Squaring up to conflict
Transform your experience of conflict from damaging and wasteful to valuable and productive

The presence of conflict in the workplace is usually seen as a negative, destructive force that damages relationships and shackles productivity. When managed badly or allowed to escalate, conflict can waste time, impede relationship-building and create inter-departmental feuds. When conflict spirals out of control, organizations have to bear the cost of external intervention such as mediation and tribunal – as well as loss of reputation. All of this can cause some organizations to adopt a 'head-in-the-sand' approach, either by allowing conflict to happen in a dysfunctional, stealth-like way, or by creating an autocratic culture of 'yes-men' where contrary opinion and new ideas are suppressed for fear of rocking the boat.

This paper proposes that experience of workplace conflict doesn't have to be this way. Where individuals and teams across organizational hierarchies are shown the positive benefits conflict can have, and learn to manage it effectively, they are able instead to use conflict productively. By enhancing self-awareness, leaders, managers and team members can transform their conflict-management effectiveness.

Introduction

Whilst many of us can observe workplace conflict simmering under the surface of conversations with colleagues or driving individual agendas, it doesn't tend to be something that is straightforward to pin down or easy to resolve. Sometimes it is not even obvious that conflict is what is causing lack of productivity or an inability to work together with a colleague.

In fact, defining conflict can be a very subjective matter – and it's not just aggressive confrontation that acts as a barrier to workplace success and collaboration. Conflict can also encapsulate a broader range of situations in which one person's concerns appear to be incompatible with those of others. In the workplace, conflict can be thought of as any disagreement that disrupts the flow of work.

If we think of a concern as being anything that people care about, then it becomes clear that conflict can take many different forms and can arise in almost every conceivable situation. For example, differences in opinion about strategy, task priorities, resource allocation, or the need for planning can prompt differences in perspective, and conflict. One common theme is that conflict is often found where there is ambiguity and a lack of clarity.

Why conflict arises

Workplace conflict is inevitable for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is the issue of individual differences. We all have different backgrounds and preferences, so we will not always share the same concerns and opinions, and will not necessarily want the same things. Secondly, there are situational, or system, factors that can give rise to conflict. Each role that an individual performs has an associated set of responsibilities, and they are required to do their best to achieve these. Inevitably though, this will sometimes bring the individual into conflict with others whose roles require them to pursue different agendas.

So, conflict may be more pervasive than we think within organizations and between individual workers – but is this necessarily a bad thing? What would our workplaces look like with no conflict at all?

The truth is that there is something compelling about conflict. We voyeuristically watch it within dramas, on our news programmes and amongst our friends and family. This is because within conflict there is energy, challenge, a move towards a different way of being and working. A workplace devoid of conflict may lack innovation, creativity and inclusiveness.

The challenge we face, therefore, is to understand not how to eliminate conflict from our lives, but how to use it as a positive driver of performance.

'Bad' conflict and 'good' conflict

The impact of conflict can often be destructive – of relationships or projects. However, the right type of conflict can engender greater productivity and better organizational performance.

Negative impact

When conflict is inadequately managed, it can lead to negative outcomes – hence the tendency amongst many people to try and avoid it. Negative impacts can be felt at three levels: organization, team and individual.

Employees in the UK lose 370 million working days every year as a result of conflict in the workplace

To an **organization**, time spent dealing with 'bad' conflict is money lost. Research conducted by OPP in 2008, in collaboration with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), found that the average employee spends 2.1 hours a week dealing with conflict. For the UK alone, this translates to 370 million working days lost every year as a result of conflict in the workplace.

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Whilst all employees need to play their part in managing conflict, it is HR professionals who, inevitably, often become directly involved. This is illustrated by the OPP/CIPD survey results, in which HR professionals reported, on average, spending 3.4 hours per week managing conflict (3.8 hours in the public sector). As well as the more formal aspects of conflict management, HR professionals also need to deal with other consequences such as increased sickness and absence amongst employees, a reduction in work engagement, and potentially a higher turnover of staff.

However, negative impact should not only be measured in terms of lost time and ineffective use of resources. There are the additional recruitment costs resulting from higher turnover to consider, as well as a financial outlay if an organization has to resort to involving external parties in the conflict-resolution process. There is also a potential risk to an organization's reputation, with conflict situations that may once have been resolved behind closed doors increasingly becoming visible to the wider world through social media channels. Whilst the impact of this may be hard to quantify, it is by no means insignificant.

At the **team** level, mismanaged conflict can be a key cause of disharmony and ineffectiveness. Teams with poor conflict management skills tend to either experience unpalatable levels of conflict, or else seek to avoid conflict altogether. Both of these have negative impacts on performance. Overt conflict that is not well managed can lead to reduced levels of co-operation and teamwork which, in turn, lead to reduced productivity. Conflict avoidance, on the other hand, can lead to impaired decision-making, as important perspectives are not communicated and key issues remain unaddressed.

At an **individual** level, the impact can also be considerable. People can suffer from a reduced level of work engagement, increased sickness or absenteeism, increased intention to quit, as well as potentially long-lasting emotional effects such as anger and frustration. These factors can all be expected to reduce employee productivity, as well as having a more general negative impact on psychological well-being.

All these things combine to show that effective conflict management is a vitally important part of organizational life. In fact, promoting 'good' conflict in the workplace is a cornerstone of effective team and individual working.

Positive impact

In some cases, a certain amount of well managed conflict is healthy, and it can be helpful to think of conflict as being a valuable 'catalyst' rather than something to be avoided at all costs.

At the interpersonal level, positive outcomes can include gaining a better understanding of others, and developing improved working relationships.

People can also gain confidence that issues have been raised and dealt with, which is something that will help them accept and support decisions. This acceptance is essential when it comes to the practical implementation of decisions, as underlying unresolved issues could undermine decisions at a future point in time. It also helps to create engagement; if people feel their views have been listened to, they are likely to put more discretionary effort into tasks. It is also often felt that conflict helps generate energy, with tough conversations being energising and stimulating when approached and handled in the right way. Indeed, it is often the case that corporate trouble-shooters are brought into organizations to 'stir things up'.

At the task level, conflict can lead to better-informed choices being made. There are many factors that can lead to poor decision-making, but if the group dynamics are right, and due consideration is given to diverse opinions, active handling of conflict can be significantly more productive than avoidance.

It is evident that it is not conflict per se that's undesirable, but poorly managed conflict that can be destructive. Where conflict is permitted,

and happens within an environment of trust and respect, it can lead to valuable and long-lasting insights and be the foundation for productive working relationships.

So how can people working in organizational settings ensure that bad conflict is dealt with, and good conflict is encouraged?

Recognising bad conflict

The causes of conflict can be very complex, and it may often be difficult to establish all the contributory factors. Whilst there may be an observable trigger event for conflict, such as a disagreement or misunderstanding, there may be additional underlying contributory factors that are not so immediately apparent.

These include things such as:

- Personality clashes
- Stress
- Heavy workloads/inadequate resources
- Poor leadership/management
- Lack of honesty and openness
- Lack of clarity (eg role and accountability)
- Cultural factors (eg values and expectations)

Some of these are linked to individual differences whilst some are a result of situational, or system, factors.

By identifying the factors that contribute towards unproductive conflict, leaders and team members can work towards mitigating and managing them, so as to reframe their experience of conflict.

Managing conflict

It is important to emphasise that conflict management is the responsibility of everyone, not just HR professionals and management. Whilst managing conflict is seen as an important leadership skill, and is something that HR practitioners may have particular experience in dealing with, there are many issues that can

be resolved without escalation. In essence, it's important that everyone realises that they are accountable for resolving conflict.

Preventing damaging conflict

When managing conflict, there is no 'one size fits all' solution; every situation has its own requirements, and these govern, to some extent, the effectiveness of particular conflict-management strategies. However, when it comes to negative, damaging conflict, prevention is usually better than cure. Actions aimed at preventing conflict can be applied at the organizational level, as well as at the interpersonal level.

At an organizational level, the need for transparency is paramount. Policies and procedures must be clear and consistent, and the rationale for important decisions should be shared with employees. This will help ensure that everyone is in a position to act in the best interests of the organization, rather than operating in an area of uncertainty, pursuing their own potentially conflicting agendas.

It is also important for an organization not to ignore conflict. Whilst it may be more natural for many people to try and avoid awkward and potentially emotionally charged situations, conflict cannot be managed effectively by denying its existence or failing to confront challenges that are being faced. Instead, employees need to be encouraged to express their opinions, so that their concerns can be addressed, or at the very least be considered. This will help avoid the simmering tensions that people can harbour if they do not feel that they are being listened to.

