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Dealing with conflict at work: a guide for people managers

This guide will help you proactively identify and manage conflict at work

Most of us spend a large portion of our waking hours at work, so the quality of our working environments and relationships has a significant impact on our well-being.

With so many different experiences and perspectives, we tend to see the world in different ways. This means we react in our own way to different situations at work, affecting the relationships we have with those around us. This diversity of experience and thought is a good thing, but it can sometimes lead to misunderstanding and conflict between people.

Some conflict can be positive, such as a healthy amount of competition between team members to reach goals. But negative conflict, like bullying or serious personality clashes, can harm individuals and undermine teamworking.

As a manager, you need to be at the forefront when conflict occurs between team members. If you don't tackle this conflict head on at an early stage, it's likely to escalate.

Our latest report, *Managing conflict in the modern workplace*, also reveals that managers themselves can often be the cause of conflict.

It's therefore essential you reflect on your own management style and the impact your behaviour has on others. When your team is happy and engaged in their work, they're more likely to meet their goals and help you to meet yours.

About this guide

This guide will help you proactively identify and manage conflict at work. It covers the people management skills you need to become part of the solution to resolving workplace conflict – not the problem.

The guide focuses on how to handle conflict at an early, informal stage – before issues escalate into serious disputes that require the use of formal procedures.

What does conflict look like?

Conflict between individuals at work can occur in many different ways.

A work issue, like poor attendance or timekeeping, can cause conflict. Conflict can also stem from a disagreement between people.

It can occur across a wide spectrum of behaviour, ranging from a personality clash to more serious types of unfair treatment – like bullying and harassment.

It can be obvious – like a heated argument – or less visible – like excluding someone from a work social event.

Obvious sources of conflict at work include:

- any form of bullying behaviour or harassment
- any form of discriminatory behaviour
- poor performance
- poor attendance and time-keeping
- unacceptable language
- excessive personal use of the internet or email
- theft
- drink or drug problems.

Others less obvious sources include:

- differences in personality style or working
- taking credit for other people's work or ideas
- not valuing other people's views, background or experiences
- talking over people in meetings
- failing to include people in round-robin emails
- ignoring people or being discourteous
- poor personal hygiene.

Often, it's these more subtle behaviours that, over time, if not tackled, lead to workplace disputes.

What is bullying and harassment?

Under the Equality Act 2010, **harassment** is unlawful, and defined as 'unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic, which has the purpose or effect of violating an individual's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual'.

The protected characteristics relevant to harassment are age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation. There are two types of harassment related to sex, both of which involve 'unwanted conduct' that has 'the purpose or effect of violating an individual's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual'.

Though there's no legal definition of **bullying**, the [Acas guide on bullying and harassment at work](#) states that it can include 'Offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power through means that undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient'.

Bullying or harassment may involve single or repeated incidents across a wide spectrum of behaviour. This can range from extreme forms of intimidation, like physical violence, to more subtle forms, like an inappropriate joke or ignoring someone.

Based on our research the most common types of bullying or harassment experienced by employees are:

- being undermined or humiliated in one's job
 - persistent, unwanted criticism
 - unreasonable pressure about job performance
 - public humiliation
 - shouting or very heated arguments
 - verbal abuse
 - isolation or exclusion from social activities.
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The first defence: Prevention is better than cure

Conflict is likely to fester and intensify if you ignore it. As a manager, you need the skills and confidence to intervene at an early stage to nip disagreements in the bud before they escalate. Handling conflict in a proactive and positive way will help you improve your team's morale, retain valuable skills and talent, and reduce sickness absence.

Here, we outline the practical steps you can take to prevent serious conflict from occurring in the first place:

1. Get to know your team better

By getting to know the people in your team as individuals, you'll be better placed to:

- foster good working relationships with them
- anticipate any potential conflict within the team
- understand any personal pressures which might be affecting them at work
- talk frankly about any problems they might be experiencing with their colleagues (or the job itself).

