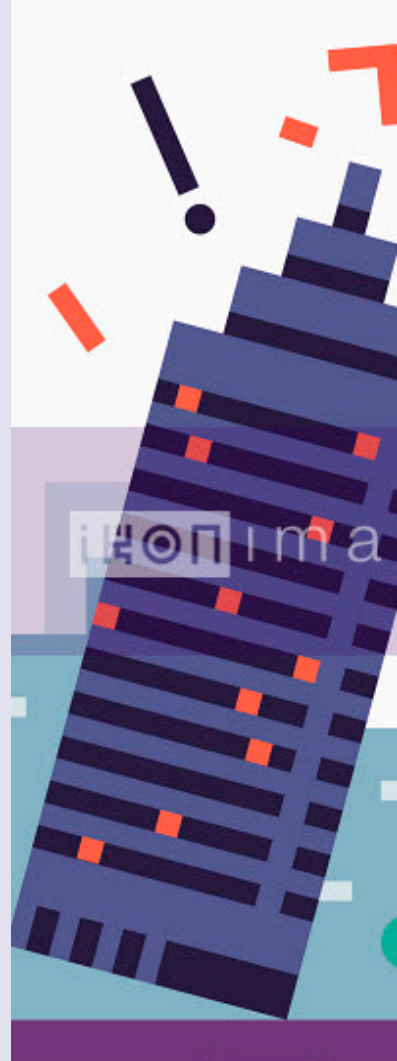


# HOW TO... RESOLVE WORKPLACE CONFLICT

How can OSH professionals manage conflict in the workplace to ensure a harmonious and safe environment for all?

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Unaddressed tensions at work can incur big costs, whether you're concerned for your people, your reputation or your bottom line. Analysis by Acas, the UK's Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (2021), estimated that workplace conflict costs UK employers £28.5bn a year, with 485,800 employees resigning each year due to conflict. These figures were calculated using the results of a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development study where 35% of respondents had experienced workplace conflict in the preceding 12 months.

An American Psychological Association (APA) survey found that 19% of US workers describe their workplace as 'toxic' – and of those, three-quarters (76%) said that their work environment impacted negatively on their mental health (APA, 2023).

A popular mantra often credited to executive coach Harvey Goldberg is that the culture of a workplace is defined not by what it expects of its people, but by what it tolerates. In the age of social media, and with sites such as Glassdoor giving a platform for employee reviews, word gets around.

Esther Patrick, client account director at Keystone Training in the UK, which offers sessions on conflict resolution, says that the impact on health and safety is significant. 'If you think about the typical effects of conflict – reduced communication, absences, "quiet quitting", higher staff turnover, disruptions to work, information not shared and general bad feeling – it's not surprising that it makes people less safe.'

Safety issues can become severe as a result, ranging from missed safety checks to violence and harassment. So, how can OSH professionals manage conflict to ensure more positive outcomes?

**WORKPLACE  
CONFLICT COSTS  
UK EMPLOYERS  
£28.5BN  
A YEAR**

### Talk and listen

Poor communication is the top cause of conflict in the workplace (Myers-Briggs Company, 2022). Canada-based management consultant Eldeen Pozniak says: 'When you bring together individuals who have varying capabilities and personalities, there's always a potential for not feeling valued, understood or respected ... But the more we have different personalities in an organisation, the more the organisation is sound, right?'

The solution, she says, is a combination of psychological screening, guidelines and emotional intelligence. She



cites the Canadian National Standard *Psychological health and safety in the workplace*, the UK's ISO 45003 and equivalent standards in other territories as key tools.

'If you take care of those psychosocial factors, you're decreasing the risk because you're taking out the hazards and the environment that may promote conflict. But then you are also arming your workplace individuals, from frontline all the way to senior leadership, with some tools in their toolbox to be able to handle that.'

OSH professionals are better equipped than most to do this, she says. 'I think, as a safety professional, we have to be armed because sometimes you are giving advice or trying to get people to do things they don't want to do, and we get thrown right into the middle of a potential conflict situation. If we arm ourselves with emotional intelligence and the self-awareness that comes along with personality tests, self-regulation and empathy to be able to see other people's motivation, we can pick up on the red flags.'

### Have good intentions

The International Labour Organization's *Violence and harassment at work: a practical guide for employers* (ILO, 2022) suggests that workplace violence and harassment cases 'can be prevented by enhancing workplace relations and creating a culture of mutual understanding, trust and respect, where the entire workforce can work collaboratively in a happy, safe and healthy environment'.

Esther says: 'When we get to know each other, we start to recognise the positive intent behind other people's words and actions.'

UK-based Simon Cassin CMIOSH, managing director of Ouch Training, cites the principle of charity – assuming the best possible version of someone's argument before you respond.

'The principle says you must be open to being challenged. So we should seek to listen and to understand, and that can help to reduce conflict.'

