

# Keeping conflict collaborative

A resource for managers



## Introduction

This resource provides an overview of conflict in the workplace, along with some strategies for keeping conflict collaborative.

## What is conflict?

At its simplest, conflict is a difference in thinking.

Difference might be in relation to opinions, interests, preferences, approaches and concerns. Differences might arise from different understandings, assumptions, beliefs and emotional reactions. We're all human and differences in thinking are happening all the time.

Conflict is neutral. It's how people deal with it, their behaviours, that makes it a positive or negative experience.

Collaborative conflict is healthy and a positive experience for those involved as well as those who observe the conflict. Collaborative conflict strengthens working relationships.

Destructive conflict is a negative experience for those involved. It can impact negatively on our wellbeing and mental health. It weakens working relationships and reduces collaboration. We tend to talk about conflict when it's a negative experience.

Imagine for a moment a meeting where people have come together to discuss a problem. A fly on the wall is likely to observe these collaborative conflict behaviours

- agreement on the meeting's purpose and outcomes,
- listening with curiosity,
- summarising and reflecting back to check understanding,
- curiosity about different approaches,
- building on each others' suggestions,
- an interest in the factors contributing to the problem,
- everyone's contributing and expressing their thoughts.



The outcome of the meeting might be an innovative amalgamation of different perspectives which help progress the problem. And people leave the meeting feeling it was productive and good use of their time.



Now imagine a fly on the wall where the conflict is destructive. It might be observing:

- a lack of clarity and agreement on the meeting's purpose and outcomes
- people cutting over others as they are speaking,
- some people pushing their own perspective and ignoring what others are saying,
- people assuming they have the one right approach and others are wrong
- some people being completely silent,
- people withholding information,

- voices may start to become raised and arguments may start

People might leave the meeting with shallow and different understandings of the problem, thinking the solution pushed by the most domineering person is going to fail and feeling it was a waste of time. These kinds of conflict behaviours destroy relationships, wellbeing and innovation.

### Reflect on your experiences of conflict

Think about a time when there were different opinions/approaches/stances and this was a positive experience

- What were the different stances in relation to the conflict?
- What did the different parties do in working through different stances?
- What was the impact of working together in this way?

Now think about a time when differing opinions/approaches/stances became a negative experience

- What were the different stances in relation to the conflict?
- What did the different parties do in working through different stances?
- What was the impact of working together in this way?

## Cost of not paying attention to conflict

Conflict is often a taboo topic in organisations. A fear of making it worse or a lack of confidence in how best to intervene can lead to managers and leaders avoiding or ignoring conflict until it escalates and has a significant impact on people.

- ❖ A survey by the CIPD (2020) found 35% of employees had experienced interpersonal conflict in the previous 12 months
- ❖ When conflict starts to become personal it can quickly escalate into bullying, with a devastating impact on victims. When allowed to escalate conflict can lead to complex, time consuming, stressful HR procedures. Others can start to be drawn into the conflict and this can escalate to teams and departments being drawn into it.
- ❖ Destructive conflict leads to increased sickness absence, reduced job satisfaction, increased staff turnover and dips in performance.
- ❖ A report published by the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) estimates the cost of conflict to UK organisations is a staggering £28.5billion.
- ❖ When destructive conflict is tolerated in the workplace the focus shifts to blame and protecting individual positions. People are distracted from delivering the organisation's vision
- ❖ ONS data reports the UK has one of the lowest productivity levels of the G7 nations

## Assessing conflict situations

So – how to be confident and proactive?

Awareness and an understanding of conflict is the first step before identifying the appropriate strategy for ensuring conflict is collaborative. Here's how to assess conflict situations.

1. Keep a watchful eye
  - Notice collaborative conflict. Acknowledge and encourage it.
  - Notice the early signs which might lead to conflict becoming destructive. For example, you may notice requests for resources, clarity or for work to be prioritised. You may notice complaining, gossip, repeated discussions on the same topic. You might notice the tone of emails becoming more defensive or accusatory, or misunderstandings which aren't cleared up quickly.
2. Assess the possible cause(s) of the conflict. Conflict can arise when:
  - there's a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities
  - conflicting/competing priorities
  - significant organisational change
  - different opinions/assumptions about how a task is to be achieved
  - there are insufficient resources (eg time, budget, skills)
  - high workloads (which, over time, reduce individual capacity to deal with conflict constructively)
  - communication misunderstandings
  - different preferences eg appetite for risk, attitude to change
  - significant amount of change

And you can probably think of other causes. Often there are a number of factors contributing to the conflict. For managers there are often things you can do to address the cause of the conflict which quickly leads to the tension reducing.

