



## Strategy & Leadership

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# The role of workplace culture in conflict management

While employee conflict is somewhat inevitable, it should never be ignored. Andy Shettle, Chief Product Officer, Selenity discusses the importance of harnessing technology and the role that culture plays in success driven environments.

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The merits of maintaining a happy and productive workforce are well documented and economists at the University of Warwick have found that happiness can lead to a 12%

([https://warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases/new\\_study\\_shows/](https://warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases/new_study_shows/))

spike in productivity, while unhappy workers are 10% less productive.

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However workplace conflicts are a natural part of the employee lifecycle and many businesses will find that conflict can stem from a range of issues such as personality clashes, miscommunication and organisational mismanagement.



It's important that businesses identify and combat negativity in the workplace efficiently and have mechanisms in place which aim to resolve conflict during the early stages. If left unaddressed these issues can lead to decreased productivity, project failure, high staff turnover and absenteeism. In fact, conflict is a huge contributor to workplace absence and UK employers can anticipate paying at least £500 ([https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/absence-management\\_2016\\_tcm18-16360.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/absence-management_2016_tcm18-16360.pdf)) per employee each year in absenteeism costs. Developing a culture of conflict resolution enables businesses to nip issues in the bud rather than letting them fester and grow. But what steps can businesses take in order to address workplace conflict and drive up employee satisfaction?

## Understanding the scope of the issue

The route to addressing workplace issues is two-fold, firstly HR departments need to ensure they have thorough processes for managing employee relations (ER). Having a clear overview of the most common ER case types such as grievance, disciplinary, or long term sick can help HR teams to spot trends and patterns of behaviour and prevent costly employment tribunals. One option is to consider a HR case management solution that provides a built-in workflow which adheres to the businesses HR policy. Not only does this ensure that the business meets the stages and steps required for each case within the allotted time frame, but also grants access to the right people within the organisation. Monitoring issues in real-time also provides businesses with a marked advantage, it gives them an increased level of visibility as well as the opportunity to provide immediate and accurate feedback on areas such as attendance and performance.

Often, the key to resolving conflict is collaboration. It's important to have a system in place which allows the central storage of information and gives HR teams the ability to easily share case documentation with those relevant to the process. Ultimately, the quicker a case can be resolved, the less costly it is for the business, the less likely the case will escalate to an employment tribunal and the more satisfied the employee will feel.

## Getting to the root of the cause

Identifying and recording patterns of behaviour is an important part of getting ahead of workplace conflict but it's also vital for businesses to address the reasons why issues are occurring. Every business has its own culture which

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defines the way employees interact with one another, how they solve problems and how they rationalise situations.



Hazel Lowndes, founder of organisation development consultancy, Ginger Dog explains: "In most businesses there is a focus on control, figures, data and metrics and these factors are typically the main drivers of success. When conflict arises, there is a tendency for businesses to put more controls in place as a way to combat these issues. However, the reality is that business leaders and managers should be doing the complete opposite and freeing up control and empowering their employees to look after their own workloads, giving them a sense of ownership and responsibility."

Further to this point Hazel highlights that: "It's not the responsibility of policies and procedures alone to transform a culture. Obviously, they are an essential part but it's key that each individual member of the senior team really understands what conflict is, how they're participating or colluding in it and what belief sets they hold. Usually control, dominance and power are actually driving an atmosphere of bullying that is then replicated across the organisation."

With this in mind, businesses who find themselves regularly dealing with conflict need to go about harnessing a strategy and culture of conflict resolutions. This could take many forms, for instance line manager training, communication workshops and listening techniques. The culture of an organisation needs to promote honesty, discussion and fairness. Ultimately, there is no running away from conflict, it's part of our working lives. Business leaders should look to incorporate fairness into every facet of the organisation, from HR strategies, processes, policies and technology. By bringing together culture and processes, businesses will find that conflict is not always a bad thing but ignoring it always is.

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