

WORKPLACE CONFLICT AND HOW BUSINESSES CAN **HARNESS IT TO THRIVE**



Maximizing People
Performance



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WORKPLACE CONFLICT AND HOW BUSINESSES CAN HARNESS IT TO THRIVE

FOREWORD

by Jeff Hayes, CEO, CPP, Inc.

In our culture, we reflexively tend to think of the term “conflict” in the negative. When we discuss conflict in the business world, we speak of it (often unwittingly) as a diminishing force on productivity, an ill that only compounds the difficulties of a job, and an element that needs expunging if companies are to achieve their goals. Normally seen as the byproduct of a “squeaky wheel” rather than a natural derivative of business itself, conflict is a force that causes short-term anxieties, and many view “fixing” ongoing conflict as synonymous with “eliminating” it.

CPP, Inc. commissioned this research in partnership with OPP, Ltd. in Europe and Fellipelli in Brazil, to shed light on the nature of workplace conflict – defined for the purposes of this study as any workplace disagreement that disrupts the flow of work. Studying workers in nine countries, our goal was to examine how different cultures view conflict; the ways they react to it, its short- and long-term impact on individual and company performance; and what (if any) correlations can be drawn between reactions and results both positive and negative.

The study confirmed our long-held assertion that the aforementioned perceptions of conflict can be too dogmatic and that understanding conflict requires a more nuanced approach. Indeed, ineffectively managed conflict is costing businesses millions of dollars per year. Yet conflict has a bounty of positive potential, which if harnessed correctly, can stimulate progress in ways harmony often cannot. Ultimately, we found it would be prudent for members of the workforce to rethink conflict’s role in the workplace and the many assumptions made pertaining to it.



First and foremost, workers at all levels must learn to accept conflict as an inevitable part of their work environment – the study found that an overwhelming majority (85%) of employees at all levels experience conflict to some degree. Furthermore, we found that U.S. employees spend 2.8 hours per week dealing with conflict, equating to approximately \$359 billion in paid hours in 2008.¹ The question for management, therefore, is not whether it can be avoided or mitigated; the real concern is how conflict is dealt with. If managed improperly, businesses' productivity, operational effectiveness, and morale take a major hit, as evidenced in our finding that 27 percent of employees have witnessed conflict morph into a personal attack, while 25 percent say that the avoidance of conflict resulted in sickness or absence from work.

On the other hand, when channeled through the right tools and expertise, conflict can lead to positive outcomes, such as a better understanding of others, improved solutions to problems or challenges, and major innovation. Roughly three quarters of workers reported positive outcomes that resulted from conflict – results that in all likelihood would not have been produced if conflict was not initiated.

For more than five decades, CPP has consulted with companies of all sizes and in all industries. Our experience concurs with the results of this study, which show that the most common denominator to successful conflict resolution is formal training. Countries like the US and Brazil, who report the highest levels of conflict management training, also observe the highest amount of positive outcomes from conflict. Conversely, countries that report the lowest levels of training report the lowest amount of positive outcomes. We have found, furthermore, that training is most effective when it includes the use of psychometric instruments and an increased understanding of personality – the number one cause of workplace conflict.

Despite this, however, our most striking – and alarming – finding was that the majority of employees have never received conflict management training. Furthermore, our concern is magnified by the discovery that stress and workload – two factors certain to increase in a dynamic economy – are the second and third most common causes of conflict. Companies, therefore, that choose to ignore conflict management are risking exposure to a myriad of negative consequences which may dramatically diminish bottom-line performance. On the other hand, organizations that implement effective strategies for dealing with conflict will position themselves for tremendous gains in the years to come.

¹ Based on average hourly earnings of \$17.95, seasonally adjusted, non-farm workers. Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2008.

THE RESEARCH

This research project was carried out in May 2008 and analyzed workers' attitudes about conflict. It questioned 5,000 full-time employees in nine countries around Europe and the Americas: Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. CPP commissioned this research in partnership with OPP¹ in Europe and Fellipelli² in Brazil.

¹ OPP, Ltd. One of Europe's leading business psychology firms.

² Fellipelli. One of South America's leading business psychology firms.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our study found that the majority of employees (85%) have to deal with conflict to some degree and 29% do so "always" or "frequently." In Germany this latter figure jumps to 56%, while employees in Ireland (37%) and the US (36%) also spend a significant amount of time managing disputes.

The level at which most conflict is observed is between entry-level/front-line roles (cited by 34% of respondents), but conflict also exists at the most senior levels: one in eight employees (12%) say that disagreements among their senior team are frequent or continual.

The primary causes of workplace conflict are seen as personality clashes and warring egos (49%), followed by stress (34%) and heavy workloads (33%). Culture also plays a part in the perception of causes: as Brazilian workers are more likely to see a clash of values as a major cause of conflict (24%). In France, 36% of employees saw a lack of honesty as a key factor, compared with a global average of 26%.

Unsurprisingly, poorly managed conflicts have a cost attached to them: the average employee spends 2.1 hours a week dealing with conflict. For the US alone, that translates to 385 million working days spent every year as a result of conflict in the workplace. One in six (16%) say a recent dispute escalated in duration and/or intensity, only 11% of those surveyed have never experienced a disagreement that escalated.

Various negative outcomes arise from conflicts. 27% of employees have seen conflict lead to personal attacks, and 25% have seen it result in sickness or absence. Indeed, nearly one in ten (9%) even saw it lead to a project failure. 41% of employees think older people handle conflict most effectively, so life experience evidently helps people become more effective. The skill of leaders in this regard is the key determinant, however. Seven out of ten employees (70%) see managing conflict as a "very" or "critically" important leadership skill, while 54% of employees think managers could handle disputes better by addressing underlying tensions before things go wrong.

However, there is an evident discrepancy between how well managers think they handle conflict and how well they actually do: a third of managers (31%) think they handle disagreements well, but only 22% of non-managers agree. Furthermore, nearly half of non-managers (43%) think their bosses don't deal with conflict as well as they should, compared to only 23% of managers who share this view.

Training is the biggest driver for high-quality outcomes from conflict. Less than half (44%) of all those questioned have received training in how to manage workplace conflict. This figure rises to 57% in the US and 60% in Brazil. Moreover, 72% of Belgian workers and 73% of those in France have had none.

Where training does exist, it adds value: over 95% of people receiving training as part of leadership development or on formal external courses say that it helped them in some way. A quarter (27%) say it made them more comfortable and confident in managing disputes and 58% of those who have been trained say they now look for win-win outcomes from conflict.

85% of people change the way they approach conflict over the course of their working lives; they become more proactive and take it less personally as a result of experience.

Among all employees, 76% have seen conflict lead to a positive outcome, such as better understanding of others (41%) or a better solution to a workplace problem (29%). This figure rises to 81% and 84% in the US and Brazil, respectively – the countries where training is most common. Belgium and France, where employees experience the least training, also have the lowest incidence of positive outcomes. This shows a clear link between training in conflict management and conflict's impact as a catalyst for positive change.

Our study demonstrates that destructive conflict is not something organizations anywhere should accept as an inevitable feature of working life. If organizations invest in building the awareness of self and others on which better relationships depend, they will see the energy created by interpersonal friction generate sparks of creativity, rather than consuming flames. HR, leaders, and employees must all accept their responsibility for becoming competent conflict managers.

THE COST OF CONFLICT

COSTS TO THE ORGANIZATION

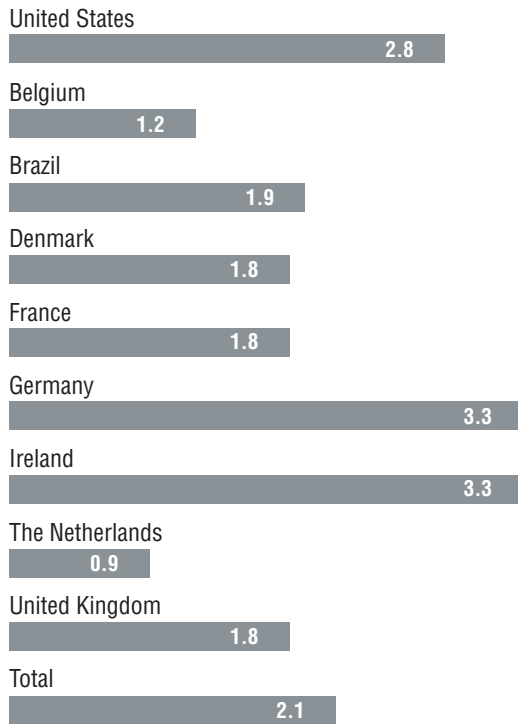
Time is Money. There are a variety of direct costs to the organization associated with poorly managed conflict, including, in the worst cases, the loss of customers and good employees. One that is visible to everyone is the time taken to successfully resolve issues. Time that would be better spent on accomplishing work and achieving goals is instead used to manage disagreements and smooth ruffled feathers, although where the outcome is wholly positive this might be seen as an investment.

