



Human Resources & Health and Safety



Do you employ staff?

Advice on Conflict Resolution

Symptoms of Conflict

Conflict in the workplace is something we are all likely to encounter at one time or another. Due to the stresses and pressures of both our working and personal lives, people can occasionally become difficult with one another. Workplace conflict comes in many forms, be it a cold shoulder, a short email, a frustrated and snappy conversation, or an actual argument, but many people fail to recognise this. Many people view conflict as an argument and may be unaware of the other ways an employee conflict can present itself. You don't have to wait for a big scene or an employee grievance to acknowledge there is something amiss in the office; workplace conflict has many symptoms.

Have you noticed a drop in motivation or productivity from your employees? Or has their work fallen below the usual standard? Has an employee's behaviour changed? Are they quieter at work, or are they more negative than they were before? Has employee absence increased? All of these could be signs that something is amiss, but too often employers tend to avoid asking if an employee is ok. Don't shy away from asking after your employees, whether it's a problem in the workplace or at home, it's always worth asking how they are.

Why Conflict Occurs

One reason that some employers tend not to engage with the "milder" workplace conflicts (the ones that don't tend to result in an argument, but still manage to cause an unpleasant atmosphere for everyone) is because they believe they are the result of "clashing personalities" and therefore can't be solved. Yes, a clash of personalities is often the reason why people don't see eye-to-eye, but there are plenty of other reasons behind workplace conflict.

According to ACAS, the following are the most common causes of workplace conflict:

- **Poor Management:** If employees aren't provided with a positive example or a skilled manager, negativity may spread, potentially leading to disagreements.
- **Unfair Treatment:** One thing almost guaranteed to create conflict is favouritism. It is vital that all employees are treated fairly and consistently.
- **Unclear Job Roles:** This is especially important if employees work collectively in a team/department. Confused employees can quickly become irritated employees, which can lead to conflict.
- **Inadequate Training:** If employees are not provided with the appropriate training they may feel unsupported which could then lead to insecurity and a lack of confidence. Insecurity and low confidence could also lead to mistakes, which could then result in a low morale. The perfect breeding ground for negativity and conflict.
- **Poor Communication:** Sometimes it really is as simple as crossed-wires. Poor communication can lead to misunderstandings, which can be very frustrating. If people fail to understand one another on a regular basis, it is very likely they won't want to work together anymore.
- **Poor Working Environment:** Our environment is very influential on our behaviour. A dark, cluttered office where people work on top of one another could cause aggravation.
- **Bullying & Harassment:** Unfortunately, some people just aren't nice. On occasion workplace conflict will be caused by the hurtful behaviour of one employee towards another, whether this is by undermining them, intimidation, prejudice behaviour, or any other form of bullying.

Helpful Conflict Resolution Tips!

The way in which a workplace conflict should be managed depends upon the extent of the conflict itself. If it is a minor disagreement between two sensible people, an informal conversation is usually enough to rectify the problem. By getting the employees to open up and discuss the problem, you are providing them with the time and space to express their feelings and concerns. In most cases conflict is worsened by crossed wires and miscommunication, once people start a healthy discussion it is likely the conflict will be resolved. If you believe the conversation is not going to be simple, if you think the issue behind the conflict is complicated, or if you don't have much experience with conflict resolution, you can always employ a professional mediator to help you with this process.

Or, if you believe the conflict can't be solved by a conversation or the use of mediation, there are always your internal processes. A thorough and objective investigation, followed by either the Grievance or Disciplinary Procedure. These two policies are especially appropriate if the conflict has become problematic enough to cause real upset and disruption, or if there could be a possible claim of discrimination or harassment under the Equality Act 2010.

When dealing with employee conflict it is essential that managers remain professional and do not engage with the "politics" of the situation. There should be no "choosing sides" or treating one employee more favourably than the other, this will only exasperate the situation.

How Can We Help?

If you have any queries relating to the subject of this e-newsletter or any other HR related issue, then please don't hesitate to contact us at hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk.