

WHY HAVING A GOOD CONFLICT CULTURE MATTERS





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INTRODUCTION – CONFLICT AT WORK

Workplace conflict is inevitable – so what should your organisation be doing about it? Are you maximising the positive aspects of conflict in your organisation and minimising the negative aspects?

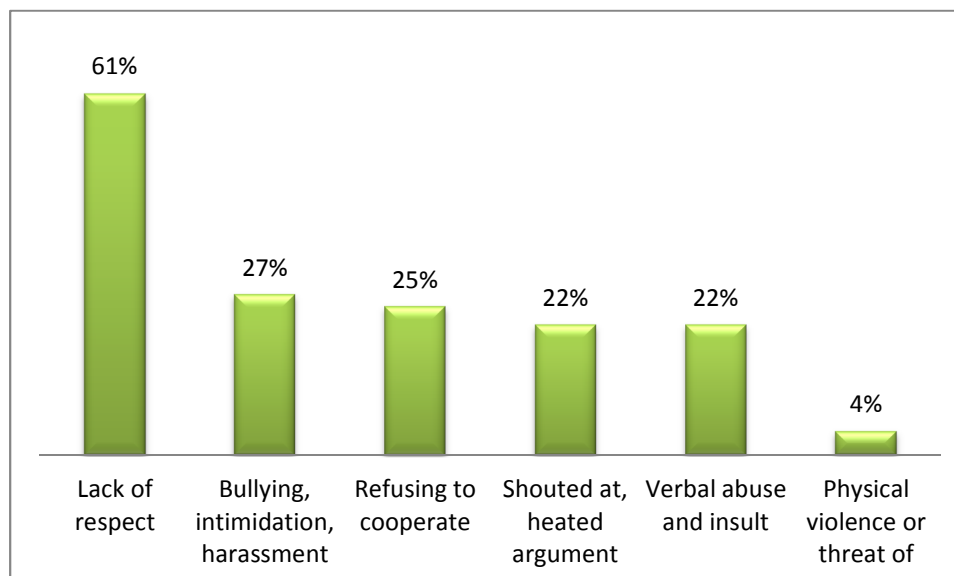
There are positive aspects for an organisation that has healthy conflict: creativity; new thinking; challenge; new ways of doing things; people who are willing to speak up and movement towards business goals and away from the status quo. All of which are necessary for an organisation's health and future.

But when conflict isn't managed, it becomes negative and hurts your people and your organisation on the bottom line. The CBI calculated that conflict costs UK plc £33 billion every year.

A study conducted by OPP in 2008 found that people spend 12 working days every year dealing with conflict - more time than is lost due to staff absence

The CIPD report¹ captures what today's employees mean when they say 'conflict' – and it's a wide range of behaviours. But by far the most common 'conflict' is lack of respect, as the chart below shows.

WHAT EMPLOYEES VIEW AS 'CONFLICT'

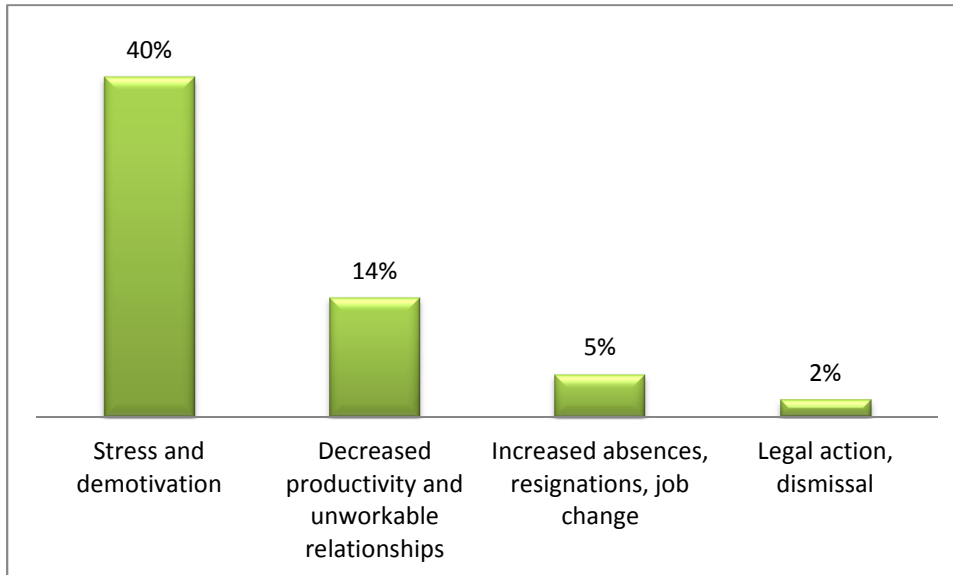


¹ CIPD, Getting Under the Skin of Conflict, 2015



The impact of this type of conflict - which most often is simply a lack of respect being shown - is significant, not only on your bottom line as the chart below shows.

THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT AT WORK: WHAT PEOPLE REPORTED RESULTED FROM THEIR CONFLICT AT WORK



So somewhere in your organisation, bad decisions are being made because people are withholding information out of anger; customers or service users are stuck in the middle of people's personal power struggles; and essential staff are either off with stress, or thinking longingly about moving on from their nightmare boss. HR staff who should be doing strategic work, are hand-holding a manager through a disciplinary process. Leaders who should be standard-setters of your values, are infamous for their weight-throwing abilities.

Yet what organisations tend only to measure are the direct costs of conflict: the cost of litigation; spending on conflict resolution professionals; employment tribunal costs; awards for claims for bullying and harassment; unfair dismissal or compromise agreements. Factor in the invisible costs, and it really starts to add up.

So why is conflict at work still seen as an operational and marginal matter?

WHY IS CONFLICT AT WORK SEEN AS AN OPERATIONAL MATTER?

The illustration below shows how most organisations concentrate their 'conflict resolution' resources in the top layer: a fire-fighting and reactive approach which is expensive and which does not add value to the organization. There is usually some ad hoc attention in the middle level, with perhaps access to trained mediators or external mediators, but little outreach taking place to normalise mediation or to position it squarely within a range of

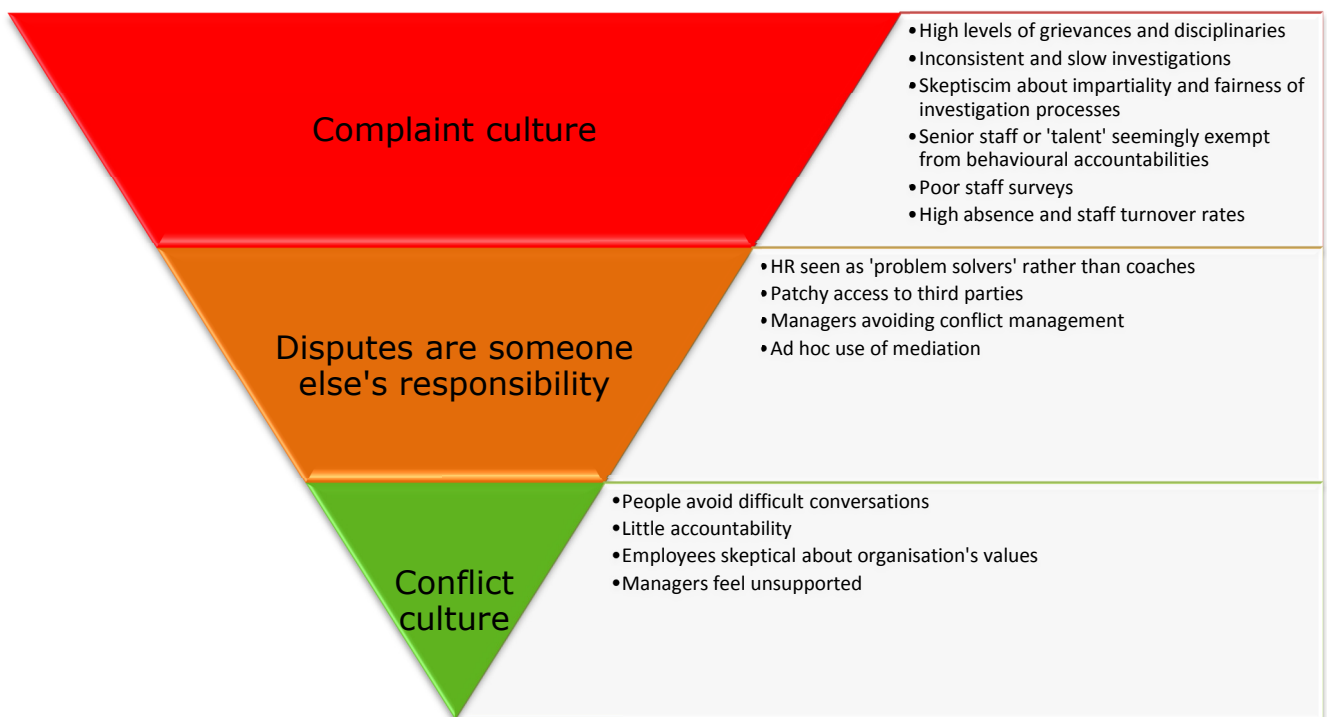


options for resolution. Most financial and human resource investment is directed at fighting a small number of highly contested, high-risk conflicts.

Meanwhile investment in the bottom layer of the pyramid, where most conflicts actually take place, is reduced; the majority of conflicts go unsupported and unmanaged, and remain invisible until someone goes off with stress, leaves the organisation, or a crisis demands management attention.

