



Conflict in the workplace

The known knowns of workplace hostility

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Key learning points

1. Unresolved conflict destroys employee engagement
2. Culture and leadership are vital to resolving conflict
3. Peer pressure can have a strong contributory effect on conflict
4. Stronger characters can exert a positive influence on the situation

“There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are

known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.” What I think Donald

Rumsfeld, the former US Defense Secretary, was getting at as he offered this memorable ‘clarification’ to reporters on one occasion during the Iraq War was that we don't have all the

answers in any given situation. Life is full of uncertainties and imponderables. So too, is the world of work and there is plenty we do not fully appreciate, particularly when it relates to human nature and behavior. Still, there are lots of 'known knowns' in organisational life.

One of them is that unresolved conflict destroys employee engagement. This is something we definitely know and the arguments in support of that proposition are rock solid. People like to work in positive, uplifting environments and when they find that, they tend to give more in return; or at least the majority will, and in the world of work you can only ever hope to legislate for the majority. Employee productivity and motivation are always significantly higher in an environment where levels of conflict are low, than when they are not. None of this is groundbreaking stuff, of course; the evidence has been heard and the judgment came in a long time ago. So overwhelming, in fact, is the proof confirming the benefits derived from minimising conflict at work that you would be forgiven for thinking conflict resolution would be at the top of the agenda for most managers.

Unfortunately, reality tells us otherwise. Everyone has at least one story to tell about a conflict situation at work which was left to fester and ultimately led to severe but avoidable problems. Apart from this wealth of anecdotal evidence, there is also plenty of respected international research showing that mismanaged conflict is having a negative influence on the levels of engagement seen in many businesses.

Conflict is a normal human state, so the surprise is not that it exists in the workplace, but rather how often it is so badly handled. It is helpful to make an important distinction here. Constructive conflict, leading to new ideas and better solutions, should be encouraged, but be well managed so that employees feel they can speak their minds or contribute in an appropriate manner. Destructive conflict, on the other hand, which adds no value, should be dealt with promptly; a failure to do so impacts on engagement levels, as most people hate to work in a poisoned atmosphere. Yet, as obvious as this may sound, I have seen many incidents over the years where conflict was allowed to tear the heart out of a business and, in one telling case, some specific lessons remained with me.

I once consulted for a large company in the aviation sector where the scale of the conflict had spiralled out of control; four disputes, official and otherwise, within two years were clear evidence there were serious underlying problems. Apart from those periodic blow-outs, day-to-day life was a constant struggle for everyone involved. On face value, the simple answer might have been to blame the difficulties on intransigent employees or, more specifically, their union representatives. In fact, this was precisely what the management team did, which only served to make matters worse. However, the reality was the managers were equally, if not more, to blame than the employees for the problems.

Sure, each and every one of those disputes had been resolved, but when everyone got back to work both parties

sought to create a situation where they could recoup the 'losses' suffered during the negotiations, be that tangible or emotional deficits. In the case of the managers, this meant turning the screw on employees at every available opportunity, which only served to taint the atmosphere further. For the employees, this simply meant making life as difficult as possible for their bosses, or for the more militant workers, sabotaging expensive equipment as a way of venting anger. So, all the conflict resolution negotiations achieved was to patch over the real problems deep within the business; they simply represented milestones on a downward trajectory. In attempting to address the problems, all concerned were in fact way off the mark in terms of getting to the heart of the real issues facing the business.

In trying to help the company move past these seemingly intractable difficulties, I learned a lot about just how intertwined the levels of conflict and engagement are; never before or since have I seen such a high proportion of employees completely disengaged from the company they worked for. Although many factors contributed to the troubles of this particular enterprise – the usual list of suspects such as aggressive behaviours, poor communication, broken promises and so on – a number of basic, but often overlooked, factors impacting on the conflict-engagement dynamic stuck in my mind from this experience:

- *Culture* – Serious and prolonged conflict, like in this aviation company, rarely arises overnight; it



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is usually the direct result of some form of cultural meltdown. Often, when the conflict bursts into the open, a lot of time is spent focusing on what everyone claims are the 'issues', when in reality these are often only symptoms of a greater malaise. In this scenario, the underlying cause was that a severe case of the 'them and us' syndrome had built up over many years. Added to this were the macho mindsets permeating the predominantly male environment. The effect was that managers and employees were essentially working from competing sets of goals, as opposed to focusing on a shared future. What had led

to this culture developing?

