

Conflict in the workplace - why, what it looks like and how to deal with it (part 1)

In my role as HR coach and consultant, I have been called upon to mediate many conflicts; acted as conduit between parties in dispute, and counselled aggrieved workers on one side of a conflict or another. I have learnt a lot from this. One, each party involved in a conflict undeniably perceives they are 'right' and the other is 'misguided', 'wrong', 'stupid'.... You get the idea. Two, there are usually just two or three causes of conflict (more about this later). Three, regardless of workplace, conflict looks the same although it may vary in intensity and impact (on the parties and others). Four, people in conflict tend to demonise or depersonalise 'the other'. This may happen unintentionally or deliberately to minimise the hurt that inevitably arises. Five, more often than not, a (perceived) power differential exists between the parties, e.g. male/female; boss/subordinate; older/younger; experienced/new graduate; long term employee/new recruit, etc.

Unfortunately, conflict in the workplace impacts on more than the parties in dispute. It can affect the morale of colleagues and draw in line managers. If the conflict is not 'nipped in the bud' it can escalate, and more and more people up the hierarchy may become involved. Like ripples in a pond, the conflict grows, becomes a major distraction and consumes much time and energy. In the worst cases, performance and productivity suffer. It is vital, therefore, to deal with it as soon as it becomes noticed as an abiding conflict!

The causes of conflict

Experience has shown me that conflict arises, in most cases, from poor communication. Examples include critical decisions made about an employee's job without consulting them; addressing people disrespectfully or rudely; inadequate or nil communication on matters that affect performance of their role; unclear delivery of messages. Any of these may lead to misunderstanding, resentment, feelings of paranoia and eventual breakdown in trust and relationships. Other factors include, people at

opposite ends of the behavioural/personality spectrum finding one another irritating and difficult, and not being prepared to compromise; lack of openness and honesty; poor empathy, etc.

Initial step to dealing with the conflict

It used to surprise me how many line managers allow conflict, bad behaviour or poor performance to continue unabated. However, I soon learnt that many line managers, either did not know how to deal with the issues, or they did not like to confront them in case they escalated. Nonetheless, as soon as a line manager becomes aware of conflict (and it may actually involve them), they are urged do three things: i) take stock and consider the context before planning to address it (quickly); ii) if unsure how to handle the situation, discuss with an in-house HR practitioner or trusted senior colleague; iii) with a plan of action in place, arrange to meet with the disputing party/parties individually and, in a non-threatening and non-judgmental manner, explore what is going on in their lives; iv) set targets and review.

There are many other straightforward steps in handling conflict through constructive conversation, which are the subject of my next article. Please look out for it.

Dr Susan Roberts is an educator at heart and a master of applied HR theory and practice. Over many years, she has advised leaders and managers in the handling of people and performance and works with them to minimise and protect against financial loss through the effective and comprehensive application of HR functions, systems and procedures.



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