

1rs **Managing** Conflict in the Workplace

Edited by Heather Falconer



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Consultant Editor
Heather Falconer

First published by LexisNexis

This edition published 2011 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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A CIP Catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0 7545 2392 6

Typeset by Columns Design Ltd, Reading, England.

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Foreword

Recent years have seen upheaval in the workplace on an unprecedented scale. Changes in the legal framework, coupled with the shock of an economic downturn and simultaneous boost in spending on public services, have left many organisations struggling to keep up. Small wonder, then, that in dealing with the need to restructure, refocus and rethink what they are all about, many have also experienced an increase in workplace conflict.

To some extent, this is reflected in the rising number of days lost to industrial disputes (albeit that this tends to reflect small numbers of strikes against a few very large employers). But new rights to protection against discrimination on grounds of religious belief and sexual orientation (soon to be joined by age), the extension of working time and flexible working legislation, and the growth of a 'rights culture' generally have also produced potential flashpoints.

The task of dealing with all this, and finding a harmonious – or at least survivable – way of encouraging creative conflict while containing the harmful variety, falls both on human resource professionals and, as IRS research has consistently found, increasingly on line managers. In small and medium-sized companies in particular, this can be a heavy burden to carry.

New Regulations and a revised ACAS code of conflict on discipline and grievances planned for Autumn 2004 should help to some extent – though getting to grips with official expectations about dispute resolution procedures will inevitably prove to be a demanding task in itself. We hope, therefore, that in this book you will find the tools you need to survive and flourish in that difficult environment.

Our thanks, as ever, go to the vast number of employers who answer our endless questions about their workplace realities and help us to formulate some shared solutions.

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Managing Editor
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In 1998, David established Total Conflict Management Ltd. Based in the Centre for Workplace Mediation, Total Conflict Management offer high quality and innovative responses to workplace conflicts and disputes. They provide mediation and conflict resolution services to public, private and voluntary organisations and have taken a leading role in developing national practice standards for workplace mediators including the development of the national certificate in workplace mediation skills.

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He started as a consultant for CEPEC, where he developed new programmes for management training. Some of these dealt with the trauma of violent incidents, from minor assault to bank raids, as well as how to defuse situations, even in the heat of battle. Mike has designed conflict management programmes for situations as varied as the normal office wranglings to being threatened at gunpoint.

In 1994 he became Development Director of Coutts Consulting, a position he held until 1998 when he co-founded Trans4mation, a management consultancy for training in leadership, management development, managing diversity and conflict mediation.

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Turning to HR after early positions in operational work, finance, legal services and international marketing, Marion also sustains interim positions, if possible, in the public sector where institutional conflict can appear most obvious. Her private caseload is predominantly concerned with cases of bullying and disciplinary issues.

A growing passion for geology, she says, keeps this day-to-day involvement with work conflict in elegant perspective.

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Chapter One

Conflict in the Workplace

Heather Falconer and Mike Bagshaw

INTRODUCTION

Whether it was Sir Alex Ferguson's unfortunate dressing room rage or the foul-mouthed bully tactics of City broking bosses, 2003 seemed to be a bumper year for high-profile conflict in the workplace.

And it wasn't just premier football clubs and the high-octane financial sector that hit the news. Sexual harassment, racism, bullying and generally oppressive behaviour have all made unwelcome headlines for numerous employers and institutions in the recent past.

We could be forgiven for thinking that destructive conflict is gaining a disturbing foothold in UK workplaces. But is it so?

Workplace conflict has always been with us, and eradicating it all together would be disastrous. Indeed, as the examples above illustrate, many creative, high-performance workplaces appear to thrive on it. If there is only one point of view, there will be only one way forward, and it may not be the best way. It is better to explore many possibilities, and that can only happen if there are lots of ideas around. Whenever there is more than one idea, there will be conflict between views. But this conflict of opinion can be positive – it can provide impetus for change and be constructive. As long as the conflict is constructive not destructive, it can be a force for change and progress.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT?

Awareness – People who learn to deal with disagreement come to recognise their personal conflict style, and the effect they have on others. They find out where their strengths and weaknesses are, and this equips them to deal better with future conflicts.

Better solutions – When people disagree about a plan of action, it gets them thinking. They often look again at the plan and notice defects. When nobody raises any doubts, the first plan just goes through.

