

Understanding Workplace Conflict

Conflict in the workplace is common. Indeed, most people at some stage in their working life are likely to encounter some kind of conflict in the workplace.

Conflict can take many different forms and can impact both employees and employers alike. It can also have farther reaching impacts beyond the organisation, including implications for families, clients, stakeholders, and even the broader community.

Yet conflict is not always “bad”. What matters the most is the way we respond to, and manage conflict. Where engaged constructively, conflict can often be managed effectively and may present an opportunity for communication, positive change, and organisational learning.

Did you know??..

A CPP study of 5000 US workers found that 85% had experienced a workplace related conflict. At least 29% of the workers also reported that they experience conflict either “always” or “frequently” as part of their working life.¹

So what is workplace conflict anyway?

Most commonly, it's where two or more members of the team start running into difficulties with communication and cooperation.

The three most common dynamics for conflict in the workplace are:

- *a conflict between co-workers;*
- *a conflict between a staff member and their supervisor;*
- *a conflict between managers.*

A range of other conflict dynamics can also arise. For example:

- *disagreements between staff members and clients, key stakeholders, and/or contractors;*
- *disagreements between owners and/or board directors;*
- *disagreements involving multiple parties and /or teams.*

Conflict can relate to the sense or perception that is held by an individual, ie: that there are differences and disagreements with others in the workplace.

Conflict may become overt and manifest where an individual or individuals, initiate actions and behaviours that negatively impact others in the workplace.

In a workplace setting conflict commonly involves any or all of the following:

- *a feeling of uneasiness or tension in the workplace*
- *difficulties being experienced in interpersonal communication and cooperation ie 'a communication breakdown'*
- *a misunderstanding, a difference of opinion, or, a disagreement relating to a workplace issue;*
- *a concern or grievance relating to a particular workplace incident or decision;*
- *less frequently, there may be concerns about events or behaviours which have occurred outside the workplace.*

It is important to recognise that conflict can look and feel different in each situation. Each individual may perceive and experience a conflict situation in markedly different ways. Similarly, each person may be impacted very differently. In some cases the impacts can be very significant and serious; for example: personal injury, impacts to livelihood and career advancement, loss of confidence, reputational impacts.

In a workplace context, it is also very important to consider the ripple effects of conflict and the potential impacts for other team members and the organisation as a whole; for example: decline in productivity and morale; increased absenteeism; potential litigation or industrial action;



reputational considerations. Yet, where conflict is managed effectively it may bring about positive impacts such as enhanced communication and team work, problem solving, organisational learning, positive change, new knowledge and innovation.

Managing conflict effectively in the workplace warrants the special consideration and attention of all organisational leaders.

Understanding conflict

At the most fundamental level everyone in the workplace is different – each team member brings their own individual goals, unique skills and personal qualities. Similarly, each team member in the workplace has their own unique strengths, weaknesses, needs, preferences, expectations and aspirations. Conflict can occur when these quite personal attributes are in some way being impacted by the interpersonal dynamics and behaviours at play in the workplace.

Commonly a conflict may start out through unconscious patterns of behaviour that affect one or more staff members. Or there may have been a misunderstanding, a



difference of opinion, or, a disagreement of some kind relating to a workplace issue. Some matters of a less serious nature may get cleared up through informal channels of communication and / or may dissipate naturally with the passage of time. However, if conflict festers or begins to escalate, very quickly actions can become more conscious and deliberate in nature, potentially causing significant distress or harm. This especially becomes a concern if a cycle-of- retaliation occurs.

Aligned with contemporary conflict management theory, we can say that conflict has two key elements.

- Perception and consciousness: ie whether one or more staff members perceive there to be a conflict
- Actions and behaviours that are having an impact: ie whether one or more staff members are adopting behaviours (especially if this is deliberate) that may be adversely impacting another staff member.

Conflict in the workplace can also be exacerbated by several contributory factors including:

- The culture and 'norms' of the workplace;
- Factors of stress and pressure in the workplace;
- Individual capabilities, for example, effective communication, self-awareness, team work, and cooperation;
- The capacity of management and other staff to recognise and manage conflict effectively;
- The personal capability and resilience factors of individual staff;
- The 'good faith' motivations and sincerity of staff members to work through problems constructively;
- Several external factors such as family / societal pressures; health and wellbeing considerations.

5 Common types of workplace conflict can be identified.

Listed below are 5 common types of workplace conflict². Specific examples are illustrated however this is not an exhaustive list.

1 Communication and interpersonal related conflicts

Team members may experience fundamental difficulties in communicating and cooperating. Misunderstandings, disagreements, and arguments may arise relating to communication and workstyle issues eg: the appropriateness of verbal and body language; the tone; style and timing of communication.

