

# Workplace Conflict: Transforming Nightmares into Dreams

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## Introduction

For most of us, the workplace is a shared social space that involves effective teamwork and collaboration to accomplish our organization's goals. If teamwork and collaboration are to be sustainable in the long term, it necessitates building conflict resolution practices into our organizational cultures. Otherwise, the inevitability of workplace conflict will consistently disrupt collaboration and negatively impact both work productivity and staff wellbeing. The culture of an organization sets the tone for what is expected, reinforced, and rewarded within the organization<sup>1</sup>. It is the environment within which conflicts are dealt with; ignored, prevented, escalated, resolved, and managed.

In this paper, when we discuss workplace conflict, we are not talking about workplace disagreement, indecision, stress or dissatisfaction. Here, we adopt the four-point definition of conflict as articulated by Dr. Daniel Dana.<sup>2</sup> Workplace conflict is a condition between staff members: 1) whose roles are interdependent, 2) who believe the other party to be at fault, 3) where behavior is causing a business problem, and 4) who are angry or have negative feelings. We prefer the term conflict resolution over conflict management. This is because we want to emphasize that the goal is always to resolve conflicts not just to manage them. Reconciliation and resolution are always the goal. However, it takes both parties in a conflict to reconcile and occasionally one party may be unwilling. Therefore, from time to time the best we can do is conflict management.

We also take the stance that absolute conflict prevention is neither possible nor desirable. Conflict is a natural part of human interaction and a common catalyst of constructive change. As such, it is imperative that workable conflict resolution policies and practices are woven into our organizations' cultures.

## The costs of workplace conflict

Quite a bit of research has been done on the cost and prevalence of workplace conflict. Practically all of it supports the idea that conflict management competence is vital among managers. One very interesting study<sup>3</sup> involved 5,000 participants from nine countries including Brazil, Denmark, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands, UK and the USA. According to this study:

1. Only 31 percent of managers felt that they deal with workplace conflicts well.
2. 43 percent of non-managers felt that their bosses do not deal well with conflict
3. 29 percent reported dealing with workplace conflict frequently

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**Note:** This article was adapted from presentations originally delivered at the CHS Alliance HR Europe Conference, Barcelona, 9 June 2016 and the UNFPA Career Roundtable, Helsinki, 8 December 2016

<sup>1</sup> Schmitz, J. (2012) Understanding the Cultural Orientation Approach, TMC Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Dana, D (2001) Conflict Resolution, McGraw-Hill Education, NY.

<sup>3</sup> The CPP Global Human Capital Report (2008)

4. On average, staff were spending 2.1 hours per week dealing with workplace conflict, which is equivalent to 12 days per year. Germany and Ireland showed a high rate of 3.3 hours per week.
5. HR workers reported spending 1-5 hours per week dealing with conflict. Several experts suggest that less than 10% of the workplace conflicts are actually reported or made known to HR. Notably, HR can only deal with conflicts that are reported.
6. 1 in 6 respondents had recently witnessed a dispute escalate in either duration and/or intensity.

Several studies have found that managers spend 20% or more of their time dealing with conflict.<sup>4</sup> However, our own research reveals that there are very few universities in Europe that teach courses in workplace conflict resolution in business and management schools. If such courses are taught, they are typically unavailable to business, marketing, and management students. This suggests that managers are compelled to deal with conflicts without training in how to do so. The outcomes are predictably less than optimal, to put it mildly.

Let's take a look at some of the direct and indirect costs of workplace conflict. While there is no method that will allow us to make a precise determination but we can make reasonable estimates by looking at the following seven cost factors:<sup>5</sup>

- Wasted and lost time
- Reduced decision making quality
- Restructuring costs
- Damage, sabotage, and theft by disgruntled staff
- Lower productivity due to staff disengagement
- Staff retention and replacement costs
- Health costs (conflict and workload are the two biggest catalysts for stress)

### **Five reasons to integrate conflict resolution into organizational culture**

There are at least five reasons why integrating an organizational conflict resolution strategy is important.

First, such a strategy allows organizations to experience constructive changes and the reward of collaboration. Well-managed conflicts consistently produce situations where both wellbeing and collaboration are improved and sustained. We enjoy the fruits of collaboration, when we manage conflict well.

Second, conflict resolution reduces costs. While workplace conflict is inevitable, sustained damage to collaboration is not. Unmanaged conflict is the largest reducible cost in organizations today. To save money, we must manage conflict well.<sup>6</sup>

Third, conflict resolution facilitates healthier work environments for staff. Workload and conflict are the two biggest sources of workplace stress.<sup>7</sup> Productivity, creativity and wellbeing are all damaged by unmanaged conflict. To be healthier, we must manage conflict well.

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<sup>4</sup> Runde, C. (2014) Conflict Competence in the Workplace, Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

<sup>5</sup> Dana, D. (2003) Managing Differences, MTI Publications,

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Anna Maravelas (2005), How to Reduce Workplace Conflict and Stress, Career Press,

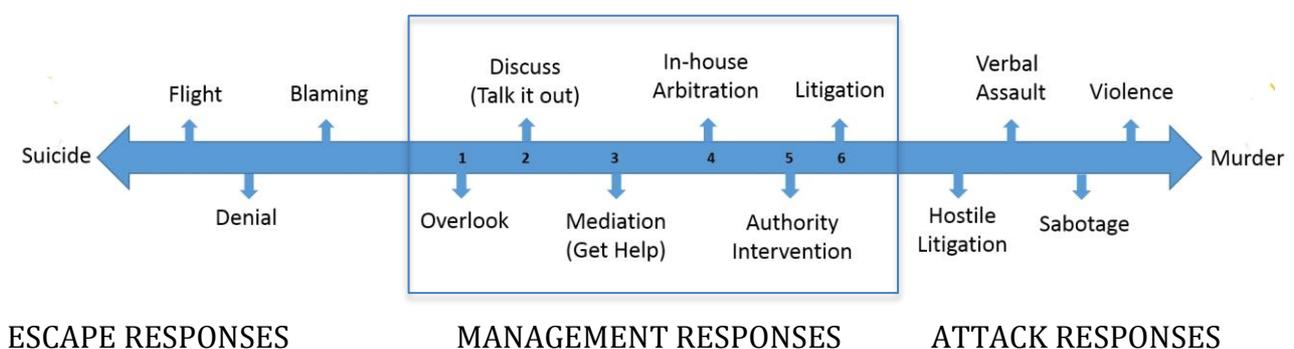
Fourth, healthy conflict resolution practices help your organization to obey the law. Duty of care regulations are increasingly including mental health. Organizations are becoming obligated to ensure mentally healthy work environments and good conflict resolution practices are good for mental and physical health. While mindfulness techniques may help staff deal with stress, a culture of conflict resolution will help eliminate sources of stress, burnout, and staff disengagement. To remain legally viable, we must manage conflicts well.

Fifth, it will distinguish your workplace. Even though managers typically spend 20% of their time dealing with conflicts, very few organizations have made conflict resolution part of their company culture. There is plenty of room for innovation and early adoption here. To be a pace setter, we should manage conflicts well.

### The workplace conflict spectrum<sup>8</sup>

Responses to conflict at work vary, all affecting the way in which resolution effectiveness can be approached. We find it helpful to map the array of possible responses on a spectrum such as the one below. Most conflict falls into one of three primary categories, namely *escape responses*, *management responses* and *attack responses*. *Escape* and *attack* responses are to be avoided and discouraged at all costs. Appropriate *management* responses need to be understood, taught, encouraged, and practiced. They don't happen unless worked on while escape and attack responses come more "naturally" as they tend to be more primal.

*Escape responses* (on the left of the scale) range from blaming to denial and even suicide. These are conflict responses that involve the urge to flee the discomfort of the conflict situation to differing degrees. When we talk about blaming, we are involved in a situation of externalizing the source of conflict to another. Denial involves a similar phenomenon of refusing to accept responsibility for one's role in a conflict situation. These are escape responses that can carry negative effects in terms of a strong unwillingness to engage in the conflict resolution process.



*Attack responses* (on the right of the scale) in contrast to the aforementioned category, include: hostile litigation, verbal assault, sabotage, violence, and even murder.<sup>9</sup> These responses are pro-active in that they are individually motivated and driven by an engine of negative behavior that must be addressed in order to prevent further damage or escalation. While escape

<sup>8</sup> This spectrum was inspired by Ken Sande's work in *The Peacemaker* (2004), Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, USA.

responses involve intervention based on redirecting escape behaviors, attack responses require a redirection of aggressive behaviors.

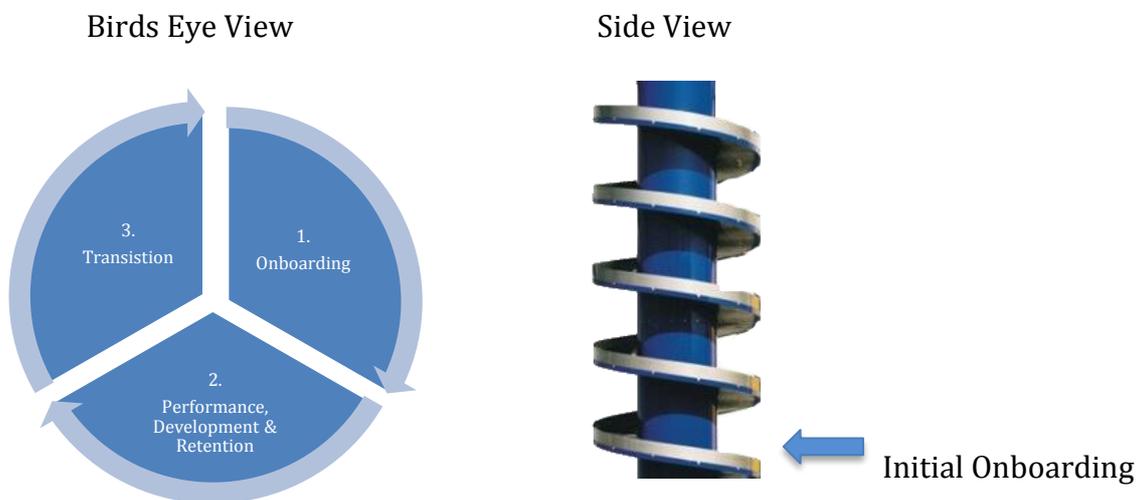
Escape and attack responses do not lead to workplace collaboration. They may “resolve” a conflict in a manner of speaking but they are unacceptable and destructive. Workplace conflicts are resolved by *Management Responses* (in the middle of the spectrum). These include: overlooking, discussion, mediation, in-house arbitration, authority intervention and litigation. They represent a progressive and sequential approach to workplace conflict that enhances collaboration and staff wellbeing. In another article we can elaborate on what they mean and how to operationalize them.

An organizational approach to conflict resolution cannot (and should not) eliminate all conflict but it will create policies and practices that help staff know how to deal constructively with workplace conflict. The key is to integrate conflict resolution practices into the culture of the organization. Think of company culture as what is expected, reinforced and rewarded by an organization. When conflict resolution is expected, reinforced, and rewarded it creates amazing and measurable outcomes for the organization, staff, and stakeholders.

### **Building conflict policy and practices into the employment cycle**

To make conflict resolution part of the company culture, it is necessary to integrate policy and practice into the employment cycle<sup>10</sup>. The employment cycle can be divided into three sequential phases: 1) onboarding, 2) performance, development and retention, and 3) transition.

#### **Two Views of the Employment Cycle**



Weaving conflict resolution into the onboarding phase of the cycle involves considering if the potential employee is conflict resolution competent. During the selection process we assess staff history of successful collaboration, ongoing unresolved conflicts, basic conflict resolution competencies, and any previous training. During orientation we make staff aware of conflict resolution policies and practices and provide initial training. During the onboarding phase, a conflict resolution culture can be reinforced through the orientation and introduction process

<sup>10</sup> Christine Williamson of Duty of Care International ([www.dutyofcareinternational.co.uk](http://www.dutyofcareinternational.co.uk)) uses the employment cycle as a way to integrate policies and practices into organizations so as to fulfil their *duty of care*.

involving organizational values, vision and goals. Furthermore, the systems, policies and practices of conflict resolution can be made clear early on in this stage in order to reinforce staff competence and trust in the organization's role in ensuring their future wellbeing. For example, every organization should have a policy that compels staff to make an appointment to discuss a workplace conflict<sup>11</sup> within five work days if approached by another staff member. Such a policy discourages 'escape responses'. Conflict resolution strategy adds to staff sense of health, safety and security in a way that is not particularly common across industries due to the lack of conflict management training.

During the first year of employment, additional conflict resolution training and awareness interventions are introduced and/or embedded into the annual review process. This could include various forms of self-awareness and personality assessments. This can be complemented with conflict resolution seminars and advanced manager mediation training later on. In terms of the second phase, management practice, performance evaluations, career development planning, reward and recognition systems and assessments all work together to strengthen the core functioning of management level competence and overall organizational self-awareness of key problem areas that may have been overlooked in the past.

Finally, when the employee transitions into a new role in the company, they are assessed and trained (if necessary) in additional conflict resolution competencies required for their new job. The more people and teams a manager leads the more conflict competent a manager should be. If they are exiting the company, then exit interviews should collect information on their perceptions of the conflict resolution climate within the organization. All of this works toward developing language, values, practice and experience in conflict resolution across all staff levels.

When conflict resolution practices are woven into all three phases of the employment cycle change happens. The workplace becomes more productive and healthy. Fewer incidents evolve into full blown conflicts. Managers and non-managers are more engaged with their work and less in need for HR or mediation specialist to intervene; thus freeing resources for other purposes while also empowering staff on all levels.

### **Questions for reflections**

How would you rate the prevailing conflict culture at your workplace? How would implementing conflict resolution strategies improve staff wellbeing and work outcomes? What are the barriers to integrating conflict resolution into your organization?

### **About the authors:**

Dr. Scott Breslin and Dr. Teo Keipi collaborate together at the Nordic School of Management ([www.nsm.se](http://www.nsm.se)) where they direct the Centre for Workplace Conflict Resolution (CWTCR). The centre exists to help organizations integrate workplace conflict resolution and staff wellbeing into their company's culture. Teo is based in Helsinki. His doctorate research at Turku University focused on social economy and conflict. Scott is based in Örebro, Sweden and is the international director of Operation Mercy ([www.mercy.se](http://www.mercy.se)). His doctorate research at the University of Edinburgh focused in occupational learning and leadership.

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<sup>11</sup> Any conflict that meets the four point definition mentioned on page 1.