- *Quality of leadership* – At the heart of the problem was a lack of leadership, both among the management team and, indeed, from the union representatives. Most of the managers in the company had worked their way up through the ranks – good in the sense they showed loyalty to the business, but extremely bad in this case because they had learned very limited, and more importantly, very aggressive management styles. They had never been exposed to alternative approaches for getting the best from people, so you could say that when the hammer didn't work, they only

knew how to reach for a bigger hammer. Similarly, shop stewards and other senior union representatives had generally worked in this, or similar businesses, so their approach to leading their members was also very blinkered because they believed that, as one union leader interestingly said to me “if you don't fight for what you want in this industry, you get walked on”.

- *Entrenched behaviour* – In essence, the company suffered because, at all levels, managers and employees had become conditioned to act and respond in fairly predictable ways to triggers from the 'other side' (this is

actually how they referred to each other). Managers refused to accept responsibility for how they had negatively contributed to the situation and union leaders were often prepared to defend the indefensible just to retain their status in the eyes of their members. "This is just how it works around here" was a phrase I heard repeatedly.

■ *Peer pressure* – Another of the striking lessons that stayed with me from this experience was just how strong an impact peer pressure can have on adult behaviour. Even though there were managers, and also employees, who did want to find better ways of working together, they were often prevented from doing so by others around them. In one telling example a fairly progressive ramp supervisor suffered what can only be described as a verbal assault from his boss, because he was "wasting time" trying to solicit ideas from his team members on a particular task. He was told "just tell them what to ****ing do". I rest my case.

■ *Absence of trust* – Clearly the combination of the above, and other, factors resulted in a complete absence of trust between managers and employees. Even when there were periods of relative calm in the business, both parties eyed each other with suspicion, wondering what they were up to. "It's too quiet around here, something's stirring," said one manager to me at the time.

Everyone liked to talk about poor communication being one of the core problems, but actually it wasn't – the real issue was that seeking open communication was pointless because neither party were really honest with each other – or when they did open up, they did so in a way that fuelled the aggression. So, even if they had communicated more, it would have made little difference because there was no trust.

Finding any sort of resolution to the root problems this company faced remained impossible until a paradigm shift took place; the disputes and general low productivity ultimately affected the bottom line. When the economy began to turn, the underperformance became very evident when compared against the competition. Finally, the general manager – the alpha bully – was replaced and someone with real leadership skills brought in.

This was the first step in a fundamental change process within the business, although it took a number of years before tangible progress was seen. Through better recruitment, training and coaching, management styles evolved over time and, even though the employees initially remained suspicious, the company persevered. Eventually they made significant strides, including an 'ideas forum' whereby employees identified a number of changes to work practices and efficiency improvements. This then led to major savings for the company.

If the problems in this business sound like a throwback to the 70s, you

would be right, except they took place in 2006. This case example demonstrates – admittedly at the extreme end of the scale – that despite all the talk about employee engagement over the past decade, some managers completely miss the point about what brings out the best in people in modern work life, and how some of them can't see the wood for the trees: high levels of conflict destroy employee engagement. And does so, every time.

Thankfully, most businesses today don't suffer from these extremes but there are lessons for all of us in this scenario, which are undoubtedly obvious, but frequently get lost in the mix. The first, and most critical, message is that real leadership effectively applied at all levels reduces conflict levels and raises employee engagement. Overall culture, too, has a direct role on engagement levels and where conflict is seen as the norm, the majority of employees will disengage. Equally, when negative behaviours – be they among managers or employees – are tolerated for long periods, people become conditioned to act and behave in a similar fashion.

Finally, the stronger characters within a business – the informal leaders – can greatly influence the way others think and behave, so it is important to make sure they are exerting a positive influence. As a take-away from this article, consider these core factors and how they apply to your business. Ask yourself, do they positively contribute to raising engagement levels? Is that a known known? ■