Our survey found that, on average, each employee spends 2.1 hours every week – approximately *one day a month* – dealing with conflict in some way (being involved in a disagreement, managing a conflict between co-workers, etc).

For the US alone, that translates to 385 million working days spent every year as a result of conflict in the workplace. In Germany and Ireland, where the average time spent managing conflict rises to 3.3 hours per week, that figure is an even higher proportion of available working time.

In some organizations, the situation is worse still: one in ten respondents say they spend six hours a week or more dealing with conflict. It is also a major drain on the resources of HR departments: half of the HR workers questioned (51%) spend between one and five hours a week managing disagreements.

Average number of hours per week spent on dealing with workplace conflict, by country



Prolonging the agony. It is not unusual for conflicts to escalate, rather than being swiftly resolved. Nine out of ten employees (89%) have experienced a workplace conflict that escalated. Almost one in three (29%) said that a recent workplace conflict took a few days to properly dispel, but as many as one in six (16%) report that a recent conflict remains unresolved, having lasted longer than expected and/or becoming increasingly intense. It's difficult to say whether this is because the issues underlying these situations are genuinely complex, but certainly the likelihood of speedy recovery without some form of scar tissue diminishes as conflicts prolong.

The research also found that women are more likely to have been involved in a conflict that escalated (19% versus 14%). The sectors in which disagreements are most likely to become inflamed are marketing and the charity/not-for-profit sector (30% and 23% respectively).

Only one in ten employees (11%) has never experienced a conflict that grew into something bigger, which suggests that conflict management techniques are not well embedded into organizations. Of course, where escalation occurs, more management time is required to restore calm and refocus the team on its original purpose.

COSTS TO THE EMPLOYEE

Individual impact. When conflicts are not addressed effectively, emotions can run high and individuals suffer. The impact of this is more difficult to calculate but no less serious, particularly on staff engagement levels. Over a quarter of employees (27%) have been involved in a workplace disagreement that led to personal insults or attacks, while a similar percentage (25%) have seen conflict lead to sickness or absence.

What negative outcomes of workplace conflict have you witnessed?



This latter issue is clearly a major problem in the not-for-profit sector, where almost half (48%) have been involved in a conflict that led to sickness and/or absenteeism.

Short-term problems are not the only outcomes of a poorly managed conflict: one in five employees (18%) say that people have left the organization because of conflict, 16% say that people were fired and one in ten (9%) even attribute a project failure to disagreements between those involved. It's likely that not all departures are unwanted, but the disruption generated by the conflict that catalyzed them often leaves scars, suggesting that swift and targeted conflict management is key.

The figure for those seeing project failure rises to almost one in five (19%) employees in Germany, which also ranks highest among the countries surveyed for negative outcomes such as insults and sickness. Adverse effects of conflict are much rarer in Brazil, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. In fact, almost half of Dutch employees (48%) say that they haven't experienced any notable negative outcomes from workplace conflict.

Undermining the team. Unsurprisingly, conflict reduces cooperation and a sense of "team" when it is poorly handled. Two thirds of employees (67%) have gone out of their way to avoid a colleague because of a disagreement at work, which is likely to create a distraction and de-focusing of the team, at the very least. This rises to three quarters (76%) in the US and it is more prevalent among women, generally (71%, versus 64% of men). It seems that women may be more diffident about opening up disagreements. While smaller numbers of people take more extreme measures in the face of conflict, the cost to teams and organizations of even one in ten employees failing to attend meetings (10%) or taking multiple days off (9%) to avoid conflict situations quickly becomes significant in terms of lost productivity.

A quarter (24%) of workers have stayed away from a work-related social event to avoid conflict, rising to 36% in Germany. One in seven (14%) has missed a day's work, one in ten (9%) has taken off more than a day, and one in eight (12%) even admits that conflict resulted in them leaving their job. It seems that conflict avoidance is a common but highly ineffective technique. For teams, this represents a missed opportunity; well-managed conflicts within a team can lead to greater trust and better decision-making through the quality of the resolution process.

It doesn't end there. The destructive emotions experienced by those involved in a conflict at work don't simply vanish. Over half of employees (57%) have left a conflict situation with negative feelings, most commonly de-motivation, anger and frustration. Workers in the UK are most likely to feel this way, with 65% admitting to negative emotions from con-

flict, while only 41% of Brazilians have this problem. Of course, we can't speculate about how long these emotions lasted; some people may have felt better afterwards. Regrettably, many people are deterred from resolving issues properly by the difficult emotions aroused in the moment of conflict.

Women struggle most to cope with the emotional debris of conflict. Nearly two thirds (64%) emerge from a conflict with negative emotions, as opposed to less than half (48%) of men. Women are also twice as likely as men to feel sick with nervousness or sleepless as a result of a workplace conflict.

Generating energy. However, conflict can also lead to positive emotions, when it's managed correctly. Over three quarters (76%) of employees have identified a good end result from conflict. A quarter of workers (22%) say that they feel good about conflict, particularly as it can engender confidence that the issue in question has been properly aired and dealt with. The fact that one in four has actually learned to enjoy the process reinforces the idea that tough conversations can be stimulating and refreshing!

While the 5% of respondents who see conflict as a chance to prove themselves may have something to learn about true collaboration, the similar number of respondents who see conflict as "the spice of life" seem to have discovered the energizing properties of conflict for change and creativity. This underlines the value that conflict can bring to an organization if it is handled in the right way.

How does conflict make you feel?

Demotivated – it's such a distraction

21%

Angry and frustrated

18%

Nervous – sick to my stomach

9%

Sleepless and stressed

9%

Nothing – I'm used to it

19%

Confident – the issues have been aired

12%

Excited – a chance to prove myself

5%

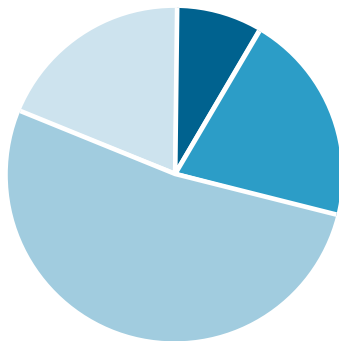
Energized – it's the spice of life

5%

THE CAUSES OF CONFLICT

A reality of working life. Given the multitude of personality types present in any workplace, and the range of internal and external pressures that exist, it is no surprise that conflict exists. However, the extent of it is surprising. Our research found that the vast majority of employees (85%) have to deal with conflict in their working lives. The question is, how much of this is productive, and how much undermines organizational effectiveness?

Do you ever have to deal with conflict in the workplace?



Yes, always	8%
Yes, frequently	21%
Yes, occasionally	56%
No, never	14%
Don't know	1%

Three in ten (29%) say they have to deal with conflict “always” or “frequently.” Only one in seven employees (14%) say that they never have to deal with disagreements.

Certain groups have to handle conflict more often than others. A third (34%) of men under the age of 50 are always or frequently dealing with disagreements, compared with a quarter (23%) of older men.

The three sectors where frequent conflict is most common are charity/not-for-profit (48%), catering (43%), and human resources (43%). Possibly the most surprising thing about these statistics is that HR, where professionals would expect to be called in during conflict situations, isn't at the top.

From the international perspective, Germany heads the conflict league. Over half of its employees (56%) face workplace disagreements always or frequently, with a quarter falling into the “always” category. The other countries to score higher than average when it comes to frequent or perpetual conflicts are Ireland with 37% and the US with 36%.

Where does conflict occur? To gauge the most common flashpoints, we asked respondents at what level of the organization they observe the most conflict. Top of the list is conflict between employees in entry-level/ front-line roles, cited by a third (34%) of respondents. These employees are likely to have spent the least time at the organization and are therefore the least likely to have learned how best to manage these situations.

The second most commonly mentioned conflict zone is between line managers and their reports, cited as number one by a quarter (24%) of employees. This underlines the key role that line managers have to play in managing conflict successfully. This is particularly the case in Ireland, where conflict between line managers and reports is actually the most observed form of workplace clash. Almost four in ten Irish employees (37%) see this as the most widespread form of conflict.

Although only 6% of employees see most conflict taking place between senior executives and leaders (which may in part be due to their disagreements taking place behind closed doors), conflict at the senior level is found in many organizations and can have a significant cultural impact.

