



## Tea & Empathy

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 16 September 2024

With workplace conflict and bullying claims on the rise, should we look at alternative ways to manage conflict? Or are we asking the wrong question?

Over recent years, HR teams in many organisations have worked tirelessly to manage conflict more effectively. Increased support has been put in place, policies have been rewritten, and workplace mediation is being offered more regularly. Yet conflict is on the rise, with wide-reaching consequences and for HR professionals, dealing with conflict can be a thankless task.

Some managers have a tendency to hand over responsibility for dealing with conflict to the HR team, which then becomes drawn into the details and emotions of challenging issues. HR leaders are often left juggling the strain on skilled HR resources, along with the significant costs of lengthy formal processes, and the wider impact of conflict on organisations, such as absence, legal fees, and recruitment.

Consequently unresolved workplace conflict negatively impacts individuals, teams, the HR function, and the broader organisation. This is why it is prudent for HR leaders to consider what alternatives there are to how workplace conflict is currently managed? Are new processes or policies needed to manage grievances, bullying, and harassment? Is more tracking of employee issues needed? Should resolution support services be enhanced?

These questions are valid and, indeed, are part of the solution. However, to really make an impact, a different question needs to be asked. But, before we get to this question, we need to understand how and why conflict has changed.

Conflict is increasing in many workplaces across the UK, as reflected in a study by Gallagher, which reported that nearly three-quarters of organisations surveyed reported an increase in litigation over the last five years, with employee disputes cited as the most common legal issue.

Looking at bullying specifically, CIPD research found that 15% of employees said they were being bullied at work. Concurrently, Employment Tribunal claims containing allegations of bullying have increased by 44%, according to 2022 research by Fox & Partners- and those are the cases we know about. A CIPD survey revealed that, of workers who experienced bullying or harassment in the last three years, 53% did not report it. It is unclear whether these statistics reflect that conflict is on the rise, or that more people are reporting it. Either way, it means that HR teams are now dealing with more conflict-related issues than before.

In today's workplace, managing conflict seems to be more complex and there are a number of reasons for this. For example, for many people, when they go to work, they are not going to a specific place of work - traditional employment is decreasing in favour of flexible working and hybrid working has blurred the lines between work and personal life. Although technology connects workers online, it also reduces real-life interaction, making relationships feel more transactional and less personal.

Emotional resilience is also declining. Ipsos's 2023 Global Happiness report, revealed a 13% decline in happiness from 2022 to 2023 while emotional intelligence has also declined for the last four years.

The expectations of the workforce have also changed and there is a growing and positive desire to speak up and to want to be heard on issues that are perceived to be important.

What does this mean in terms of the rise of workplace conflict? A lack of social connection at work and a decline in emotional wellbeing decrease employee resilience. If an employee finds that their relationship with a colleague has run into difficulties, they may be less likely to manage their response constructively or be able to feel empathy for the other person, which is a key skill in managing conflict. Managers are trying to navigate these dynamics, and the potential for more workplace conflict, often with limited skills and limited capacity.

Many organisations are providing more support to managers to increase their ability to manage workplace conflict, along with workplace mediation, which is becoming more mainstream and being successfully used to resolve disputes between entrenched parties. However, although HR and conflict professionals perceive of mediation as an informal resolution, employees are often unwilling to engage with it because they perceive it as too formal.

Organisational policies have also evolved to encourage early resolution, including those relating to allegations of bullying and harassment. Some organisations are training their managers in resolution skills, and the more progressive leadership development programmes now include both resolution skills and an understanding of the opportunities that disagreeing respectfully brings.

These are all positive steps in the right direction - and part of the solution – but they still miss a key point because they focus on the organisational requirements and structures needed to manage conflict more effectively. So, if the question isn't how conflict can be managed better through better support, processes, or legislation, what is the other question we should ask?

Are organisations focusing on the right people to resolve conflict? If organisations focus primarily on HR professionals to support with the resolution of conflict, this means they are utilising a costly and skilled resource, which will take time away from more strategic HR work.

If we look at conflict specialists, such as accredited workplace mediators, they are a valuable organisational resource. If mediators are trained internally, organisations can choose candidates who reflect the wider organisation and include other partners, such as union representatives. Yet, to ensure the impartiality of the mediation process, the organisation must be large enough so that mediators don't know the parties they are supporting.

If we look to managers to help resolve disputes, we have to remember that there are already high demands on their time. Whilst there are many advantages to training line managers and giving them the confidence to support their team members in managing conflict, we are not necessarily upskilling the people who are in conflict with each other.

Because, the best people to resolve conflicts are the people themselves who are part of the conflict. By shifting the focus onto how the organisation can encourage, empower and enable employees to resolve their own conflicts, the emphasis shifts from what structures are needed to support resolution, to a discussion about providing skills for the many rather than the few.

There are numerous benefits to early self-resolution and when people communicate with one another directly, the opportunity for connection, understanding and empathy is greater. When we speak with the person we are in conflict with and hear their feelings and the impact the situation is having, it helps us appreciate their humanity. Parties who work issues out together are more likely to stick with the agreed outcomes and resolving relationship challenges together has a greater chance of success, than if someone else tries to solve an issue for us. These experiences of dialogue build skills and confidence for the future, although there will always be cases where third party support is needed, or where formal processes should be used. However, by relying too heavily on these methods of conflict resolution, organisations are missing out on alternative ways to resolve conflict, which will reduce the number of cases unnecessarily going to formal processes.

The business case for using less formal conflict management processes, such as early self-resolution, is compelling in terms of reducing costs. The ROI of informal conflict resolution multiplies when you consider that conflict management skills are not just needed in times of conflict and dispute; these skills can also transform everyday conversations and improve communication at work. They can be used daily, all the time that people work together.

Upskilling all employees might appear to be an insurmountable task. However, technology now enables on-demand resources and training for everyone, so that a base level of skills across the organisation is more achievable than ever.

By asking the right question about conflict management, HR leaders have the opportunity to make a positive impact and help build a future-fit workforce. A workforce where everyone can navigate the inevitable challenges that arise at work and move on, with stronger, more meaningful relationships.