

## Workplace Conflict – When it is in Interpersonal

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Key finding from CIPD (UK) survey report on employee experiences of workplace conflict, April 2015: *The single most common contributor to workplace conflict is differences in personalities and styles of working.*

Significant workplace conflict can have a number of roots causes including:

- **Interpersonal conflict arising from poor relationships between employees** (eg. 'personality clashes', lack of mutual respect or understanding)
- **Conflict arising from decisions which impact adversely on an employee** (eg. placement, promotion, development, resource allocation, workplace change)
- **Conflict associated with work design** (eg. lack of role clarity, poor information flows, overlapping or competing accountabilities and changes to work requirements)
- **Inappropriate conduct** (eg. bullying, harassment, breaches of ethics/codes of conduct).

When it occurs it can be crippling for the individual, creating personal stress and affecting motivation and commitment. For the organisation it reduces the productivity of the individuals and team/s which are impacted. An overarching learning about conflict is that is rarely if ever goes away on its own. In fact it can be expected to get much worse when left to a 'wishful thinking' approach.

What is required is for individuals and managers involved to actively work to resolve conflict when it arises and to do so at as early a stage as possible.

This article particularly focuses on the first of the above root causes of conflict. That is interpersonal conflict.

The CIPD research cited found that about 44% of workplace conflict occurs as a result of interpersonal conflict.

The report found that formal grievance and complaints processes tend to be less often used by employees in cases of interpersonal conflict. Issues of a relational nature may be seen to be more subjective and not necessarily well suited to formal investigation and resolution processes.

The survey also found that employees who experienced conflict rooted in interpersonal or relationship issues were more likely to perceive these issues as insurmountable and look for an alternative job rather than feel they could achieve a productive resolution.

As the employees involved may not raise their concerns directly this suggests there is an important role for workplace managers in identifying and facilitating resolution of conflict within and between team members.

There are a number of practical ways manager can do this discussed below.

At a workplace / team level:

- Recognising that conflict between people is not uncommon or necessarily terminal but a group dynamic that can be expected to occur from time to time when people work together.

- Placing importance on skills and behaviours that enable good teamwork when discussing individual performance expectations and objectives, providing performance feedback, and in coaching and developing staff.
- Making it ok within the culture of the workplace for employees to raise legitimate concerns regarding the behaviour and conduct of others.
- Creating opportunities and fostering regular discussion within and between teams about workplace values and behaviours. This should include discussion of expectations of what team members should do when they hit 'rocks in the road' in dealings with others.
- Being aware of workplace culture, fostering team reflections on this, and facilitating feedback within the team on what is working and areas of concern regarding teamwork, professional behavior and working relationships.

Managers working with individuals in conflict can:

- Learn to productively surface and name conflict when they become aware of it.
- Be open and approachable.
- Recognise and acknowledge people's feelings.
- Treat the issues raised with sensitivity and confidentiality.
- Adopt a problem solving approach to understanding and resolving conflict between people.
- Involve a third party for more complex issues such as particularly sensitive matters or when the manager wants to introduce a more objective view (the manager may feel too close, conflicted or they may judge that the situation and people would benefit from the skills and input of an independent party).

In addition to the above we have found conflict between people can often be rooted in different working styles.

Using tools which allow individuals to develop a greater awareness of different working styles can be powerful in getting to the bottom of and resolving complex disputes between individuals. This can create a foundation to enhance both individual and team skills using a positive and productive developmental approach.

Senior Executives and Human Resource staff need to ensure managers are educated about workplace conflict and have access to professional development in skills which will enable them to identify and act on workplace conflict when it arises, supporting managers to foster robust teams, productive and safe work environments. This may involve a mix of formal programs, peer learning, external support and coaching activities.

*Further Reading:*

*Getting under the Skin of Workplace Conflict: Tracing the Experiences of Employees, Survey Report, April 2015 CIPD (UK).*

*Building Productive Workplaces: Managing Internal Complaints, September 2005, HR Advantage Research Article.*

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