

Conflict, in some form or other, is a feature of working life and as such cannot be eliminated entirely from an organisation (Saundry et al., 2016). Individual conflict may be expressed formally as disciplinary action or employee grievances but also by disagreements and clashes between colleagues and between managers and their staff. Acas aims to promote early and effective resolution of conflict to help save organisations and their employees time and money, address issues before they develop into deep-rooted problems and encourage good employee-employer relationships. To explore this issue, Acas has commissioned a number of qualitative studies looking at challenges and opportunities facing workplaces when dealing with the management of individual conflict (Saundry, 2012; Saundry and Wibberley, 2011 and Latreille and Saundry, 2015). The latest qualitative research comprised 25 focus groups and 20 individual interviews to include managers, HR practitioners, union representatives and employment lawyers from a wide cross-section of organisations (Saundry et al., 2016). To complement this and attempt to quantify some of the findings, Acas also commissioned some questions on conflict management to be added to the Business Opinion Omnibus poll carried out in March 2016ⁱ.

How common is conflict?

The Business Poll found that more than 92 per cent businesses said that conflict was rare in their organisation, five per cent that it was occasional, and only three per cent that it was common, all largeⁱⁱ companies. More than three quarters (78 per cent) of businesses said that they had experienced no conflict in the previous 12 months. In the focus groups, perceived incidence of workplace conflict varied among the participants reflecting size and sector (Saundry et al., 2016). In that study, participants in smaller enterprises claimed to have had little experience of conflict which they explained in reference to the strong personal relationships that smaller teams can create and the 'family' atmosphere of small businesses. However, managers in SMEs tended to equate 'conflict' with more formal expressions of workplace conflict and most small employers rarely experience an employee grievance or an employment tribunal application.

What are the contemporary issues in the workplace?

In the Business Poll, of the 22 per cent who said they had experienced conflict, more than half (55 per cent) said they had issues with disagreements among staff, a third (32 per cent) reported issues around attempts to manage poor performance, one-fifth (20 per cent) issues around discrimination and ten per cent issues around managing absence and attendance. This supports findings from the previous qualitative research. For example, Latreille and Saundry (2015) found the former two were the most common causes of conflict in an NHS Trust and Saundry et al (2016) found that within larger organisations, attempts to manage the performance of individual employees were the main causes of workplace conflict, especially in the public sector, where an increased focus on cost, efficiency and regulatory compliance had seen employers adopt more rigorous approaches to performance management. For many HR practitioners in that study, addressing absence and underperformance was long overdue. However, TU reps interviewed were concerned that strict application of targets and rigid interpretations of sickness absence could crossover into bullying and harassment. Managers and HR practitioners accepted that poor performance management practices could have a negative impact on employee well-being and in certain situations lead to bullying behaviours, particularly where performance issues had not been managed at an early point. The Business Poll found that 12 per cent of organisations that had experienced conflict had issues with accusations of unfair treatment against managers.

The Business Poll also found that a small percentage of those who had experienced conflict in the previous 12 months had issues with use or misuse of social media (3 per cent), and Saundry et al (2016) found that participants in their study held the view that social media was playing an increasingly important role in conflict escalation and although businesses encouraged the use of social media by staff for professional purposes, it was felt that it could undermine the ability of organisations to control and manage conflict reflecting the role of social media in blurring the lines between social and work life.

Is Managing conflict a priority?

In the Business Poll, although there was a majority view that conflict is very rare, 81 per cent agreed conflict had a negative impact on performance and 75 per cent that conflict wastes a significant amount of management time, although less than half (44 per cent) agreed that the cost of conflict is a concern supporting findings of the qualitative research. The Poll found less than two-thirds (61 per cent) of businesses agreed that managing conflict was a priority. In the focus groups, Saundry et al., (2016) also found that there was general agreement among participants that conflict had negative implications for both employees and the organisation, but that in general there was little sense that conflict management was a strategic priority and it was only seen as a problem if it escalated into a grievance, disciplinary issue or an employment tribunal application.

Who has responsibility for managing conflict?

In the Business Poll, the majority of businesses (87 per cent) said that line managers or a general manager were responsible for managing conflict (although nearly all large companies in the sample named HR as responsible). This was particularly the case for small organisations. The majority (83 per cent) of organisations agreed that line managers are encouraged to resolve conflict at the earliest possible point through informal discussions. The focus groups also found that there was a growing enthusiasm for early identification and resolution of conflict. However, early resolution was more likely to be found in workplaces where managers felt they had the support of HR and/or senior managers and conflict resolution was seen as an organisational priority and importantly where line managers had the skills and confidence to discuss difficult issues with their staff; unfortunately it would seem that these conditions were relatively rare (Saundry et al., 2016).