## CONFLICT MEDIATION

### Consider your processes

There's no 'one size fits all' when it comes to policies and procedures, but Kompass Professional Development outlines seven steps a conflict mediator should follow:

1. Bring both parties together
2. Lay out the ground rules
3. Find the root cause of the conflict
4. Actively listen as each side has their say
5. Establish a desired outcome
6. Get participants to suggest potential solutions
7. Agree on a resolution and what must be done to make it happen.

It's important to be aware of any relevant legislation that may shape your policies and procedures – and dictate how complaints are handled – particularly if a conflict involves harassment, violence or discrimination.

IOSH's competency framework is a good way to make sure your people are developing the skills they need. Core competency 8 (leadership and management) specifically addresses conflict management, while more can be found throughout the framework – for example, 'communicating effectively', 'providing constructive feedback' and 'active listening'. Relevant training is widely available.

### Don't ignore conflict

Dodging the issue is a tactic that we've all probably seen in practice. In fact, 'Avoiding' is one of the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument's five conflict-handling modes (see *How do you handle conflict?* overleaf) – and while there might sometimes be a legitimate reason to postpone a discussion, indefinite delay will often have a negative effect.

'Most people still try to sweep conflict under the carpet,' says Esther. 'Managers >

don't always have the skills to nip things in the bud, and employees don't feel it's their place to address conflict directly themselves. It becomes the elephant in the room.'

Simon notes that businesses are often 'reactive rather than proactive' when it comes to addressing conflict – but he and others emphasise the benefits of giving a team the tools and support to diffuse potential conflict before it grows.

Esther says that conflict handled well is good for teams: 'It's a form of positive disruption. It often leads to improvements, higher performance and innovation. Don't be afraid of conflict. Be afraid of conflict that's ignored or handled badly.'

US-based conflict resolution expert Troy Stearns agrees, and says that conflict is simply a different point of view that 'makes us all human'. He says: 'My goal is to change people's conception of the term "conflict" and make it a positive that can lead to engagement.'

'If a conflict is creating verbal abuse, emotional abuse or physical abuse, though, it is imperative to get administrative help as soon as possible because the conflict has become too caustic to resolve without assistance.'

**Record and respond**

Simon says one of the most powerful approaches to tackle workplace conflict is effective reporting. 'If we're not recording the incidences of conflict, then we are unable to recognise the type and extent of the issues and consider factors that may be influencing those issues.'

He has worked with organisations without a good reporting system, and by introducing one, he says, 'we were able to gather data to give us a better understanding of what their teams were experiencing. From this, we could look at



individual cases or commonalities, and devise strategies accordingly.'

An escalating situation should involve HR – but sometimes it's hard to detach the issue from related safety concerns. Eldeen says: 'As safety professionals, that's where we sometimes are fuzzy-grey with HR, because we're in the field, or we're using our skills, and the conflict might be around a safety issue, or something that could lead to a safety issue.' This can lead to increased emotional investment in a dispute, Eldeen says, and 'can contribute to a psychologically unhealthy work environment'.

**Nurturing positivity**

Esther says: 'I can't think of anyone who wouldn't benefit from conflict resolution training. Whether you're a leader, manager, supervisor, team member, parent, coach, workplace counsellor, union rep or anything else, we can all benefit from having

**How do you handle conflict?**

The Thomas-Kilmann Instrument (TKI) test can assess your conflict behaviour and help identify areas where you might need to improve. The five modes it measures are:

**COMPETING**  
Assertive and uncooperative, this mode can see someone fight or defend themselves, even at another person's expense.

**COLLABORATING**  
A solution-driven approach that looks to fully satisfy the needs of both sides through exploration and learning.

**COMPROMISING**  
Both assertive and cooperative, compromising is a quick route to find an outcome that's good enough, with concessions on both sides.

**AVOIDING**  
This could mean postponing a discussion or taking a strategic sidestep while not addressing either side's concerns.

**ACCOMMODATING**  
This self-sacrificing mode sees a person neglect their own concerns in a way that may convey generosity, or perhaps subservience.

better conversations and building stronger, more authentic relationships.'

Keystone's conflict resolution sessions, she explains, offer a safe space to practise new skills. 'Participants learn how to hold courageous conversations, use the empathy model to provide a framework for those conversations, explore how to listen, learn how to give feedback and try to reach a positive conclusion. We also do plenty of skills practice, often with actors,' Esther says.

'Very few people enjoy the stress of conflict situations or the effects they have. It always comes down to having the courage to have a constructive dialogue. And that doesn't come naturally to most of us – it's a skill that needs developing.'

From nurturing a positive culture to making training a priority, there's a lot we can do to keep honing how we handle issues – for our colleagues, our businesses and our safety. ●

For references, see [ioshmagazine.com/workplace-conflict](http://ioshmagazine.com/workplace-conflict)