3. Assess approaches to dealing with conflict
  - We all have our preferred ways of dealing with conflict. And it may be the preferred approach isn't appropriate for the situation. For example, we may prioritise relationships over the task, or tasks over relationships.
  - Sometimes organisations might promote a culture with a rigid approach to dealing with conflict which is no longer working for kinds of problems it's facing.

## Benefits of paying attention to conflict

The benefits of being confident and proactive in managing conflict are huge for the individual, for teams and for organisations:

- teamworking, collaboration and cohesion are enhanced
- problem-solving is more innovative and effective
- wellbeing and performance are maximised
- enhances a culture of respect, psychological safety and learning
- enhances performance, reputation and staff retention

## Strategies for dealing with conflict that enhance collaboration

Managers and leaders set the tone for how people react to conflict. The following will assist in enhancing a culture which promotes collaborative conflict

- A. Listen with curiosity (and without judgement) to different perspectives. Assess the situation and the approaches people are taking.
- B. Ensure clarity and shared understandings in relation to performance goals, expectations, responsibilities, priorities and the organisation's direction of travel. Engage with your employees to hear their views and perspectives.
- C. If workload levels are high for extended periods of time, support your team in prioritising the workload.
- D. Develop your knowledge and skills in managing conflict to enhance your competence and confidence in ensuring conflict is collaborative
- E. When you notice the early warning signs of destructive conflict coach others in dealing with conflict more constructively
- F. Encourage a focus on the problem (rather than a focus on who's right/wrong). Work with people in conflict to identify medium and longer term actions to resolve and prevent the conflict re-emerging further down the line
- G. Consider facilitated conversations or mediation. This is a voluntary process which works when the people involved in the conflict are motivated to find a resolution and to develop good working relationships. The manager, HR or an external mediator then facilitates a meeting where each person has an opportunity to articulate their issues and listen to the other person's perspective. This enhances mutual understanding and improves working relationships. Mediation is often less stressful and less time consuming than HR procedures
- H. If conflict is localised to just a few individuals consider training to develop their conflict skills.
- I. If destructive conflict is widespread this suggests organisational culture requires shaping to support more constructive, collaborative conflict behaviours. As with other culture change initiatives this requires a more holistic approach and the engagement of senior leaders as well as colleagues. An example is to consider if the principles of 'Just and Learning Culture' might work for your organisation.

## Find out more

Talk to Karen ([karen@aspirecc.co.uk](mailto:karen@aspirecc.co.uk)) about

- Workplace mediation to help people in conflict to rebuild their working relationship
- Coaching for managers and leaders to think through approaches to conflict
- Facilitated team sessions to learn about conflict and agree ways of working to keep conflict collaborative
- Complete the Thomas Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) to discover your conflict style

## About the author, Karen Wills (Walsh)

With over 5 years working as a middle manager Karen's familiar with the complexities and different priorities of different staff groups and the conflict this leads to. Through her coaching, Karen brings her experience, knowledge in organisational psychology and leadership to support managers and management teams in thinking about the complexities of working life, building cohesion and keeping conflict collaborative. Karen is an accredited coach and trained workplace mediator.

Her knowledge of conflict and its resolution comes from the fields of psychology, mediation and non-violent communication developed by Marshall Rosenberg.

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## Review your ratings

### Strong agreement for every question

There's strong evidence suggesting a high performing, supportive, innovative team. Well done! This suggests your team is highly effective and delivering excellent work for its clients.

The next step is to invite other team members to complete this assessment individually. And then have a team session to go through the questions. Explore, with curiosity, any differences in ratings what this means in terms of team strengths and areas for development. Then seek feedback from clients and key stakeholders on their views of the team's strengths, deliverables and needs for the future.

### One or more questions don't have strong agreement

Reflect on the factors which may be getting in the way of team effectiveness. Here's how to do this...

You're invited to think about your team as you reflect on the following and to choose one thing that stands out for you that requires more focus. Think about an improvement which is likely to make the biggest difference for the team. And a month or two after implementing an improvement come back to this assessment to see how the ratings have changed.