What are the skills and competence of managers in managing conflict?

HR practitioners, union representatives and employment lawyers in the focus groups reported that the lack of confidence and competence of line managers was a serious challenge to effective conflict management. Saundry and Wibberley (2014) also found in their thematic analysis of case studies that although responsibility for managing conflict has been devolved to line managers, many of them lack the capability to deal with difficult issues. Latreille and Saundry's (2015) study of an NHS Trust found that managers were sometimes deterred from addressing difficult issues by the potential for escalation and employee grievances.

Indeed, the qualitative research findings found that the ability to manage conflict or manage people was not a core competence for most people with managerial responsibilities and that conflict management was seen as a lower order skill and

there was an assumption from senior managers that all managers should be able to handle the challenges associated with people management as a matter of course (Saundry and Wibberley, 2014; Saundry et al., 2016). The qualitative research found that it was rarely tested within recruitment processes. In the Business Poll however, two thirds (67 per cent) agreed that frontline managers' performance in managing relationships with employees is regularly reviewed and appraised and the Poll also found that three quarters (76 per cent) agreed that the ability to manage people places an important role in recruiting and promoting managers.

So how do we explain the contradictory findings between the Business Poll and the qualitative research? First, there is a possibility that there is an over-reporting of 'agreement' to some of these questions in the Poll. The possibility of acquiescence bias - a tendency to agree with statements questions on an agree/disagree format is well-documented. Second, when participants are discussing issues in focus groups, they may be more open with peers when difficulties can be shared and answers probed in more detail. Third, in a survey, we can also expect more accurate answers when we ask about specific events or behaviours rather than attitudes or beliefs as is the case here.

Are line managers trained?

To this end, the Business Poll also asked if line managers are provided with formal training in areas associated with managing people:

- Employment law
- Using disciplinary and grievance procedures
- Dealing with bullying in the workplace
- Managing poor performance
- Having difficult conversations
- Tackling unwanted behaviours eg misuse of social media
- Mentoring and / or coaching staff

Forty eight per cent of organisations offered no training in these areas. Only half (51 per cent) of small organisations and three quarters (73 per cent) of medium organisations offered some training (all of the large organisations in the sample did so). Training was least likely to be provided in 'Having difficult conversations' and 'Tackling unwanted behaviours' for both small and medium organisations, skills in which would be needed in resolving conflict.

Conclusion

Although small organisations are most likely to devolve the management of conflict to line managers they are least likely to offer training in any of the skills that are needed to be able to deal with conflict effectively. The attitude expressed that conflict is a priority is not matched by the training offered in small organisations and to a lesser extent medium sized organisations (the sample of large organisations was too small to generalise from), contributing to a 'conflict resolution gap' (Saundry and Wibberley 2014). The focus groups found that in SMEs often working in highly competitive environments, conflict management was something for which there was little time and for many, simply not a consideration. Although line managers are seen as important to the management of conflict there is a skills and confidence gap and Saundry et al. (2016) argue that is important to build line management competences and confidence around complex people issues.

References

Latreille P. and R. Saundry (2015) 'Towards a system of conflict management? – An evaluation of the impact of workplace mediation at Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust: Acas Research Paper 02/15.

Saundry R. (2012) 'Conflict Resolution and Mediation at Bradford MDC – A Case Study': Acas Research Paper 08/12

Saundry R and G. Wibberley (2014) 'Workplace Dispute Resolution and the Management of Individual Conflict – a thematic analysis of five case studies: Acas Research Paper 06/14

Saundry R., D. Adam, I. Ashman, C. Forde, G. Wibberley and S. Wright (2016) 'Managing individual conflict in the contemporary British workplace' Acas Research paper 02/16

ⁱ Every quarter BDRC telephone interviews 500 new businesses for the Business Opinion Omnibus, covering a range of business sizes, sectors (including public sector) and regions. They speak to the main financial decision maker within the organisation; in the smaller businesses this is usually the owner or managing director, in the larger ones the financial director / controller. Because their target respondent is the financial decision maker, they do not speak to HR managers in the larger organisations. However, they ask "What is your level of involvement in the following business activities? - HR / Employee Benefits". Typically around two-thirds of respondents each wave have all or some responsibility for this area and these respondents were included in the Acas poll on conflict management. As a result, the findings are inevitably more focused towards the smaller businesses where the same person has responsibility for all or most departments. Excluding sole traders, the poll achieved a sample of 239 businesses. Although the final sample has been weighted to the business population, the actual numbers of large organisations, especially those 500+ are small and therefore the findings from the poll on large organisations are indicative and caution must be exercised when looking at comparative findings between small and medium organisations and large organisations.

ⁱⁱ In this research, small businesses are categorised as 2-49 employees, medium 50-249 and large 250+