Reduces ‘groupthink’ – Perpetual harmony is far from ideal. Too much stability brings stagnation. If everybody agrees with everybody about everything all the time, nothing can change – and nothing will improve. Irving Janis coined the word ‘groupthink’ to describe what happens when people agree too much. The group slides into a consensus, which becomes immovable. It seems to the group that they have got it right, therefore any change, by definition, is wrong. They back each other up, and frown on dissenters. This sometimes leads to catastrophe, as they are not responsive to the outside world. The world turns and turns about, but the group stays the same. The only cure for this is a dose of positive conflict.

Organisational change – Systems may stay the same just because they are there – and nobody bothers to disagree. When somebody does, it’s often a revelation. Everyone realises that they’ve been working with glitches for years.

Productivity – Problems are ironed out more quickly when they are noticed in the early stages, rather than when they have caused a situation that nobody can ignore. Where disagreement is accepted, discussions lead to rectification of mistakes before they cause any damage, and productivity improves.

CONFLICT CAN HIT THE BOTTOM LINE

Destructive conflict, on the other hand, brings with it no bonuses at all. While constructive conflict is often labelled ‘cognitive’ or ‘co-operative’ conflict, destructive conflict is often referred to as ‘dysfunctional’, ‘affective’ or ‘emotional’ conflict because it is driven not by ideas or opinions or the desire for solutions or by any part of the thinking brain at all, but by deep emotional responses to threatening situations. This can create in protagonists the sort of ‘fight, flight or freeze’ responses so important to our primeval ancestors when faced with a threat: not only deep psychological responses such as fear, anger, and aggression; but physical ones too – sweating, adrenaline rushes, raised blood pressure, nausea. Under these conditions, behaviour can become irrational, impulsive, and out of control, and the descent into destructive conflict begins.

The reasons why destructive conflict can get a hold in the workplace are numerous and are detailed in the next chapter. It can have its roots in the power structure of an organisation, the way managers handle (or fail to handle) personal or team conflicts, or a lack of fit between team goals and individual aspirations.

What many of the causes have in common is a gap between people's needs, goals or expectations and what they perceive to be the reality of the situation. What makes the conflict especially destructive is when these gaps are not recognised at an early stage and attempts made to manage them.

The danger is that if left to fester, destructive conflict can have a disastrous effect on the bottom line, as:

- people begin to focus on scoring points, rather than on finding a solution
- it creates an atmosphere of blame where people are fearful about offering new ideas
- it leads to secrecy, so important information is not made available to all who need it
- negative politics get a hold, where personalities are more important than issues
- it wastes time
- it can lead to litigation, which is extremely expensive, in money, time, and emotion.

So is destructive conflict in the workplace becoming more common, or does it just feel like it? Certainly, conflict is more likely when people feel insecure, and these days there are many reasons to feel insecure. Rapid change in technology means people are becoming de-skilled and have to keep renewing their expertise. Organisational change means more companies are being restructured and jobs are disappearing. The rules keep changing, and some people feel they just do not know where they are. If they feel out of control of their own destiny, they may feel hostile to those around them.

We are also being faced with more and more challenges to the status quo. We have a workforce of increasing diversity, which means people are working closely together who would once never even have met. The old boy network, where everyone had more or less the same background, experience and expectations, has gone for good. Now we rightly encourage people to push forward, be part of the team, and say what they think. There is no security in knowing the status quo – it will change tomorrow.

And, of course, there is more competition for business – and this is growing on a global scale. If the competition copes with change better than we do, we are lost. Change brings discomfort, loss and conflict, and we have to cope with that too.

STATISTICS

There have been few attempts to measure the prevalence of destructive conflict in UK workplaces. Those that have, have tended to concentrate on specific problems, mainly bullying – and if these are anything to go by, then it seems that destructive conflict is indeed a force to be reckoned with.

A study of 3,500 UK workers by *Mercer Human Resource Consulting* in 2002 found that more than one in five respondents had been ‘bullied at work’ at least once during the previous year.

Almost one in ten reported bullying on more than one occasion, with 2 per cent saying they had been bullied five or six times. The survey found bullying was prevalent at all levels of organisations: 24 per cent of middle managers and 17 per cent of senior managers said they had been bullied, suggesting just how entrenched the problem may be. Gender, age, and the size of the employer did not seem to be a factor in whether someone was bullied, though unsurprisingly, the industry they worked in did – public healthcare was the worst offending sector and retail the least.