The return from adopting this pattern is poor – with high expenditure but little long-term return. Staff and managers may be aware of your values and their rights and responsibilities, but they do not believe in them, or even in you as an employer.

WHAT YOU GET FROM HAVING NO CONFLICT STRATEGY AT WORK



HOW TO CHANGE YOUR CONFLICT CULTURE

An organisation with a strong conflict culture is one that embraces the concept of 'good conflict' and adds value to employee relations, because people are encouraged to raise difficult issues and generate latent benefits of conflict through constructive dialogue.

People's behaviours and your processes are what will dictate your conflict culture.

So to develop and embed an organisational culture that encourages positive and constructive conflict, you need to develop the skills of your managers and employees, and introduce conflict resolution processes that offer an incremental approach. As with any



strategy, this should be underpinned by clear organizational goals, benchmarks, and a process for monitoring and evaluation. Pay more attention to where most conflicts occur – in the day-to-day interactions between people.

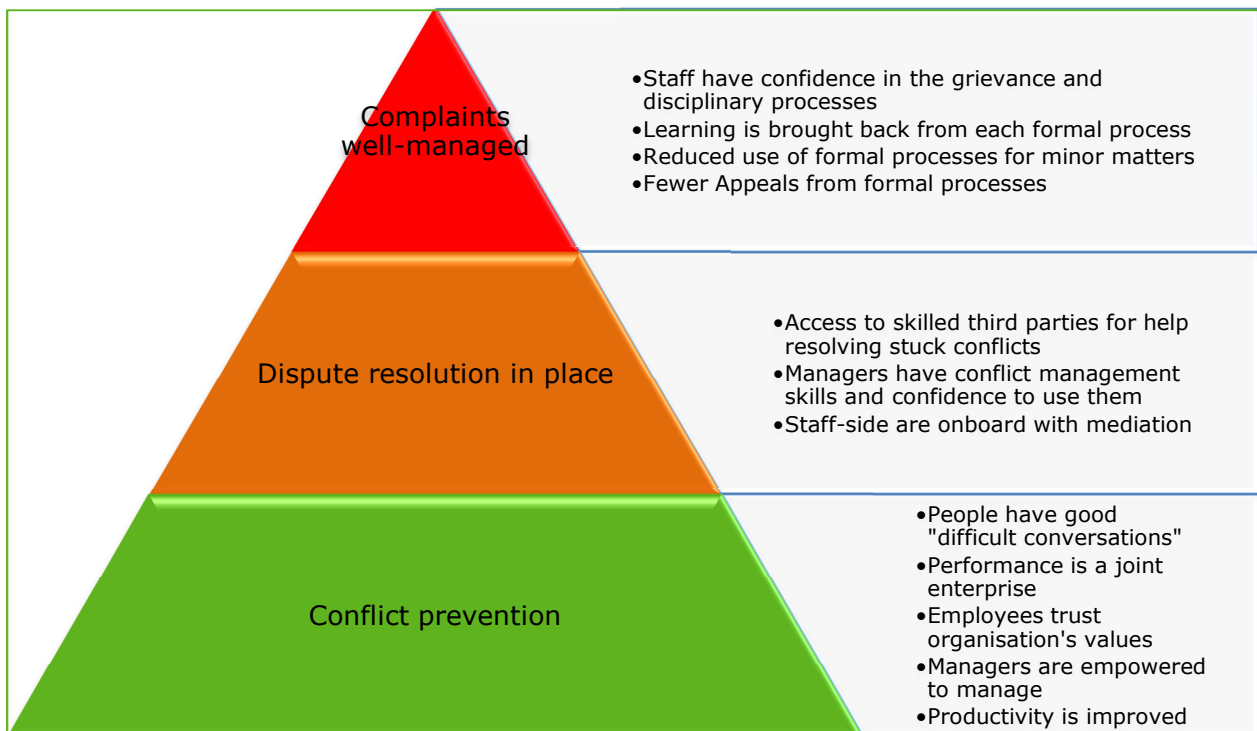
Usually you will have a requirement that people, in the first instance of a conflict with someone, talk to that person directly. However, too few employers support their employees in doing this. It is human nature to avoid difficult conversations and to polarize quickly when their needs are, or are perceived to be, at risk of not being met.

Therefore put more resources into supporting people away from escalating their negative feelings, and towards dialogue with each other. The rate of return on your investment will be greatest and you will get the greatest culture shift by doing this.

Then look at how you manage conflict – at your third-party offerings such as grievance resolvers and mediators. Are your processes integrated? Do you have a continuum of options for people to get support when matters do escalate? Does everyone agree to try and resolve matters at the most local, informal level possible?

Turn the pyramid on its head and create a strong conflict culture, with a strategy which you can drive forward, measure, and evaluate. You should be able to identify the ROI in human and financial terms, and the benefits from creating this culture are significant.