In illustration of this, only one in five employees (21%) say that they see no conflict in the up-most reaches of their organization at all, while one in eight (12%) say that disagreements between their senior management are frequent or, worse still, continual.

The majority (56%) of employees also feel that conflicts at this level, if poorly managed, have an adverse effect on the entire organization.

The countries where employees see the most conflict among senior management are Ireland, Brazil and Germany, while the Netherlands and Denmark see the least. The marketing sector observes the most conflict between senior managers, and is also the most likely to view that conflict as having a negative effect on the organization: eight out of ten marketers (79%) believe this to be true.

At what level of your organization do you observe the most conflict?



What triggers conflict at work? When asked what they observe to be the main cause of conflict, employees believe that personality has a critical role to play. Half of all employees (49%) see personality clashes and warring egos as the primary cause of workplace conflict. Stress is second, selected by a third (34%) of workers as the prime cause of disagreements, while a similar percentage (33%) identify workload pressures as a key factor.

Women are slightly more likely than men to name stress as a main source of conflict: 38% versus 32%.

Leadership, or lack of it, is also seen as a significant element in generating conflict at work. Three in ten employees (29%) see conflict arise from poor leadership at the top of the organization, with around a quarter (23%) saying that poor line management is to blame.

Employees in Ireland, the US and the UK are most likely to see personality clashes as the prime source of workplace conflict, chosen by 66%, 62% and 59% respectively. Conversely, workers in Germany are the only ones not to rank warring egos at the top of the list. They view stress as the number one cause of disagreement, chosen by four in ten employees (41%).

The research highlights the impact of cultural factors on conflict:

- A clash of values is cited as a major causative factor by 17% of employees in the US and UK, but that figure rises to 30% among Brazilian workers
- While only one in twelve of the overall group (8%) sees disagreements arising from issues of accountability, over a third of Germans say that a lack of clarity in that area leads directly to conflict
- More than a third (36%) of employees in France say that lack of honesty and openness is a main cause of conflict, but only one in five Dutch workers share this view

What are the main causes of conflict?



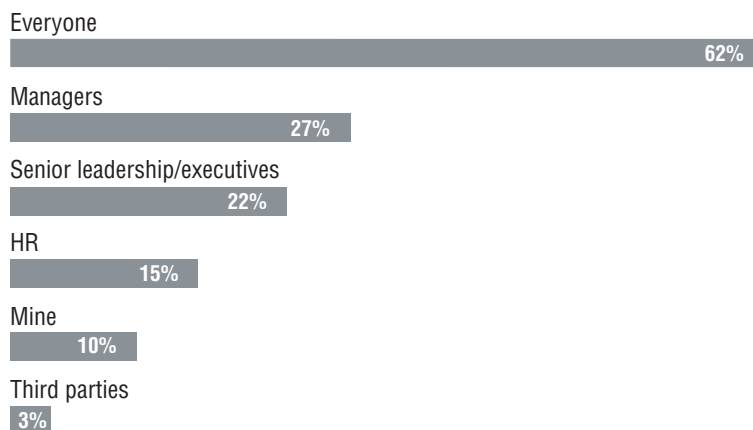
Working life differs in subtle ways between nations, and these differences have a significant effect on which factors are most likely to lead to conflict – an important insight for anyone working outside their country of origin.

THE ROLE OF THE MANAGER

Whose job is it to manage conflict? The entire organization has a role to play in managing conflict, not just HR departments and line managers. When asked who has the ultimate responsibility to better manage workplace conflict, six out of ten (62%) employees say they believe that everyone in the organization must do their part.

Others believe that line managers or senior executives are responsible, whereas only 15% feel that managing conflict is the HR department's exclusive responsibility.

Whose ultimate responsibility is it to ensure conflict in the workplace is managed more effectively?



It should come as a relief for HR departments to learn that they are seen as only one cog in the machine when it comes to handling conflict, not a “cure-all” towards which any people-related problem can be directed.

HR professionals may also be pleased to see that, where an employer has a dedicated HR function and they do get involved in resolving conflict, they score highly. We asked employees in organizations with HR teams to rate how they deal with conflict and the majority (63%) are satisfied with the work of their colleagues in human resources. This figure is as high as 71% in the US and 68% in both the UK and Brazil. However, in France and Belgium it is only just over half.

Taking the lead. We also asked workers to rate how important they believe managing conflict is as a leadership skill. Given that many of them see managers and leaders as having a key responsibility in this area, it's no surprise that seven out of ten (70%) view managing conflict as either “very” or “critically” important in the leader's armory.

So if managers are going to take the lead in managing conflict, we need to know what areas they should be focusing on. We asked employees to identify what managers could do to address workplace conflict more effectively, and top of the list with 54% of the vote is that they should identify and address underlying tensions before things go wrong.

Clearly, a good knowledge of the personalities in their team will help managers be alert to potential flashpoints and personality clashes. It will also help guide them towards the most effective methods of resolution for each individual, based on their needs and styles.

What could managers do to address conflict at work more effectively?

Identify and address underlying tensions before things go wrong

54%

More informal one-to-one conversations with people they manage

42%

Act as mediators when conflict develops

40%

Provide more clarity over what's expected

40%

Be a model of the right behaviors

39%

Provide more clarity over areas of responsibility

35%

Manage toxic individuals who create conflict more firmly

33%

Provide counseling for employees in conflict

31%

Not let their own egos get in the way

29%

Improved consultation in day-to-day management

25%

Raise the subject of possible conflict as part of business

25%

Provide improved work-life balance

25%

Nothing, it's inevitable

6%

The single most critical activity for effective conflict management is deemed by respondents to be conversation:

- More informal one-to-one conversations with direct reports (chosen by 42%)
- Acting as mediators (40%)
- Providing more clarity over expected forms of behavior (40%)

Of course, all of these depend on there being a bedrock of trust between managers and their people, built on regular and consistent communication. The importance of trust, particularly, is highlighted in the finding that a substantial proportion (39%) of employees note that managers could better deal with conflict by being a model of the right behaviors themselves, as well as not allowing their own egos to dominate (29%).

Only 6% of employees think there is nothing managers can do to address conflict more effectively. There is clearly scope for organizations to take action to ensure that disagreements with negative outcomes are not inevitable and unavoidable.

Self-delusion or unfair criticism? Most employees think that managers play a vital role in addressing conflict at work. However, there seems to be a significant discrepancy between how well managers believe they handle disagreements, and how well other employees think they do.

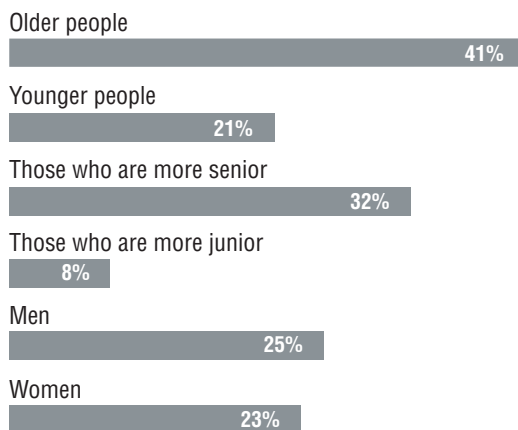
Among those respondents who are now or have been a manager, around a third (31%) believe they handle conflict well. However, less than one quarter (22%) of non-managerial employees think their managers do a great job of sorting out disagreements.

Similarly, nearly half of employees (43%) believe their managers don't handle conflict as well as they should, compared with only a quarter (23%) of managers who take this view.

Denmark and France are the countries where managers are most likely to have a poor view of their own conflict management skills, whereas the self-perception of managers in the US and UK is significantly better than the average: only 15% and 17% respectively think they're doing a below-average or poor job.

Who are the experts in our midst? When asked to identify the group at work that handled conflict most effectively, the most popular choice among employees was older people, chosen by four out of ten (41%) respondents. Those employees who are more senior (often, though not always, the same thing) come in second with just under a third (32%) of the vote. In Brazil and France, however, the proportion of employees who rank "more senior" members of the workforce as the most effective increased significantly, to 48% and 44% respectively.

Who do you perceive to handle conflict most effectively?



Perhaps predictably, it seems that most age and gender groups think that they are best at managing conflict situations. More employees in their 20s and 30s say that younger people are the most effective, while workers in their 50s and 60s are more likely to rate older people as the conflict management experts.

In addition, 28% of men say that they are likely to handle conflict most effectively, compared with 21% who rank women at the top. For women, these figures are more or less reversed.

