively, and an even greater level of emotional intelligence to interpret it. It is worth considering, however, how intelligent a form of communication it really is if it requires interpretation to get the true message across.

Behaviours associated with passive aggression are withholding communication, withholding support, sabotage, back-stabbing and sarcasm. This is what is interpreted by many in organisations as political behaviour: rather than talking openly about an issue, people have watercooler chats, car park conferences, and briefings against each other. In my experience, most workplaces are passive aggressive in the way they deal with conflict.

Passivity

Passive behaviour is characterised by not expressing how we feel and what we want, but expecting others to magically interpret what we feel and want. It's a position of powerlessness, but assumed powerlessness. Passive people believe that complying with what others want keeps everyone happy, and that in the end, they will get what they want. It's not honest about feelings, needs and wants, and it's not a very intelligent position to take, because it expects the rest of the world to fully understand one's needs, based on very limited or zero information. Passive people often comply, but never seem happy.

Assertiveness

Aggressive, passive and passive aggressive behaviour are all unhealthy ways of carrying out conflict. They are ineffective at communicating, cause far more emotional work than is necessary, and waste time, effort and energy. In other words, they reduce productivity and increase stress.

But there is an alternative: assertiveness. An assertive workplace is characterised by high levels of emotional intelligence and honesty. This workplace culture exists because anyone of any level knows they can be honest and, crucially, be angry with anyone else, at any level, in a healthy and constructive way.

In an assertive workplace, people quickly clear up misunderstandings, listen to each other, and respect each other's boundaries. Grudges are not held on to, because the issues are cleared up. Backstabbing and politics are minimised, and aggressive behaviour is virtually eradicated.

In short, conflict becomes replaced with empathy. Teamwork becomes the norm, even in competitive environments, and a solution-focused environment starts to grow.

Assertiveness is about being honest. People need to be able to acknowledge that they have these, often uncomfortable, feelings. It requires being honest with colleagues and, crucially, honest with yourself. Sadly, a truly assertive workplace is, in my experience, rare. The bigger the business gets, the less likely it is to exist.

How we each contribute to conflict

When we end up in conflict with others, it is almost always about us, not about the other person. The key reasons for conflict are outlined below.

Stress

Have you noticed how much easier it is to get into conflict with others when you are stressed? That does not mean stress is an acceptable justification for conflict. But there is a direct relationship between how short our collective fuses are and how many disagreements, feuds and arguments we participate in. Right now, the business environment, possibly your home environment and the general atmosphere in the country all mean we are anxiously waiting to find out what will change next. In other words, there are environmental factors at play. That said, we are all responsible for our relationship with stress and how we deal with it.

Self-esteem

So many conflicts in competitive workplaces can be related back to challenges to our self-esteem. Many of us rely on our workplace to meet our emotional needs, such as to feel respected, liked, appreciated and held. When things get stressed and colleagues no longer support those needs – perhaps they are not as appreciative as they used to be – it is easy to feel hurt.

Self-esteem is dependent on the approval of others, rather than being an inherent positive view of ourselves. Most of us actually hold subconscious negative beliefs about ourselves. Conflict can arise where someone accidentally triggers one of those negative self-beliefs. What they actually said may, objectively, be innocent and normal, but if it is a trigger for us, we can take offence, get hurt and react in a way which sets off a conflict.

Our judgemental and critical nature

As humans, we are not born judgemental, but we learn very quickly to use this technique to protect ourselves. When I am judging you, two issues arise.

First, I am subconsciously seeking to elevate myself above you. Maybe I don't feel powerful enough, and this is my way of gaining perceived power. Second, I am in the opposite position to empathy. When I am judging you, I cannot and will not understand why you behave the way you do. This is not good for cooperation, but is a great way of getting into conflict. With careful attention to our judgements, we can learn a great deal about ourselves, and more to the point, we can develop the essential skill of empathy that fosters cooperation and productivity.

If we all learn to take responsibility for our relationship with stress, foster our own healthy self-esteem, nail down the negative beliefs we carry around, and be more aware of our judgemental and critical nature, then we will automatically have less conflict. What we are left with is healthy conflict.

What healthy conflict looks like

Healthy conflict is where team members openly share an issue with each other, the impact that issue has on them, how they feel and how they would like it to turn out differently next time. We have a structure that teams use, which we call "clearing the air". When a team signs up for it, they are committing to take responsibility for their emotional health, and sit down and have healthy conflict with anyone else, whenever is necessary. It's not easy, it requires

bravery and self-awareness, but it is worth it.

As Patrick Lencioni says in his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (John Wiley & Sons, 2002) (not having conflict is the second dysfunction): "I don't think anyone ever gets completely used to conflict. If it's not a little uncomfortable, it's not real. The key is to keep doing it anyway."

How to reduce unnecessary conflict

1. Set the scene

Check the time is right and that neither of you is going to be interrupted by home-schooled children or spouses. Consider your camera angle for the video call. Can it be wider or longer to show all of your body language?

2. Listen

Have you ever had one of those conflicted conversations where, on reflection, you realise that if you had simply listened, you would have picked up essential information that disproved the assumptions that led you to conflict in the first place? Try listening with the intent to just listen, rather than to respond.

3. Respect

Starting every interaction from a position of genuine respect for the other party is a solid starting point. Don't patronise.

4. Offer utmost positive regard

Your colleague didn't get up today and decide: "I think I'll wind my colleagues up today." They are doing their best in trying circumstances, just like you are. Seek to see the positive impulse behind their actions and behaviours.

5. Be compassionate

Have compassion for others, but also for yourself. We are all in this together. Ask yourself: "What am I finding challenging in this new way of working, and what may my colleagues be experiencing?"