Managing and Resolving Conflict in a Remote Workplace

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Conflict in the workplace is not new, but as the nature of work evolves so too does the nature of workplace conflict. We might think that remote workers face fewer conflicts, however remote work introduces new sources of conflict and new avenues through which disagreements, incivility, harassment, and disrespectful behaviour can occur.

What causes conflict in remote/hybrid work environment?

In addition to traditional sources of conflict in the workplace - stress, workload, personality differences, poor communication, incivility, and disrespect - there are certain factors that are prevalent causes of conflict in remote or hybrid workplaces, including:

- Ineffective and/or insufficient communication and information sharing.
- Insecurity or feelings of vulnerability due to detachment from the workplace.
- Lack of clarity or uneven application of expectations.
- Lack of decorum or inhibition in virtual and digital interactions.

Remote workplaces have been referred to as 'breeding grounds' for misinformation. When communicating through digital mediums, information such as context and body language is lost, leading to the potential for misinterpretation and 'attribution error.' *Is my supervisor angry with me? Why is no one this zoom call paying attention when I am speaking? Did my coworker intend to sound so rude in that text?* Conflict and discontentment can be more difficult to detect in remote work. When employees are not onsite, there are fewer opportunities for casual interactions and check-ins. Remote workers may be less likely to voice their concerns if they must do so through digital venues or other formal processes rather than informal interactions. Some remote workers may choose to hide behind the digital divide and not speak up. Managers may be less likely to address conflict because they will not see it unless they are being proactive.

The 'virtual' workplace creates unique drivers of incivility and disrespect. Digital body language or 'tone' on video calls and in emails and texts can be inadvertently negative and often misinterpreted. A lack of decorum can arise in virtual meetings, particularly in the absence of agreed upon rules of decorum. And we are all too familiar with the fact that when communicating

in the digital world, people often act without inhibition or filters, and the lines between what is and is not appropriate seem blurred.

How can we mitigate workplace conflict in remote or hybrid work?

Leaders play an important role in managing and mitigating conflict in any work environment. Many workplace conflicts can be avoided or mitigated if the supervisor or manager supports effective communication and engages in conflict management and early resolution. Doing so in a remote environment or within hybrid teams may require more diligence and different approaches:

- **Engage** with all employees on a regular basis and maintain the same level of accessibility to you for all team members. If you have an 'open door' make it sure it is open for all employees – in person and virtually.
- **Communicate** clearly, effectively, regularly, and equally to all team members.
- **Set expectations** and clearly communicate them to all employees. Monitor performance so that all team members know everyone will be accountable.
- **Model and support effective communication skills**, including awareness of differences in the communication and receipt of information between in-person and virtual settings.
- **Establish ground rules** for communication, accountability, meeting decorum, and engagement that equalize the playing field for all.

Resolving Workplace Conflict

Whether your employees work remotely, in-person, or in a hybrid model, it is important to address workplace conflict through proactive prevention and timely, effective resolution.

Be proactive – regular communications and team engagement can help to identify conflict in the early stages and support early and effective resolution.

Create safe space – ensure all employees have a means of speaking up and voicing their concerns, whether in-person or virtually. Recognize that remote workers may feel less comfortable speaking up because they feel more vulnerable or disconnected.

Engage in the difficult conversations – do not ignore the 'small stuff.' Address and resolve conflict and incivility when and where it happens.

Provide and support a range of conflict resolution tools – to managers and employees, which are suitable for use in-person or remotely. Facilitation, mediation, and other forms of ADR can be highly effective both in-person and on virtual platforms.

Restoration – include restorative practices in your conflict resolution approach and ensure they reflect the needs of all impacted employees regardless of where they work.

Remote work is part of the 'new normal,' and effective management and resolution of conflict needs to evolve to keep pace with the changing face of the workplace. For information about the workplace conflict management and resolution services offered by Hulton Workplace Resolutions contact us at: joy@hultonworkplaceresolultions.ca or www.hultonworkplaceresolutions.ca.