THE VALUE OF TRAINING

Getting lost in the curriculum. We know that conflict at work is endemic. Our study reveals that its outcomes can vary widely, and that its negative impact carries substantial personal and organizational cost. It's perhaps surprising, therefore, that formal (or even informal) training in how to manage conflict is not as pervasive as it should be. Less than half of the employees questioned (44%) have received some type of training in dealing with workplace conflict.

Most commonly, training is delivered as part of leadership development, a formal course in conflict management and informal peer-to-peer coaching. Perhaps in desperation, 7% of those surveyed seek “advice from the Internet” (as distinct from e-learning) as a key source of guidance in how to manage conflict.

Conflict management training is more prevalent in the HR and charity sectors, where 69% and 63% respectively have received it. In addition, certain countries seem to be more likely than others to benefit from conflict training, particularly as a standard part of employee development: 57% of employees in the US and two thirds (68%) of Brazilian workers have received training in this area.

Of the former, one in five (22%) has done so in the context of leadership development training.

At the other extreme, three quarters (72%) of Belgian employees and a similar proportion of those in France (73%) have not had any conflict management training at all.

It's important to acknowledge that simply “throwing training at the problem” of organizational conflict is not the solution. A veneer of behaviors or tools is not as powerful (or durable) as creating and building on a better understanding of oneself and others, as a means of getting the best out of individual differences.

Training in conflict management received, by country

Country	Part of leadership development	Formal external course	None
United States	22%	18%	43%
Belgium	6%	12%	72%
Brazil	16%	18%	43%
Denmark	9%	14%	61%
France	5%	11%	73%
Germany	13%	12%	57%
Ireland	13%	10%	50%
The Netherlands	7%	10%	63%
United Kingdom	14%	12%	55%

Generating positive outcomes. This general lack of training is all the more lamentable given the demonstrable improvement in skills that it brings. Over 95% of people receiving training as part of leadership development or on formal external courses say that it helped them in some way. Specifically, where any kind of training was provided, a quarter (27%) of workers say it made them more comfortable and confident when handling a conflict situation, and we know that in facing challenges, confidence is often a predictor of success.

This rises to 36% among US employees, 32% in Germany and an impressive 64% among those employees who were trained as part of a leadership development program.

One in five (19%) say it helped them to draw out positive outcomes for both parties involved in the disagreement – arguably the best possible result - while a similar percentage (20%) say it allowed them to avoid conflict entirely.

Employees also list some more subtle outcomes from training. Fourteen percent and 10% respectively say that it taught them when to give in gracefully (in the broader context of working life you have to be able to “pick your battles”) or helped them get what they want from the situation (at certain times, one may elect to choose the result over the relationship).

Significantly, 39% of employees say that training provided no help at all. This calls into question the quality of some of the training being delivered to address this skill set: does it target appropriately the often personality-led issues and personal differences that are usually the underlying cause of conflict at work?

How did training help you to become more effective?

It made me more comfortable about and confident with handling conflict

27%

It helped me avoid conflict

20%

It helped me get more positive outcomes for both parties

19%

It helped me understand when to give in gracefully

14%

It helped me to get what I want from conflict situations

10%

The research reveals that, of those who have been trained, six out of ten (58%) employees look for the win-win outcome (the most often stated outcome in this group). Of the broader sample of all employees, nearly half (44%) try to deal with conflict by seeking a compromise (the most commonly named result for this group) and a further quarter (27%) try to avoid it entirely. This reinforces the value of training as a means of ensuring that employees get the best out of a conflict situation: while looking for a compromise or turning away from conflict will not necessarily yield worse outcomes, often those brave enough to seek a win-win scenario experience a lasting boost in the quality of their working relationships.

Conflict as a force for progress and innovation. Positive outcomes from effective conflict management demonstrate that conflict is not, per se, a bad thing and can actually benefit the organization considerably.

Three quarters (76%) of employees have seen a conflict lead to something positive. Four out of ten (41%) found that it led to a better understanding of other people, while a third (33%) experienced improved working relationships, and three out of ten (29%) even found that conflict led to a better solution to some problem or challenge. Indeed, one in ten (9%) say that conflict resulted in the birth of a major innovation or new idea at work.

If employees have had training, the incidence of positive outcomes increases significantly. To take just one example, among employees who've had formal training from an external provider, 56% have seen conflict lead to a better understanding of others, 42% said it has led to a better solution and 19% have seen disputes result in a major innovation.

What positive outcomes have you experienced from workplace conflict?



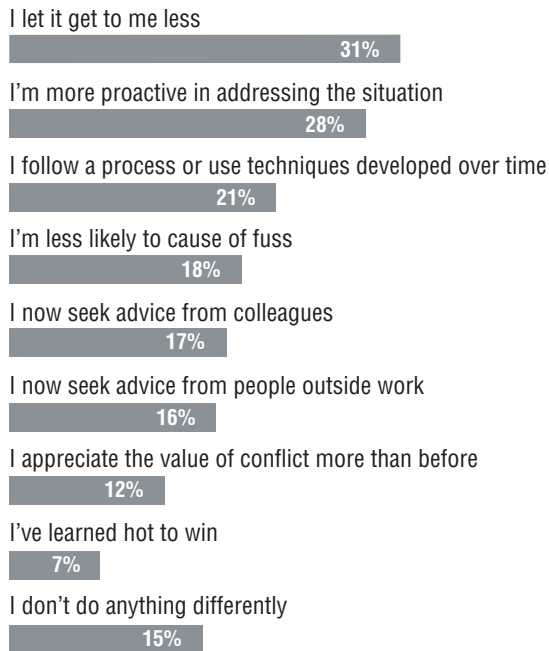
There is also a clear link between those countries where conflict training is more common and the likelihood of obtaining beneficial results. For example, US and Brazilian employees are most likely to have had formal training. In addition to the increased confidence mentioned above, employees in these countries are more likely to have experienced positive outcomes: 81% and 84% respectively.

Furthermore, the countries where workers are least likely to have seen positive outcomes from conflict, Belgium and France, are also those where training is least common.

A change of approach. Interestingly, most people change the way they approach conflict over the course of their working lives; they become more proactive and take it less personally. Nearly a third of employees (31%) find that it “gets to them” less, while almost as many say that they are now more proactive in dealing with conflict than they have been in the past. In fact, 85% of employees approach disagreements differently now compared with how they used to.

Time seems to bring both wisdom about and increased wariness of conflict at work. While 12% of employees say that they have come to appreciate the value of conflict as their career has progressed (suggesting that they have acquired the skills to generate positive outcomes), almost a quarter (18%) reflect that they are now more likely to “keep their heads down” for minimal disruption. A mercifully small 7% claim that time has taught them how to “win” in conflict situations. It appears that without a concerted focus on training, different people will develop in very different ways according to their experience and personality preferences – yielding worryingly random results.

How do you handle workplace conflict differently now than you did earlier in your career?



Gender is a factor here: women are more likely than men to seek advice from people outside the workplace (19% versus 13% of men). Men are more likely to develop greater self-sufficiency; more men than women rely on techniques for conflict management that they have personally developed over time (24% versus 18%).

Age is also a determinant of approach, as the proportion of workers who turn to their colleagues or to other people outside work for advice on conflict declines as they get older: a quarter (25%) of workers in their 20s turn to someone else for guidance, compared with only 11% of those in their 50s and a mere 6% of those in their 60s.

GETTING THE BEST OUT OF CONFLICT WITH CUSTOMERS

It is easy to think of conflict as a destructive force: most people will recall bad experiences from conflicts they've faced. This stems from the fact that the process of conflict is rarely a comfortable one: it involves dealing with someone who wants different things to you.

But the outcomes of conflict can be hugely positive. For example, making good-quality decisions means being able to take in a range of diverse information, involving diverse opinions from diverse people. Research into team performance has found that teams in which there is no diversity of opinion (where everyone sees the world in the same way) will tend to agree quickly and feel confident, but actually make worse decisions: an aspect of what psychologists call "groupthink."

This applies in all our working relationships. When we think about workplace conflict, we tend to think about relationships with the boss, or with “troublesome” peers. However, when we talk to our clients, one of the areas of conflict that they would like to get more from is their relationships with their clients.

Client relationships exhibit many of the classic characteristics of conflict: both parties want the best value from the relationship, but they are working from different information and they generally have limited communication. One might, then, assume that any conflicts will be competitive, negative experiences. In some situations this will certainly be true: if an organization has a short-term, transactional relationship with its customers, it need not worry too much about what to do when the customer is unhappy.