Things to consider

- Understand what really matters to your team, and remember that everyone's different. What are their personal triggers for stress? Do they feel secure and supported in their role? Do they have a sense of belonging and inclusion in their team?
- Give every team member a good induction when they start in a new role. This helps you get to know them, and helps them settle in.
- Get to know their preferred working styles. This encourages effective teamworking and reduces the risk of conflict.
- Make yourself personally available to talk. Show empathy and listen to their concerns. This encourages them to open up and approach you should they have a problem.
- Try not to shy away from personal issues. People aren't always able to leave their domestic responsibilities and worries at home. If you know someone has suffered a bereavement or is going through a relationship breakdown, they may be

understandably more emotional and have a lower tolerance level at work than they would do under normal circumstances.

2. Be aware of simmering tensions

People deal with relationships and conflict in different ways.

Some show their annoyance swiftly and openly, while others who appear laidback and tolerant on the surface may find themselves becoming progressively annoyed with a colleague, manager or problem until they lose their temper, often over a minor issue proven to be the last straw.

Things to consider:

- Monitor team relationships. Tension can arise in any team, but be alert to any signs that serious conflict is developing. Many disputes start as mild disagreements which appear to be resolved or forgotten straight away. However, just because a disagreement isn't visible doesn't mean it's been resolved.
- Be confident to challenge any hint of inappropriate behaviour (for example, a sexist remark or personal insult) immediately. This will send a clear message to your team that unfair treatment, like bullying, is not tolerated.
- Have regular one-to-ones, and try to create an environment in which people feel comfortable discussing their concerns about projects or issues in team meetings.
- Find ways to have informal conversations to pick up on any issues that are beginning to fester beneath the surface. You could, for example, use the feedback gained from employee feedback/voice mechanisms (for example, a survey which might demonstrate that employees feel frustrated by lack of progression) to highlight potential areas of frustration and kick off conversations.
- Make sure you intervene and talk to the individuals concerned about what's happening and what the real source of the disagreement is. Often there are other underlying issues at play (for example, an issue raised concerning someone's performance could, in fact, highlight underlying feelings of resentment).

3. Acknowledge when a team member is causing stress to others

It only takes one person to cause disharmony within a team as a result of their negative behaviour or poor performance.

Examples of behaviour and performance which can create stress at work:

- Being overly critical
- Having a short temper
- Making personal remarks
- Not sharing information
- Talking about others behind their backs
- Avoiding unpopular team tasks
- Poor time-keeping or attendance.

Things to consider:

- Encourage people to talk to you if they have concerns about a work issue or are experiencing difficulties in their personal lives. By understanding an employee's context and situation, you'll be closer to understanding how it impacts their behaviour at work, how they're dealing with it, and how you can address it accordingly.
- Be prepared to step in and talk to the individual as soon as you're aware there's a problem (irrespective of whether it's a performance or behavioural issue). In many cases the person might be unaware of how they (or their behaviour) is perceived by others, and will quickly - and positively - respond to a quiet word. If it's a performance issue causing conflict (like poor timekeeping), encourage a conversation to understand if there's in fact a deeper, underlying problem (for example, a health or personal issue).

4. Be clear about your expectations of team conduct

As a manager, you're an important role model. You'll need to spell out what behaviour is not tolerated, and demonstrate the positive behaviours employees should follow (in terms of how they interact with each other, their customers, clients and the public).

Things to consider:

- Always maintain professionalism. Set an example by visibly living the organisation's values around dignity around respect and following organisational policies and

procedures.

- Respect individuals' points of view, background and working styles, but be confident to call out behaviour that is unacceptable.
- Treat all employees with the same level of importance, and avoid favouritism. If you don't manage people equally, you'll struggle to build working relationships based on mutual trust and respect. Any sign of favouritism is also likely to lead to resentment, becoming a cause of conflict in itself.
- Always discourage employees from talking about their colleagues behind their backs. Ignoring this type of behaviour can lead to resentment, cliques and a work culture where bullying is more likely to occur. Establish if there's a genuine problem, and then deal with it openly by talking to the individuals concerned.

5. Try not to get involved in office politics or gossip

Though a certain level of office gossip is inevitable and need not cause any problems, office politics can be a source of misunderstanding and tension. Maintain objectivity and resist the urge to join in; this will only add fuel to the fire.