These findings are not out of line with the large academic study carried out in 2000 by Helge Hoel and Cary Cooper for the Manchester School of Management at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST).

The researchers used two ways of measuring the extent of bullying. The first was to ask respondents if they had been bullied at work in the previous six months, using the following definition: ‘A situation where one or several individuals persistently over a period of time perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of negative actions from one or several persons, in a situation where the target of bullying has difficulty in defending him or herself against these actions.’ The definition did not include one-off actions.

From this, the researchers concluded that 10.6 per cent of respondents had been bullied in the previous six months. Approximately a quarter reported they had been bullied in the previous five years, with 46.5 per cent of respondents saying they had observed or witnessed bullying taking place within this period.

The second approach of Hoel and Cooper was to list a set of 'negative behaviours' and ask respondents to report their experience of these. They included:

- 'Work-related behaviours' such as persistent criticism of work, attempts to find fault, excessive monitoring, and being ignored or facing hostility when you approach someone;
- 'Personal harassment' such as insulting or offensive remarks about the person, spreading of rumours, teasing, exclusion and racism;
- 'Organisational harassment' such as having key areas of responsibility removed, being given impossible deadlines, being transferred against one's will, or being required to carry out tasks outside the job description; and
- 'Intimidation' – threats of violence, intimidating behaviour such as finger pointing, shoving or invasion of personal space, and being shouted or raged at.

Using this approach, the UMIST study found that 38 per cent of respondents had experienced at least one negative act on a weekly or more frequent basis within the last six months. Nearly a quarter had experienced two or more on a regular basis, and 16 per cent could say yes to three or more. The most frequently complained of behaviours were:

	Occasionally	Regularly
Someone withholding information which affects performance	54.0%	13.3%
Having your opinions and views ignored	49.3%	7.8%
Being given unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines	42.2%	9.7%
Being exposed to an unmanageable workload	39.3%	14.6%
Being ordered to do work below your competence	35.1%	10.7%
Having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks	32.0%	6.1%
Having gossip spread about you	29.8%	4.1%
Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work	27.8%	3.6%
Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger	25.1%	4.7%

It should be remembered that 'occasional' could mean as often as monthly, and 'regularly' means either weekly or daily. If these experiences are taken as a whole, it builds up a rather unflattering vision of the average UK workplace. Five per cent of workers were shouted or raged at at least once a week, while nearly 15 per cent felt they were given an unreasonably heavy workload at least once a week. Almost 8 per cent felt their views were regularly ignored, while 13.3 per cent felt they weren't regularly given all the information they needed to do their jobs properly.

While there are well-known problems with the self-reporting of such a subjective phenomenon as bullying (one employee's bully is another's robust manager), the message is clear: many workplaces would seem to have all the ingredients of dysfunctional conflict. People are reporting in significant numbers that their needs, goals and expectations are being ignored on a fairly regular basis. This appears to be borne out by further findings in the UMIST study that bullying was strongly associated with a negative work climate, high workload and unsatisfactory relationships at work.

The UMIST and Mercer studies did much to bring the problems of bullying and confrontational management into the mainstream, to the extent that many large organisations are now including anti-bullying policies alongside those on harassment and equal opportunities – often using a broader dignity at work policy to include all these elements. The problem with this is that while harassment on grounds of sex, race, disability, sexual orientation or religion are illegal and have statutory definitions, bullying per se is not and does not. The danger, according to some commentators, is that because bullying can cover such a wide spectrum of behaviour, formal procedures hitherto reserved for serious allegations of harassment are being used to deal with complaints that essentially deal with a breakdown in relationships between management and staff or colleagues.

As HR consultant Peter McGeer put in a recent article:

'What many organisations need, as a means of avoiding costly, time-consuming and inevitably demoralising investigations into allegations of bullying, are mechanisms for dealing with instances where relationships between managers and their staff are breaking down.'

While growing employee dissatisfaction may be forcing organisations to face up to their lack of resources in this area, there is soon to be another imperative shaping the policies and procedures by which UK companies attempt to manage relationships at work. Over half a million people are currently experiencing