However, many organizations now operate in industries where it’s far more expensive and difficult to get a new customer than it is to keep an existing one. In such situations it’s worth the investment in considering how best to manage conflict situations. Competing is probably not appropriate with such clients, and ignoring the situation will ultimately mean that you lose the customer. Instead, client-facing staff needs other strategies to adopt that will enhance the relationship, reaping longer-term rewards through a greater understanding of client needs.

There is also evidence from the other side of this relationship. For clients, when there is a problem, the treatment they receive from their supplier has a significant impact in either direction. If conflict is handled badly, the relationship will certainly be soured and they may consider taking their business elsewhere. But if the conflict is handled well, the client’s belief in the company can actually increase, through greater trust that their needs are understood and that future problems can also be overcome by working through difficult issues together.

Organizations address this by considering how they train and support client-facing staff. Conflict is rarely comfortable at the time and staff will need support to deal with the impact of disagreements. The obvious sources for this are their team and their manager, although it’s important to balance empathizing with the individual with showing respect for the customer because they are a customer.

A lack of confidence and skill can be a good excuse for not addressing problems with clients, or even for failing to set their expectations properly around tricky issues such as payment or contracts. Ensuring that everyone has a chance to practice and develop their conflict management skills in a safe environment will increase their effectiveness when working with “real” clients. Training that contains a component on understanding individual differences, for example using psychometrics, provides client-facing staff with the insight that makes for lasting behavior change, rather than just a short-term cosmetic impact.

It can be tempting to think that this might just apply to call center staff handling irate calls about customer’s broadband, but many organizations are seeking to develop conflict skills in all client-facing employees, from business developers to project managers and engineers, and even partners of professional services firms.

To create good solutions it’s essential to seek a range of opinions, gaining input from those with diverse experiences or personalities, and manage the process of doing so professionally. This can be done: 76% of those in our study reported positive outcomes from conflict situations. As with many organizational challenges, conflict is not the problem; badly managed conflict is.

UNITED STATES: A STRUCTURED APPROACH

Conflict comparatively rife. Levels of workplace conflict are relatively high in the US, with 36% of employees having to deal with it always or frequently, versus 29% on average. 62% (versus 52% globally) blame personality clashes and warring egos, while 20% cite poor performance management as the cause, against 15% across the sample.

Employees in the US report various negative outcomes of workplace conflict, with proportions of people leaving and cross-departmental conflict both higher than average. In addition, a quarter (24%) admit that they have been involved in a conflict that culminated in an employee being fired, against a global average of 17%.

Training to the rescue... However, the potential for conflict in the fast-moving American workplace is recognized and dealt with in a structured way: 57% of US employees have had some form of training in conflict management. For 22% of employees it is part of leadership development programs – the highest proportion of the study choosing this route against the overall average of only 13%.

American workers are also most likely to have had a formal course in dealing with conflict: 15% have had internal training and one in five of them (19%) have been on an external course, compared to 6% and 13% as the respective global averages.

Given this investment in training, it is reassuring to note that employees in the US are among the most likely to have found training useful: only 28% say that it didn't help them, versus 39% overall.

A healthy respect for conflict. Unsurprisingly, in a country in which employees rank second in the global league for training, US respondents see positive outcomes from conflict. Over half of employees (54%, versus 42% on average) report a better understanding of others while 40% find conflict leads to better solutions to workplace problems, compared to 31% on average.

Among all those surveyed US managers are most likely to think they handle conflict “better than some” or “very well.” Nearly half (47%) believe this, and only 17% of non-managers say their bosses don't handle conflict as well as they'd like. It is encouraging to see this measure of training effectiveness, since employees in many countries are much more likely to be at odds with their managers' self-perceptions.

Consistent with this, US employees are among the most likely to view conflict handling as a “critically important” leadership skill. Four in ten (38%) believe this to be the case, versus a global average of 28%, highlighting that a more diligent approach to dealing with workplace conflict leads to beneficial outcomes for both organizations and individuals.

Training received on managing workplace conflict United States versus survey average



BELGIUM: A NATION OF DIPLOMATS?

Of all the countries in this study, Belgium has the least incidence of employees receiving training in how to manage conflict – only 28% – and of those, half (49%) said it didn't help them.

A conflict-free workplace? It seems that levels of workplace conflict are generally low in Belgium. Only one in five employees (18%) report having to handle it always or frequently, versus 29% on average, and the majority of employees spend only 1.2 hours a week dealing with workplace disagreements, as opposed to 2.1 hours a week on average.

Consistent with this, Belgium also has one of the lowest proportions of workers who see conflict management as a “critically” important leadership skill: 21% against an average of 28%.

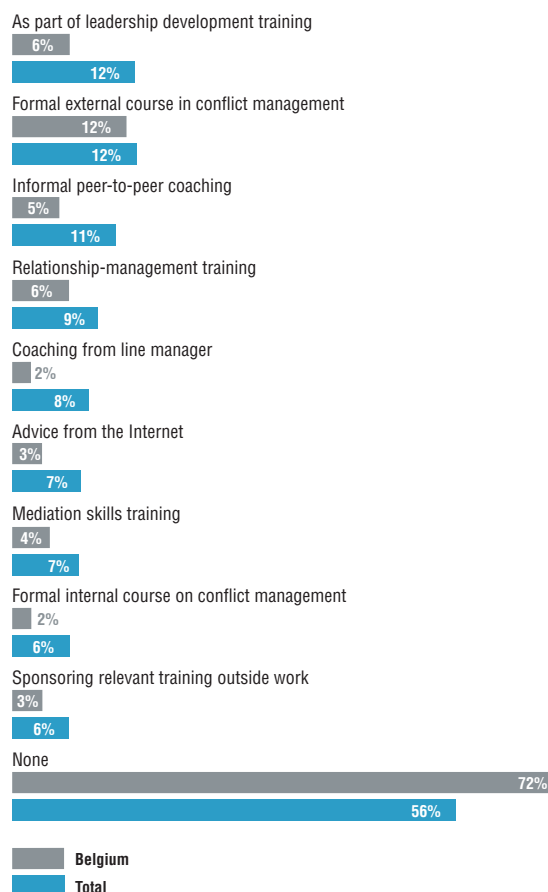
Where there is conflict, it occurs among frontline staff or between different levels in the organization. A relatively high percentage of employees (34%) seek to avoid disagreements where possible, compared to 27% on average.

However, the lack of training can present a problem when conflict does erupt. Belgium has one of the highest proportions of workers – three out of ten (29%), against 23% on average – who fail to experience any positive outcomes from conflict. Furthermore, only a quarter (25%) feel positive emotions when dealing with conflict, against 22% across the survey as a whole.

A passive approach. Belgian employees may wish that conflict were managed more effectively, but it seems that their preferred approach is to hope someone else will fix things. Nearly half (47%) want managers to act as mediators, versus 39% on average, while a similar number (45%) want their bosses to be a model of the right behavior, as opposed to 40% on average.

Once again, managers' views on how they deal with conflict differ noticeably from other employees' perceptions: only three out of ten Belgian managers (29%) believe they don't handle conflict well, but four out of ten non-managers (41%) evaluate their bosses as handling conflict poorly.

Training received on managing workplace conflict Belgium versus survey average



BRAZIL: GETTING THE BEST OUT OF CONFLICT

Maximizing on training. More Brazilian employees have received training in handling conflict (60%) than any other country in the study. Of these, almost three quarters (74%) found it helpful, compared to 61% on average.

The results of this approach are remarkable and conclusive. As many as half (50%) found their most recent conflict was resolved on the same day. Brazilian employees also top the league for positive outcomes from conflict; 84% versus 76% overall.

If that were not evidence enough of the benefits of a proactive approach to conflict at work, Brazil ranks lowest for negative outcomes of conflict for employees, such as personal insults, people being fired and sickness or absence. Four out of ten employees (42%) even say they have never been involved in a workplace conflict at all, against a global average of 37%.

Workers there are also the least likely to see negative impacts on their organizations from any clashes among the senior management: only 41%, compared to an average of 54%.

The most positive results. It seems that positive outcomes are common among employees in Brazil: nearly half (46%) find that disagreements make them feel energized, excited or confident, as opposed to only 22% of workers on average. Brazilians also show more evidence of developing skills over time: 98% say their approach to conflict now is different to the one they used to take, against 85% on average.

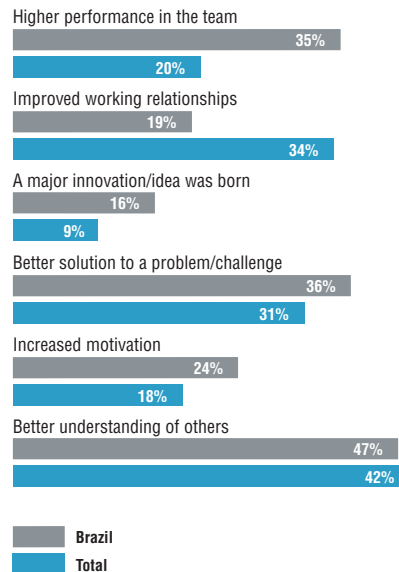
Interestingly, four out of ten Brazilians (41%) see younger people as being the best at managing conflict. They are the only nation to rank them so highly.