Things to consider:

- If office gossip is malicious, intervene and spell out clearly, to those involved, that spreading unsubstantiated rumours is unacceptable and could be construed as bullying or harassment.
- Encourage an open working environment in which everyone's contribution is valued. Always give positive feedback where it's due to help foster collaboration and effective teamworking.
- Keep employee issues private and confidential. To build relationships based on trust you'll need to respect employees' privacy, particularly if the issues they discuss with you are of a personal nature.

Using performance management to prevent

conflict

Performance management should be a positive, supportive process, yet performance issues can sometimes be a cause of conflict themselves (for example, if someone feels they've been unfairly treated by being overlooked for promotion or received a negative performance rating).

Things to consider:

- Manage performance proactively and positively to avoid misunderstandings or conflict arising. Make sure every individual is aware of the expectations on them, and how they're expected to deliver.
- Set clear goals and realistic deadlines for every team member. Give everyone in your team all the information, training and development they need to perform their job to a high standard. Make sure everyone's roles and responsibilities are well matched with their skills, experience and career aspirations.
- Don't rely on a one-off appraisal meeting to assess performance – give regular and constructive feedback as part of a two-way conversation.
- Address poor performance at an early stage. Ask simple, open questions about how the employee's doing, and whether there's anything affecting their performance (such as a health or personal issue).
- The reasons for poor performance aren't always properly understood or discussed. Where there are suspected or known health issues, make sure you explore these prior to initiating any formal procedures. Also explore whether there are any workplace issues, like negative relationships with colleagues, which may be impacting performance.
- If performance improvements are needed, make clear the issues which need addressing, and discuss any additional support needed along the way (such as extra training or supervision). Develop an action plan and arrange regular catch-ups to discuss progress.

Encouraging informal ways to resolve conflict

Despite the preventative measures we've explored above, conflict can still develop. If it does, you'll need to take action to resolve it early and informally.

This can appear daunting, but it's a core part of your role as a manager.

If you ignore unacceptable behaviour, problems can escalate until formal disciplinary or grievance procedures have to be used. This can make it much harder to achieve a successful resolution and repair relationships.

Be proactive, and initiate informal discussions if you think a problem's brewing. Conflict can lead to absences, so return-to-work interviews are also a good opportunity for you to ask questions about any issues which might be bothering employees.

Depending on the size of your organisation, your HR department should always be available in the event that you need informal advice to help you deal with conflict.

1. Be ready to facilitate conflict situations

Make sure you engage in challenging conversations as soon as you begin to observe early signs of conflict (for example, a heated example or an inappropriate personal remark). This shows you're treating the conflict seriously. It's more difficult to be respected if you've appeared to give certain behaviours tacit approval by letting a situation drift on for weeks or months.

Things to consider:

- Intervene quickly in cases of conflict. Deal with issues head on in a sensitive, fair and constructive way.
- Encourage people to talk. Listen carefully to their concerns. Help the individuals involved to identify the root of their disagreement.
- Remain objective. Avoid taking sides or making hasty judgements, and listen to everyone's views and concerns. Make sure you fully understand all the issues at play, including any underlying tensions.
- Try to establish what the individuals need to happen to resolve matters or move forward, and any changes or compromises they're prepared to make in their behaviour or attitudes.

2. Speak to each team member individually

If there's an open disagreement between colleagues or you suspect a conflict is developing, start by having an informal, one-to-one discussion with each of the individuals concerned.

This will help you identify the crux of the problem while giving you an opportunity to hear people's concerns in a safe, confidential setting.

Things to consider:

- Choose an appropriate place. It's important to make people feel comfortable, so it's good to have the conversation somewhere private and quiet.
- Avoid making assumptions. Many people find it difficult to open up about problems at work, let alone dealing with conflict itself. Keep an open mind and give them the space to talk it out.
- Always act with integrity and maintain confidentiality. Reassure the employee that the private information they disclose will stay confidential, and that you'll only pass this information onto the other person with their permission.

3. Bring both sides together to communicate

Once you've gained a clear understanding of the conflict (as well as everyone's different perspectives on the problem), bring the parties together and act as an objective facilitator to find common ground.

Things to consider:

- Encourage people to acknowledge their colleague's views and concerns so that they see both sides of the situation.
- Take a problem-solving, constructive approach. Encourage the individuals to discuss any changes that can be made by either side to help find solutions and move forward.
- Remain impartial and objective. Avoid taking sides, but focus on helping the

individuals to discuss their options and reach a resolution.