Time spent listening to the concerns of others and trying to address them is well-spent, even if at times it can feel like an unnecessary distraction from the task at hand. Effective listening will entail acknowledging the underlying emotions being felt by those immediately affected by the conflict situation, as well as paying attention to the practicalities of the situation.

At an individual level, people should seek to identify and deal with issues before they lead to conflict. This requires being sensitive to the concerns of others, and being aware of the trigger events, such as those listed above, that may lead to conflict. They should also maintain an awareness of any further personality-based or situational factors that may increase the likelihood of conflict; for example, if a colleague is trying to manage a particularly heavy workload, or is experiencing stress at home.

One very productive way of helping to prevent damaging conflict is to teach individuals about different conflict-management styles and strategies, and to help them understand personality differences between themselves and others, in terms of working styles and ways of relating to others.

Cure

Once a situation looks like it has the potential for unproductive conflict, one of the primary courses of action should be for the parties involved to have informal one-to-one conversations. Conflict often arises as a result of communication breakdown, so establishing clear lines of communication is an important first step.

Opening up communication channels is a good way for the people directly involved to seek to resolve the situation themselves, without the need for escalation. Escalation can lead to resentment if one party feels the other has 'got them in to trouble', which can create difficulties in terms of future working (especially if the escalation isn't well handled) – so trying to resolve it independently is the best strategy, if possible. By taking ownership of the resolution people can feel empowered to shape their own outcomes, with the additional benefit of learning essential conflict management skills that they can employ in the future to gain more positive outcomes from conflict.

If it becomes clear that third-party intervention is necessary, there are various tips that managers can use to help ensure effective resolution.

Firstly, managers should role-model appropriate behavior and provide clarity to others over what is expected from them in terms of behavior. This is standard managerial best-practice so, in a sense, is nothing new. However, when employees are facing challenges that they are struggling to handle, it is more important than ever for their managers to be seen to be role-modelling the best way to behave.

There is also the issue of providing clarity over areas of responsibility. As already mentioned, conflict tends to be found where there is ambiguity and a lack of clarity. It is therefore the responsibility of managers and leaders to provide as much clarity as possible, to be available to provide rationales for important decisions, and to provide regular updates on issues that may impact on others. Managers should also ensure that the responsibilities of all staff members are clearly defined.

Managers can play an important role as mediators. Mediation skills can be taught, and whilst organizations can make use of professional mediation services, the vast majority of issues tend to be resolved internally by managers and HR professionals, without needing to rely on professional support. Whilst formal disciplinary and grievance processes tend to be process-led, mediation has the benefit of putting the individuals concerned back into the centre of the resolution process. This allows them to reap the wider potential benefits of effective conflict resolution.

Only 44% of managers believed they were effective in managing conflict

In essence, all the points above are behaviors associated with demonstrating good management. However, organizations also need to ensure that their managers and employees are provided with the necessary skills for handling conflict. The CEDR Tough Times Tough Talk survey illustrates this by revealing that two thirds of managers reported their biggest challenge was holding difficult

conversations, with only 44% believing that they are effective in managing conflict, and only 37% feeling trained to cope with business conflict.

In these conditions, it is more likely that conflict will spiral out of control and become destructive, and less likely that employees will be able to leverage a positive experience of conflict as a force for innovation and consensus.

Conclusion

In order to mitigate unproductive conflict, and instead harness its creative potential, employees at all levels of an organization need to be equipped to recognise conflict triggers, and to adopt a meaningful and effective strategy for addressing conflict.

A considered conflict-management approach centres around helping clients gain an understanding of the types of behaviors different types of people typically exhibit in conflict situations. The same event may trigger stress and conflict for one person, but not another. In addition, once individuals are in conflict, each person is predisposed to prefer certain conflict-handling styles over others. Whilst people are not limited to adopting one style of behavior, they will have a preferred style that comes to them more naturally.

The challenge is to highlight to individuals what their natural style is, and to share information with them about alternative styles of behavior that may be more effective for resolving a particular situation. It is not possible to say that one style is **better** than another; it's just that one style may be more **appropriate** in a given situation. For example, a 'competing' mentality may not always be the best approach to take; 'collaboration' may in some cases lead to a more effective outcome.

By learning about conflict-handling styles, people can be taught to recognise their own preferred behavioral styles, and those of the people they interact with. Armed with this knowledge and insight, people can learn to adapt their style to situations in which they find themselves, in order to maximise the likelihood of an effective resolution, and to turn the natural conflict that occurs between people to the advantage of the individuals and organizations involved.

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