Where there is conflict, stress (reported by 43% of employees) and a clash of values (cited by 24%) are seen as major causes. However, over two thirds of employees in organizations with an HR department think that their HR team is doing a good job of managing the challenges of workplace conflict, as opposed to 41% on average.

There is a distinct correlation between the amount of training received and the extent to which conflict is viewed positively. One in six Brazilians (16%) has seen a major innovation born out of conflict and one third (35%) has experienced higher performance generally. There is little doubt that many workers in this country regularly see the upside of workplace clashes.

What positive outcomes have you experienced from a workplace conflict?

Brazil versus survey average



DENMARK: TAKING THE BROADER VIEW

It affects everyone. Although Danish employees face similar levels of workplace conflict to our study's global average, nearly two thirds of employees (63%) see disagreements, particularly those among senior management, as having a negative impact on the organization as a whole (versus 54% on average).

This broader perspective is reinforced by the fact Danish employees are most likely to see conflict management as “everyone’s” responsibility: seven out of ten (71%) express this view, versus 63% on average.

Curiously, the Danes are also the most likely to ascribe good conflict handling skills to genders – without being clear on which one did it most effectively. A third (35%) think men are the most skilled at managing disagreements, against 23% on average, while almost as many (31%) believe women to be the best, again versus 23% on average. (The remainder felt the issue was gender neutral.)

Entry-level issues. The Danes perceive most conflict to emanate from entry-level roles, seen by around half (47%) of workers as the main source of workplace disagreements, as opposed to 34% on average.

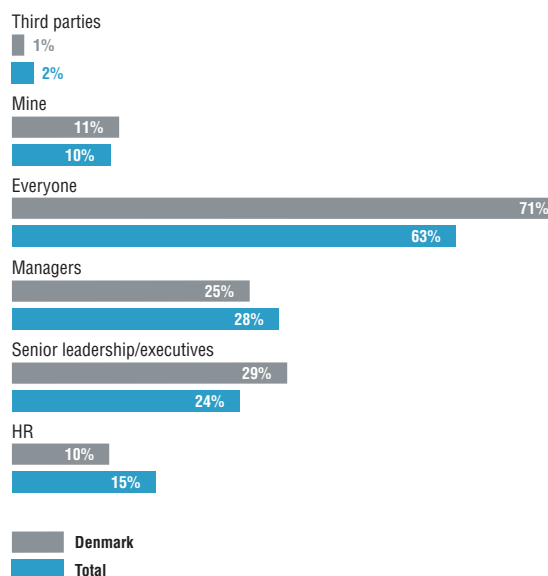
Given that so much conflict is seen at this more junior level, where attrition is often highest, it is perhaps unsurprising that Denmark has the highest percentage of employees reporting that conflicts have led to them leaving their jobs. One out of six (17%) have done this and a third (32%) say that conflict makes them feel demotivated.

Danish workers have had less conflict management training than our survey's global average (38% compared to 44% across all the countries surveyed) and half of those (48%) feel that it didn't help. But despite the lack of training, Danish workers are actually the keenest to seek win-win situations from conflict: four out of ten (40%) take this approach, versus only 20% on average.

Perhaps this collaborative approach is a product of a strongly consensual culture. Nonetheless, a third of managers (35%) feel that they don't manage conflict well enough, tying in to the absence of effective training, while half (47%) of non-managers rate their bosses' ability to deal with disagreements poorly. The Danes are the least likely to believe better conflict management comes from managing toxic individuals (just 13% report this), reinforcing the idea that the dynamic of the group – the consensus – is perceived to be more important than isolated individuals.

Whose ultimate responsibility is it to ensure conflict in the workplace is managed more effectively?

Denmark versus survey average



FRANCE: COUNSELING, NOT CONVERSATION

Although French workers face as much conflict as those in other countries, they do experience fewer negative outcomes than most. They rank among the lowest for conflicts that led to personal attacks (18% versus 28% on average), people leaving (10% versus 18%) or colleagues getting fired (9% versus 17%).

What they are most liable to do as a result of conflict is to fail to attend a meeting – one in six (16%) admit to doing this, compared with 9% across the sample as a whole. This suggests that, in this regard, the French prefer powerful gestures to conversation.

Failing to invest in training. However, there are bigger issues facing French organizations: namely, that their employees have had the least training of any country surveyed in how to manage conflict. Three quarters (73%) have had none at all (versus a global average of 56%), and the French rank the lowest among all those surveyed for attendance at formal courses. Of those few who have had training, half (50%) say it didn't help.

This lack of investment in training is reflected in employees' approaches to workplace disagreements: French workers are most likely to avoid conflict (36%) and least likely to seek win-win situations (only one in ten does so). They are also the least apt to seek advice from colleagues or use a documented process (only 14% do the latter, against an average of 23%).

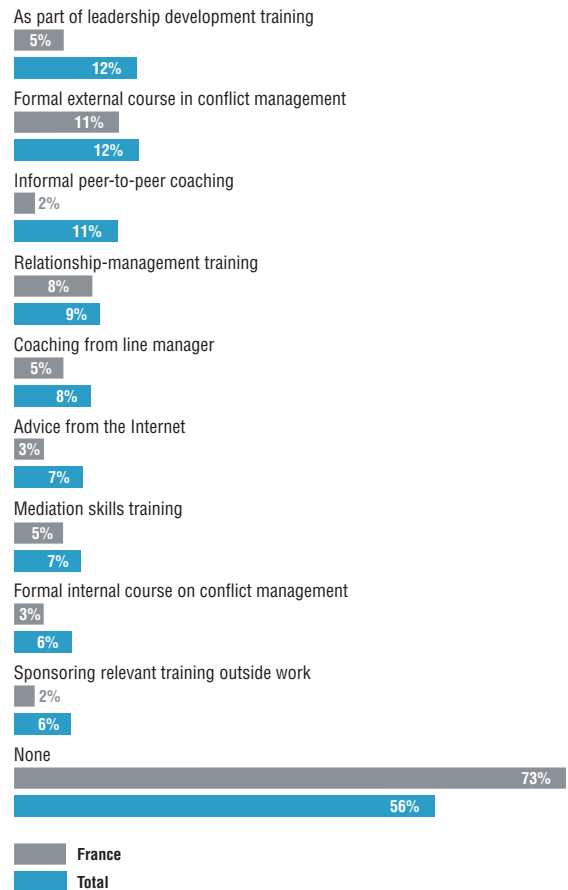
A scarcity of positive views. Unsurprisingly, given the scarcity of training, employees in France are the least likely to perceive and develop positive outcomes from workplace conflict: three out of ten (30%) see no silver lining beyond the clouds, versus an average of 23%.

French workers are most likely to see poor line management and a lack of honesty and openness as major causes of conflict (29% and 36% respectively, compared to 20% and 26%). They are also the least satisfied with what HR departments are doing to manage it.

What they want, it seems, is more counseling for employees. Nearly half (45%) say their managers should provide better counseling to help deal with disagreements, as opposed to 30% on average.

It is as if acknowledging and dealing with workplace conflict is something of a taboo in French organizations. Treatment of the negative effects, rather than systematizing prevention of the downsides, seems to offer employees the greatest hope of an improved experience.

Training received on managing workplace conflict France versus survey average



GERMANY: MANAGING UNDER STRESS

A workforce familiar with conflict. Of all the countries surveyed, German employees report the most workplace conflict. Over half of employees (56%) experience it “always” or “frequently”, more than any other country. In addition, they spend an average of 3.3 hours a week dealing with conflicts, the highest amount of time (equal to Ireland).

German employees also report the highest incidence of many negative outcomes: almost twice as many say that conflict led to bullying or project failure as anywhere else in the world, (30% versus 17%, and 19% versus 10% averages, respectively). A third (33%) say that it led to sickness or absence, compared to under a quarter (24%) elsewhere.

They are also the least likely to say that they have never been involved in a workplace disagreement, that escalated with only 22% professing this to be true.

This is not really accounted for by the only slightly lower than average proportion of employees who have had training on how to manage conflict; a total of 43% have had some kind of training, similar to the 44% average across all the countries surveyed.

Perhaps a better explanation is to be found in the fact that employees in Germany are the most likely to say it is the responsibility of managers to control conflicts: over a third (36%) feel this way against 28% on average, even though training for those managers is not particularly widespread. If individuals were to take more responsibility for resolving issues, rather than depending on the hierarchy to do so, they might experience more positive outcomes from conflict.

Germany also ranks number one for the reported incidence of middle managers squabbling with one another. One in seven employees (14%) say that they observe most conflict within the ranks of middle management, compared to only 8% on average.

Stress and social opt-out. Curiously, Germany is the only country in the study not to rank personality clashes as the most common cause of conflict. In the German workplace, according to employees there, stress is the number one factor underlying disputes. A common victim of this stress-related conflict is the company social event: four out of ten German workers (37%) have missed work-related social gatherings because of a conflict, compared to a quarter (25%) on average.

The overall picture is of a rather fraught German working environment where the negative by-products of conflict go unmanaged. Employees seem to be misplacing the onus on managers for improving working life, but they are too busy trying to resolve their own conflicts, without the right skills to be effective at either.

Have you been involved in a workplace conflict that led to any of the following outcomes?

Germany versus survey average



IRELAND: AN OPTIMISTIC VIEW

Irish employees appear to face the negative effects of conflict on a regular basis: 37% of them say that they face it “always” or “frequently” at work. One in four (26%) has experienced conflict that led to bullying. The same proportion has seen people leaving the organization after a disagreement, although, admittedly, this may not always be an undesirable outcome.

Of all those surveyed, Irish employees were most likely to observe conflict between line manager and direct report: 29% admitted as much, compared to 23% on average globally.

Taking it personally. The impact of workplace conflict on the Irish workforce is marked: one in five (18%) has missed a day’s work as a result of conflict, against 12% on average, while one in six (16%) has even left a job, double the average of 8%. Furthermore, a quarter (26%) find that clashes at work make them feel angry and frustrated, as opposed to 17% on average.

There are encouraging signs, however. Over half (51%) of Irish employees have had conflict management training, versus an average of 44% across the entire survey. Almost as many (46%, versus 30% on average) say that as they have matured they take a more proactive approach than they did earlier in their careers.

Two thirds of Irish workers (66%) think personality clashes are the major cause of conflict, the highest proportion of all those surveyed. Similarly, one in five employees (18%, against an average of 13%) see bullying and harassment as a primary factor. Conflicts between Irish employees can apparently take a personal turn.

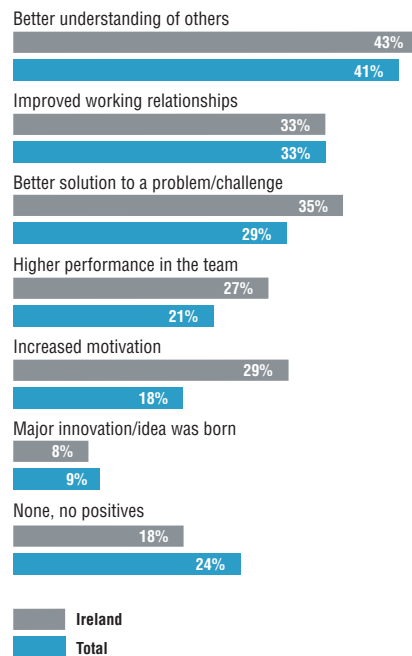
One positive outcome stands out. Over a third (35%) have found better solutions to organizational dilemmas as a result of conflict at work, compared to 29% on average.

Management misconceptions. Irish managers tend to take a positive view of their own conflict handling capabilities: around half (46%, versus 33% on average) think they do an above-average job. This view is not shared by those around them, however, as only 20% of non-managers (compared to 19% on average) agree that conflict is handled well by those above them in the organization.

When it comes to employees’ assessment of how managers could improve, Irish employees want managers to address the underlying tensions and not let their own egos get in the way. The results suggest that a little more self-awareness might make this a more likely possibility.

What positive outcomes have you experienced from a workplace conflict?

Ireland versus survey average



THE NETHERLANDS: AGREEING TO DISAGREE

Almost a non-issue. Dutch employees are the least concerned about conflict: results for the Netherlands reveal the lowest proportion (15%, against 28% on average) of employees anywhere who see conflict management as a critically important leadership skill. In fact, 6% think it's not important at all, compared to only 2% on average.

Meanwhile, one in nine (11%) say that there's nothing managers should do differently, compared to an average of 6%, because conflict is inevitable.

This easy-going attitude is reflected elsewhere in the Dutch results. Nearly half of employees here (46%, versus 26% on average) have no awareness of any disagreements that might exist among their senior management.

In addition, only a third (37%) have had some form of training in how to manage conflict, compared to 44% on average. A quarter (27%) of employees do not deal with conflict any differently now than they did earlier in their careers, compared with 15% across the entire survey.

Nowhere else in Europe are employees less likely to have learned and adapted their approach to conflict as a result of maturity and career progression.

By the same token, 27% (versus 23% on average) have seen no positive outcomes emerge from a conflict and only 4% (against an average of 9%) have seen a clash lead to a major innovation. This suggests that the Dutch tendency to compromise in conflict situations leads to generally neutral and middling outcomes for both parties.

Taking it in stride. It appears that the reason underlying this lack of interest in managing conflict is that Dutch employees experience the lowest levels of conflict in their organizations of any country in the study. One in five (21%) Dutch employees have never had to deal with conflict in the workplace at all, compared to 15% on average.

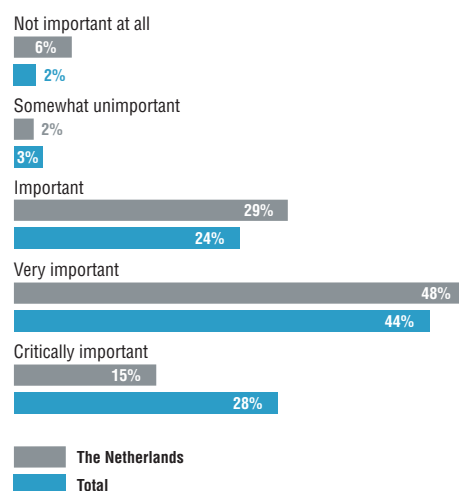
Predictably then, the average time spent handling disagreements is also the lowest reported among all respondents: less than an hour a week rather than the 2.1 hours average across the entire survey.

When conflict does arise, it appears that employees in the Netherlands are not disconcerted by it, but rather take it in stride. One in six (15%) Dutch workers say that conflict energizes them, compared with just 4% on average. The percentage of employees who feel negative emotions during a conflict is also a little lower than the global average (51% against 57%).

Among those surveyed in the Netherlands, the most common approach to conflict is to seek a compromise. Over half (52%) favor this method above all, versus 44% on average. Only 19% seek to avoid conflicts that do arise, against a global average of 27%. It seems that the Dutch view of conflict is that compromise is the way forward and that anything else just over-complicates matters.

How important is conflict handling as a management/leadership skill?

The Netherlands versus survey average



UNITED KINGDOM: KEEPING IT BOTTLED UP

Of all the countries surveyed, employees in the UK say that they experience conflict the least: 20% say they never have to deal with conflict, versus 14% on average, while 27% say there are never any conflicts among their senior management, as opposed to 21% on average.

Where there is conflict, time spent managing it and its negative impacts on the organization are in line with the rest of the world. UK employees also rank at or near the global average when it comes to the likelihood of receiving training.

Conforming to stereotype? While UK workers are among the least likely to have seen a conflict escalate (only 14% report this, against 16% on average), they are the most likely to experience negative emotions as a result of conflict. Two thirds of UK employees (65%) admit to feeling anger and frustration in the face of conflict at work, as opposed to 57% across the survey as a whole.

This suggests that UK employees are not easily aroused, but that once they are, the emotional intensity develops dramatically. It also begs the question of how effectively they confront the issues: nearly a third report that conflict has resulted in absence from work (30%, as opposed to 25% on average).

