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Dealing with conflict: The dos and don'ts

If business decisions aren't widely welcomed, how do you deal with the aftermath?

Business life is not always plain sailing. For business leaders, hard decisions sometimes need to be made and actioned, while elsewhere, cost-cutting measures may or may not impact customer experience.

Conflict can arise from many situations, ranging from employee poor attendance and timekeeping to more serious issues such as bullying, discrimination, and harassment.

Less obvious forms of conflict occur when people take credit for work that is not their own or are dismissive of or disrespectful to others. Some people may take offence when talked over, ignored or excluded from meetings, events or round-robin emails. Often, it is these more subtle activities that can fester and grow into something much more serious.

Conflict can also be grouped into overt and covert. The latter can be difficult for managers to recognise and, therefore, remedy.

"Covert conflict can be addressed by diffusing the situation, by listening and empathising. However, many managers don't recognise or know how to deal with covert conflict which can be really undermining if allowed to continue without challenge," says Lucinda Carney, a chartered psychologist and CEO of Actus Software.

Managers need to call outs such behaviour without coming over as critical or patronising, Carney advises.

"Ideally, this will encourage the individual to open up about whatever is bothering them and makes it clear that you won't allow covert conflict to fester."

Tackling the issues

Some 35% of employees have encountered conflict in one form or another in the last year, according to January 2020 research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).

While the stats are pretty bleak, employees should feel empowered with the knowledge that conflict isn't always a bad thing, according to Darren Hockley, managing director of e-learning company DeltaNet International. "It's our response to conflict that makes all the difference. By focusing energy on a common interest (e.g. the success of the team or business), rather than who is 'right', conflict can be a great motivator," he says.

While conflict is inevitable in any workplace, it is possible to create a culture where employees choose positive styles of resolution over negative, notes Derek Irvine, senior vice president of strategy at Workhuman. "These include collaborative

approaches - where teams work to-gether to reach a mutually-satisfying solution - and compromising meth-ods, where all parties give something up to reach a common agreement," he says.

"These resolution styles are built upon open lines of communication and a solid foundation of trust, so it's crucial that companies work towards building these values into their work-place culture."

In such situations, it can be difficult for individuals to think clearly and ra-tionally. That's because they are in the midst of an amygdala hijack, where their emotional response becomes overbearing.

"This is like the phrase 'seeing red', indicating that emotion is overriding all else. The first thing to ask yourself is why you are feeling this way and what has triggered your reaction, is it truly work related or is it personality related?" according to Paul Russell, director of Luxury Academy London.

There are a number of ways that managers can deal with conflict. That said, many managers avoid dealing with conflict because it makes them uncomfortable, Russell believes. This is borne out by the CIPD's research, with 34% of employees suggesting their managers lack the confidence to effectively deal with any such issues.

"It's important not to ignore con-flicts, whether you are personally involved in that particular conflict or not," Russell says.

"Try to leave emotion out of your response, think rationally and use crit-ical thinking. These four points can be used to solve all conflicts."

While managers often get the blame for non-existent or below-par conflict resolution – and are often the cause of the conflict in the first place – there is real opportunity for positive change.

"Managers should be important role models, set expectations of behaviour around dignity and respect, and gain the trust of their team," says Rachel Suff, senior employment relations adviser, at the CIPD.

"The number of managers who are being blamed for harassment and bul-lying should serve as a wake-up call to employers to put training managers at the heart of efforts to prevent inap-propriate workplace behaviour.

"Our research shows that managers who've received training can help to stop conflict from occurring and are much better at fostering healthy relationships in their team. And when conflict does occur, they can help to resolve the issue more quickly and effectively."

Goodbye conflict?

Employers have legal responsibil-ities under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and other regulations. These responsibilities require them to ensure, as far as is reasonably practi-cable, the health, safety, and welfare of their employees.

"Talk in facts rather than emotions," Russell says. "For example: 'You have not met your targets this month, why do you feel that is?' rather than 'You never meet your targets.'"

Conflict is a natural output of differ-ent views and personality types, which is critical for creativity and building ef-fective teams, according to Carney.

"A workplace without conflict is unlikely to be high performing - the key is a healthy conflict where people share differences of opinion, but still fundamentally demonstrate respect for each other," she says.

Hockley concurs, adding: "The key isn't to remove conflicts from the workplace, rather to focus the energy positively."

He adds that the risk of negative workplace conflict can be reduced by considering the workplace envi-ronment, the design of the job, and the training given to those at risk of conflicts with negative repercussions.

Recommended paths

For business leaders, the best way to deal with conflict is to recognise your current conflict resolution style, according to Russell.

"If you tend to ignore conflict then you are an evader. If you attempt to appease all without the necessary critical thinking then you are a con-ceder. If you don't involve yourself in conflict until it affects you personally, then you are a dominator," he says.

"When you understand your con-flict resolution style, you are in the best position to make the necessary changes."

Training can help empower your employees to manage their own re-sponses to situations.

By developing skills like communi-cation and problem-solving, negative conflict can be avoided, paving the way for the type of conflict that's healthy and positive.

Resolving conflict can be one of the most difficult challenges managers and leaders face.

Making contact with others in a similar position - to set up a support network - could help via the exchange of ideas and tips for defusing situa-tions and finding common ground.

Ultimately, for business leaders looking to manage conflict within an organisation it's important to stay open to the ideas, beliefs, and assumptions of others and ensure you remain an active listener.

After all, no solutions can ever be created unless first off the problem has truly been heard.