4. Protect employees by removing them from conflict situations

In those instances where conflict has become particularly heated, it might simply be untenable (when one considers the needs of the rest of the team) to keep the disruptive colleague present. In these cases, it might be necessary to temporarily separate team members who are in a conflict situation to prevent the situation from escalating.

Things to consider:

- Understand what to do in the event of a major disagreement. If attempts to calm the situation down do not improve things, the risk is that someone will do or say something in the heat of the moment that could become a bigger source of grievance than the original problem.
- Once the disputing parties have been physically separated (where organisational size permits), it should be possible to have a calmer, more rational conversation about what sparked the disagreement and find a possible resolution.
- Consider transferring the disruptive team member to another team or area – only where fair, necessary and feasible. In some circumstances there may be personality clashes that are hard to resolve, or a particular member of staff who consistently causes conflict. If so, consider whether it could be helpful for the individual to move to a different job role or team, which they may be more suited to. Any change would have to follow full consultation with the individual.

5. Gather ideas on how to address conflict from within the team

In those cases where a dispute affects the whole team (for example, as a result of tensions arising from having to meet particular deadlines, or changes to working practices), hold a discussion or brainstorming meeting to find possible solutions.

Things to consider:

- Use one-to-ones with employees and listen to different people's perspectives to get a clear picture of what exactly is creating team disharmony.

- Help prevent future instances of conflict by having regular consultations with your team. This ensures you consider their views before introducing any changes which might affect their work or working environment.

6. Follow up on conflicts after resolution

It's tempting to hope that, once a conflict's been resolved, the problem's gone away for good. In many cases, however, one party or another will still feel aggrieved (to a greater or lesser extent).

Things to consider:

- Talk to the individuals involved during one-to-ones, or during discussions around performance appraisals, to find out whether the conflict really has been resolved, or if there are any renewed tensions or feelings of unhappiness.
- Regular one-to-ones serve as 'temperature checks' to ensure that old disagreements do not resurface.

The last resort: Using formal procedures to resolve conflict

By now, you should've made every effort to resolve the conflict. Sometimes, the situation can develop to the point where it's appropriate to use formal procedures to address unresolved conflict (when, for example, an allegation of serious harassment occurs, or if a complainant has requested the situation be investigated).

Please note that formal methods should only be used if absolutely necessary, and in those cases where informal problem solving has been unsuccessful.

If a complaint is serious or the individual wants it investigated formally, they should have the right to pursue a grievance. Where serious incidents occur – such as alleged harassment or discrimination, persistent bullying or out-of-character outbursts of verbal abuse or physical intimidation – they must be dealt with and taken seriously.

Avoid shying away from using the formal disciplinary process in those cases where an individual's misconduct or underperformance demands it. One of the most important

judgements you'll need to make as a manager is to recognise the point at which informal approaches dispute resolution have failed and formal disciplinary action needs to be taken. HR can provide useful advice at this point.

Key takeaways

- Good people management is fundamental to fostering positive working relationships in your team and wider organisation, spotting early signs of conflict, and initiating early intervention.
- Managing conflict is an integral part of your role as a manager. To a large degree, it's about good communication, providing ongoing feedback, and effective coaching and development. It's also about recognising good work and effective performance management.
- Always make your expectations for performance clear. Address poor performance at an early stage, and always in a positive way. Performance management goes a long way in preventing the build-up of conflict.
- Understand how conflict can occur, and be alert to any signs of it (including bullying and harassment). Challenge any kind of inappropriate behaviour immediately to foster a culture based on dignity and respect.
- Get to know your team, and treat every person with the same importance.
- Lead by example, and continually reflect on your management style. Appreciate the impact your behaviour can have on people. Aim to be open, collaborative and supportive as a manager.
- Monitor team relationships so that you're aware of any simmering tensions between people. Use one-to-ones to have informal conversations about any concerns your team may have.
- Conflict will only escalate if it's left alone. Be confident to tackle it head on and get to the root of the problem.
- Aim to resolve conflict early and informally, and take a problem-solving approach to help people reach consensus and move on.

- Use formal procedures, where appropriate, to resolve conflict.