#### Is the team a real team?

- The word 'team' is used in different ways in organisations. Sometimes a leader is referring to the people they are responsible for, which might relate to tens, hundreds or thousands of people. They may be thinking about the team delivering the organisation's vision. To get the most from this resource it's best to consider a team that you are a member of or a team that you are leading. This might be a hierarchical team or a project team. And is likely to be between 3 and 10 people,
- A team leader will often refer to their direct reports as a team. For the purposes of this self-assessment they aren't a team if they don't have shared goals or if they don't need to collaborate with each other to achieve their goals. If the work is delivered independently of each other then it's more appropriate to consider individual effectiveness rather than team effectiveness.
- Sometimes leaders want to be inclusive by including a wide range of people in the team and this can lead to confusion about roles and responsibilities. Effective teams are clear about the roles, skills and experiences which are needed for delivering its objectives. Setting up processes to inform or consult a wider range of people can be more effective than including lots of people in a team.

#### Clarity about deliverables and a compelling purpose?

- Effective teams are clear about who their client(s) is/are and have a shared understanding of who their key stakeholders are. There is clarity and agreement about client and stakeholder expectations of quality, quantity and timelines of the work the team delivers.

- The team is clear about how its deliverables contribute to the vision of the organisation. And team members are clear about their unique contribution and their roles within the team.
- Individual, team and organisation purpose/vision are aligned and compelling for each member of the team
- Suggestions for improvement:
  - o work with clients/stakeholders to deepen your understanding of their expectations
  - o understand what meaningful work means for each team member and articulate the organisation's vision/purpose in a way that is aligned with what's meaningful for them

### **The right people?**

- An effective team has the knowledge, skills and experience to deliver the work.
- Team members have teamworking skills
- A team which is more diverse (in terms of thinking, experience, backgrounds) is better at problem-solving, innovation, and delivering high quality work. This assumes that the team have the capabilities in working with differences of opinion
- Suggestions for improvement
  - o Consider the knowledge, skills and experience needed to deliver excellent work. Organise training or recruit to fill major gaps
  - o Assess/develop teamworking skills
  - o Consider the diversity in backgrounds, knowledge, skills and thinking styles which will support innovation and problem-solving. Provide opportunities for people to get to know and understand each other's contributions to minimise misunderstandings and strengthen teamworking

### **Is the context supportive?**

- The wider organisation/system needs to provide the information and resources (eg budget, environment, software, time) the team needs to be effective
- The wider organisation needs to provide the training and development to build expertise
- Fairness in the allocation of rewards. If there's a perceived lack of fairness in status, financial rewards, etc this can be de-motivating
- Suggestions for improvements
  - o Ensure sufficient resources or prioritise the work so it can be achieved with the available resources
  - o However busy the team are, ensure at least some of the organisation's development opportunities are taken up
  - o Understand individual perceptions of fairness and unfairness

## Does the team structure support effectiveness?

- An effective team has the appropriate number of people for the work. For example, a hospital ward has the appropriate number of nurses to fill the shifts needed to provide patient care.
- The team has clear and agreed norms for how they work together. For example, they might have a team charter or team values which are followed and regularly reviewed
- Suggestions for improvement
  - o Work with the team to review ways of working. Identify what's working well and what could be improved.
  - o Work with the team to turn frustrations into improvements

This resource is based on the work of Richard Hackman and Ruth Wageman (pioneers in team coaching).

We hope this resource has sparked some useful ideas to help you to enhance your team's effectiveness.

## Find out more

Why not subscribe to 'Team Time', monthly resource to support teams in reflecting on team effectiveness. Email [karen@aspirecc.co.uk](mailto:karen@aspirecc.co.uk) for the subscribe link.

If it would be helpful to reflect further on how you could enhance your team's effectiveness, or you have queries about this resource why not sign up for a complementary [30 minute call with Karen](#)

If you're interested in a more comprehensive team assessment why not consider the Creating the Team Edge 360 team assessment. This assessment is for management teams and collates data from team members and stakeholders. Contact [karen@aspirecc.co.uk](mailto:karen@aspirecc.co.uk) for more information.

Alternatively, contact Karen to find out more about team coaching 9 month programme [karen@aspirecc.co.uk](mailto:karen@aspirecc.co.uk)

## About the author, Karen Wills

With over 5 years working as a middle manager Karen's familiar with the complexities of leading a number of services. Through her coaching and work with teams, Karen brings her experience, knowledge in organisational psychology and leadership to support managers and management teams in taking time out to reflect on the 'how' rather than the 'what' of working life. This might include reflecting on purpose, enhancing self-awareness, building wellbeing/resilience, reflecting on what's working and what needs to be improved.

Karen is an accredited coach and trained workplace mediator. Her knowledge of team effectiveness comes from the fields of psychology and organisational development.

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