2

Values based conflicts

Team members come into disagreement around core values, for example, there could be significant differences in professional opinion or workplace ethical values; differing personal beliefs and attitudes; differing political views, faith beliefs and/or cultural views.

3

Information and data related conflicts

Team members may disagree about issues relating to information and data; interpretation; attribution and/or intellectual property. Concerns may include, for example, whether correct information has been shared; the way it has been shared; the timing; how it has been interpreted and utilised.

4

Interest based conflicts

Issues and concerns may arise that impact a staff member's needs and interests, for example, opportunities for promotion / acting-in higher duties; allocation of duties / workloads; employee entitlements and leave arrangements; reputational considerations; professional development opportunities.

5

Structural conflicts

Conflicts that relate to issues of organisational structure, governance, hierarchy and/or power dynamics. For example, disagreements about workplace policies; decision making processes and how authority is exercised; reward & recognition considerations; performance management; disciplinary procedures.

Workplace wellbeing and managing conflict effectively

Increasingly the impacts and costs of poorly managed workplace conflict are being better understood. Not only can the impacts on individuals and families be debilitating, but the impact on business productivity, operational effectiveness and morale can also be devastating.

Thankfully it's not all bad news!

Firstly, it's about building a workplace culture and team capabilities that provide for effective conflict management if and when the need arises.

It's not so much about '*conflict proofing*' your organisation - indeed this is hardly possible. Disagreements and conflicts of various kinds are largely inevitable in the workplace - the real key is how do we manage and respond effectively, especially in a way which preserves and promotes mutual respect, understanding, beneficial workplace relationships, and enduring workplace cooperation.





It's important to remember that in many cases staff are able to work through disagreements and interpersonal conflict situations themselves. This is especially the case where staff are equipped with the right tools and abilities, and when there is an abiding organisational focus upon team wellbeing.

Secondly, there is also a time and place where seeking support and intervention from management and/or conflict management professionals is advisable. This is where at the organisational level, the development of effective dispute resolution policies and procedures also has an important role to play.

Not sure where to start?

There is much that can be done. Building greater awareness and understanding about workplace conflict is a good step for managers and staff alike.

There is also much that can be done to build effective interpersonal communication skills and conflict management capability at the individual staff level. For managers and organisational leaders it's important to build capability relating to professional

judgement and procedural leadership as it relates to conflict management, promoting workplace cooperation and team cohesion.

There is an imperative to act:

- ✔ Managers and organisational leaders do have statutory responsibilities for providing a safe workplace for employees, and in this context the risks associated with poorly managed conflict cannot be ignored.
- ✔ Concomitantly, many organisational leaders appreciate that building conflict management capability also aligns well with building organisational leadership capabilities that promote effective team cohesion, and foster cooperation, problem solving and creativity.

Professional support is always available - if in doubt it's always advisable to gain professional advice and support. It is definitely time to seek professional assistance at any stage if you perceive a risk or concern relating to staff safety, health and wellbeing.

What can I do if there is a workplace conflict?

If you are personally involved with a workplace conflict it can sometimes be a difficult and sensitive situation. Take heart, as there are several effective ways of engaging conflict in a workplace situation.

- ✔ Attempting self-resolution
 - if you feel comfortable and safe you could consider trying to talk with the other person about the issues. Try to find a mutually convenient time to discuss the issues respectfully and constructively.

- ✓ Seeking a manager's assistance with the situation
 - Talking over the situation with your manager may be an appropriate course of action especially if you are feeling unsafe or your wellbeing and work performance is being impacted.
- ✓ The option of a third party independent conflict management professional
 - Seeking the assistance of a Mediator may be appropriate in certain situations – you may need to talk with either your manager or HR support to determine the most suitable options
- ✓ Seeking other support and assistance
 - For example do you have access to counselling support? In some cases it may also be appropriate to seek other professional support and advice.

If you are a manager assisting staff members in conflict, there are several options available for you:

- ✓ Encourage and mentor the staff member/s to resolve the issue themselves
- ✓ Intervene and attempt to resolve the issues proactively
- ✓ Arrange for a 3rd party to assist the staff members experiencing conflict

There are also numerous strategies that workplace managers and staff alike can adopt to promote:

- ✓ effective communication and cooperation in the workplace
- ✓ a culture of peace and effective conflict management in the workplace

For more guidance on how to work through conflict

- ➔ [Read Luemo's article Working your way through workplace disharmony](#)

- ➔ [Read Luemo's Managing Workplace Conflict - a structured approach.](#)

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References

1. Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness It to Thrive Global Human Capital Report CPP 2008.
- ➔ [CPP Global Human Capital Report Workplace Conflict](#)
2. This list is adapted from the work of Christopher Moore, The Circle of Conflict
- ➔ [Moore-Circle-of-Conflict](#)