BENEFITS OF CREATING A GOOD CONFLICT CULTURE





HOW DOES YOUR ORGANISATION SHAPE UP?

Using something like a [Conflict profile](#)[™] identifies the current costs of conflict for your organisation and benchmarks these against the national average for an organisation of your size and sector. Reducing those costs will underpin your strategic approach and be the cornerstone of your business case for making this culture change. It also reviews and assesses your “conflict competence” and provides recommendations for where you can strengthen this.

ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE NOW

STRATEGY

- 🔥 Carry out a conflict audit to identify the strengths and weaknesses of your current provision.
- 🔥 Monetise the results using our Conflict Profile or similar tool.
- 🔥 Set key performance indicators for your strategy: how will you measure its success? What is the overarching organisational goal for the strategy?
- 🔥 Draw up a plan of action with timescales and responsibilities.

LEADERS

- 🔥 Start at the top. Do your leaders understand their role in making the strategy happen? Do their own behaviours model what is being asked of everyone in the organization?
- 🔥 Run a short learning session for your leaders on their role as influencers and role models, ensuring they act collectively and consistently to uphold the organisation’s values and expectations.
- 🔥 Senior managers are often the ‘deciding’ officer to a grievance or disciplinary hearing. The flaws that will come back to cost you at an Appeal or ET are where deciding officers are inconsistent, so that one person is treated differently from another for the same behaviours; or where they lack the objectivity and/or confidence to reach a determination against someone where the evidence leads clearly to that outcome. So train your deciding officers in how to weigh and assess the evidence fairly and consistently.

PROCESSES

- 🔥 Review the policies and procedures which support your conflict strategy: whistleblowing, dignity at work, complaint handling, grievance resolution, performance management, absence management, learning & development.



- 🔥 Do they all give a consistent message about your expectations of employees and managers?
- 🔥 Are those expectations clear and achievable, and is it clear where people should turn to get the support or development they may need?

HUMAN RESOURCES

HR is the back-stop for conflict management at work. They are under more pressure than ever to do more with less, so it is important that they are efficient, and effective.

- 🔥 If you have an HR Business Partner model it is essential HR remain strategic and facilitative rather than hands-on. So train HRBPs to offer conflict coaching support to managers, to keep the actual responsibility for managing and resolving conflict where it belongs, with managers.
- 🔥 HR needs to know when to consider mediation, so make sure HR agree when mediation is the right approach. As mediation is voluntary, HR also need the skills to explain and encourage parties into mediation – after all, it is rarely a party's first choice of remedy.
- 🔥 The responsibility to ensure investigations into grievance and disciplinary matters are done consistently, robustly and in a timely manner sits with HR, who may find it difficult to 'manage' an investigator who is more senior than they are. So train HR in this crucial yet delicate function.
- 🔥 If HR themselves undertake grievance and disciplinary investigations, are they working consistently and to best practice? If not, your ability to bring complaints to a close with a clear and fair outcome, may be jeopardized.

MANAGEMENT SKILLS

- 🔥 Some managers have the inbuilt skills to manage conflict constructively. Others, perhaps more technically minded, will need support if they are to have difficult or courageous conversations. Review your management programmes to ensure they include the soft skills involved in embracing positive conflict and defusing negative conflict.
- 🔥 Managers who are skilled in managing their, and others, emotions, power and influence will achieve positive results from difficult conversations.
- 🔥 Train managers to enable them to adopt a mediation approach with their staff. Managers who consistently listen, empathise and take a joint-problem solving approach will have more engaged, productive and self-managing teams.



- Some managers may need coaching to support them in difficult situations arising from either their behaviour or the behaviour of individuals around them. This kind of conflict coaching focusses the attention and effort where it is most needed and most of use.

STAFF SKILLS

The majority of your headcount sits at the 'lowest' level of the pyramid, and for this reason alone most conflicts and disputes take place among your staff. Your strategy needs to include provision for changing your staff's approach to differences, whether arising from diversity issues, or from different views about how to do the work.

- Train employees in managing their own disputes and differences, so they take responsibility and accountability for what they say and how they say it.
- Motivate and train employees to have difficult conversations with each other and with their manager, for example in *how* to challenge colleagues' banter, or a manager's bullying.
- Expand this conflict management orientation to include how they respond to complaints from clients, users or the public.

ABOUT CMP RESOLUTIONS

CMP is the market leader in conflict resolution, workplace mediation and investigations. We work with organisations to Close, Manage and Prevent conflict.

This means that we work with clients to develop and fully implement their conflict strategy to build a conflict-positive culture, and then help to measure the rate of return on their investment.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HOW CMP RESOLUTIONS MIGHT SUPPORT YOUR ORGANISATION PLEASE CONTACT

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