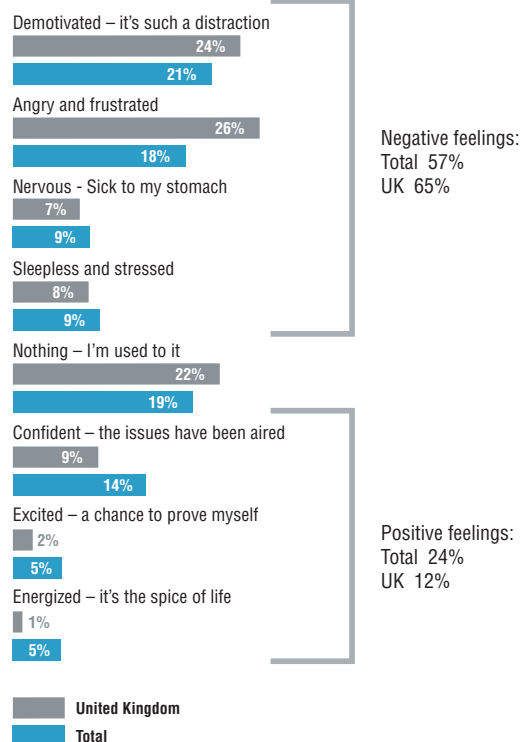
Only the Dutch are more likely to seek compromise when there is a disagreement: half (50%) of UK workers take this approach, compared with 52% of Dutch employees and 44% on average. Only the French are more likely than the British to blame poor line management when conflict occurs: 27% of UK employees and 29% of the French take this view, versus 20% on average.

Oblivious or avoidant? The research highlights commonly attributed national characteristics such as a desire to avoid disharmony and a reluctance to get involved in conflict (or even to be aware that it's happening). The high proportion of UK workers who admit to feelings of anger and frustration, and who take sick leave to deal with the effects of conflict, suggests that emotions may be suppressed rather than being aired and dealt with in the workplace.

It is also interesting to note that almost half (45%) of UK managers think they handle conflict better than most or very well – one of the highest proportions of any country in the survey. Encouragingly, the UK also features the joint lowest proportion of employees who disagree and think their managers aren't managing conflict well: a quarter (25%), as opposed to 35% on average.

What is less clear is how far this genuinely reflects good management and how far it is a matter of putting one's head in the sand because conflict is an anathema to the British psyche.

How does conflict make you feel? United Kingdom versus survey average



REALIZING POSITIVE OUTCOMES FROM CONFLICT

TOP TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS AND ORGANIZATIONS

1 Clarity beats conflict

Disagreements thrive where there is ambiguity: around the boundaries of job roles or functional teams, the relative importance of organizational priorities, or the ownership of resources. If the rationale for decisions isn't transparent, if tricky issues are ducked by leaders, or if employees are continually surprised by decisions they know to be at odds with reality, conflict breeds. Employees fight their own corner against the interests of the organization.

So, check your organization's policies and procedures for clarity and consistency. However, because these can never be static or perfect, insist that leaders learn to share their thinking and rationale with their teams at every opportunity and even, sometimes, their feelings. Organizations should be seen to uphold a consistent system of justice. If people don't get what they feel they deserve, this can be mitigated, at least, by letting them know how the decision was made and seeing that it applies to everyone else too.

Don't expect cross-functional relationships to flourish unless there's a clear steer from the top that this is expected, and provide a strong model of being a good internal partner.

2 Train, train... and train some more

Every conflict presents an opportunity for positive change. Nonetheless, it's harder to realize improvements if leaders don't have the skills to manage potentially difficult conversations in a constructive way that permits creativity to flourish. Most people don't naturally relish conflict, so skills training will dramatically improve outcomes, making it easier for them to walk confidently "through the fire" of tough conversations to the benefits on the other side.

First, start by repositioning conflict as a catalyst and a valuable feature of working life, rather than something to be suppressed or shunned. Second, provide leaders with some self-insight using a psychometric tool, and help them apply this model for understanding individual differences. Third, leaders must see that conversation is the only way "through the fire." Fourth, help them to build confidence in having conversations where agreement does not come easily and where interests are not necessarily common. And finally, instill the basic skills in giving and receiving feedback and ensure that they are used – constantly.



AVOIDANCE

At first glance, this might appear to involve simply ignoring the conflict situation. However, there are many positive aspects to avoiding the conflict. We all know that "sleeping on it" can help us calm down and think about what we really want. The trick to success is ensuring that you do not use this calmer mindset as an excuse for not addressing those issues that may worsen if left unresolved. A common challenge for new managers is learning when to use avoidance. They may have progressed well in their career by getting involved in problems and solving them. However, as a manager this may mean that they spend all their time on resolving conflicts, and it will also reduce others' opportunities for development or visibility.



ACCOMMODATION

This essentially involves understanding what the other person wants out of the situation and doing whatever you can to ensure that this happens. Instead of your own needs being met, you are choosing to invest in the relationship. This can be a great approach to take in customer-related roles or within a team where you may be hoping to develop relationships for the future. The greatest drawback of this approach is obviously that your needs are not met. While this may be acceptable to you in the short term, over time you may be taken for granted and could start to feel resentful.

3 Don't just do nothing

It's easy to think that ignoring conflict will enable you to reach your individual, team, and organizational objectives more quickly, but this is often self-deceit. Keeping plans a secret in case they're opposed; holding decisions in perpetual abeyance while more data is gathered; deferring meetings endlessly in the hope that circumstances will change are all actions likely to trigger conflict of damaging proportions. The trick is to weigh the cost of not making a decision against the benefit any shift in circumstances might bring, and be open about that choice.

Organizations in which managers try to keep a lid on differences – of opinion, personal style, and cultural preferences – are usually riven with the undercurrents of unproductive conflict. So, leaders need to learn to encourage their people to express and voice differences, and be seen to consider, if not always address, these stakeholdings in their decisions.

4 Invest energy when times are tough

There are inevitably times when all the ingredients for conflict come together and it seems that leaders can have little control over the quality of working life. When the economy is difficult, cost-cutting and competition are aggressive, and sales are underperforming, rising stress levels cause friction to arise from even the smallest issues.

In such a climate it's important to ask: are people rewarded for contributing individually, or for working together in teams, towards a common goal? Does everyone have a chance to contribute their best thinking in a constructive and positive manner at regular meetings? Is there a balance between formal and informal communication channels that promote real dialogue and discussion? Do managers intentionally build relationships with all their people?

It's a mistake to think that maintained productivity derives solely from “delivering more” at times like these, rather than from talking – and listening – more intently than usual.



COMPETITION

Sometimes, it's just more important to get what you want. This tends to be a valid strategy in two situations: either where what is under discussion is just too important to risk, for example, ethics or core values; or where your relationship with the others involved is not important to you. Taking a competitive approach may get you what you want short-term, but it will probably be at the expense of the long-term relationship. This approach can therefore be useful in short-term sales models, or when appropriately channeled to external sources such as business competitors. However, those who over-use this approach may find themselves competing with peers, reports, their manager, and their clients, all to the detriment of the business.

5 Ensure that everyone “owns” accountability for resolving conflict

It's tempting to look to the manager or formal leader as being responsible for the difficulties conflict can create when poorly handled, and so, too, for digging the team out of the mess. While it's true that managers play a critical role in ensuring good outcomes from conflict in the organization, avoiding the downward spiral of escalating conflict must be a shared responsibility. Employees who pass the buck to their bosses for sorting out any disagreement they encounter along the way never mature into truly useful organizational citizens, never mind future leaders – and managers deprive them of this chance when they shoulder that burden.

Regular meetings at which employees are coached to handle situations they find “difficult” are essential, as is delegating closely managed tasks of progressively increasing organizational complexity. You can guide someone through the minefield without having to carve out their footsteps first.



COMPROMISE

This is often seen by those who use it as the most mature approach to take. It certainly feels grown-up to divide the cake equally: allowing all the involved parties to have a slice of their needs met. This option will often be chosen by those who wish to avoid the emotional aspects of conflict management: aiming for a quick and equitable, if not completely satisfactory, resolution. This latter point is the real drawback when relying on this approach: everyone ends up equally unhappy. In some situations you may be better off letting the other person get everything they want; this will delight them and strengthen your relationship.

6 Watch out for the tipping points

The Pareto principle applies in organizational conflict as anywhere else. At front-line level, most negative conflict stems from a relatively small number of issues. Leaders need to tune in to the “crunch points” around which heated feelings gather in their teams and organizations. These may be issues that barely register on their own radar screens, but which dominate people's experience of work, such as office space, working hours, or misunderstandings (including perceived favoritism, or repeated miscommunications with another team).

Managers must see things from the perspective of their reports, who may not be in possession of the bigger picture. It's also key to note which individuals foment conflict in an unhealthy way. These are not the same as your opinion-leaders, whom it's important to keep informed and aligned. It can be difficult to tell the difference between someone who is willing to disagree with you even when you “know” you are right, and those who simply relish dissent – often behind the scenes. But managers must learn to discern by taking their egos out of decision-making and being humble enough to admit when they are wrong. “Toxic” employees' intentions and actions are counter to the interests of the organization, so manage these people out.

TOP TIPS FOR INDIVIDUALS AND LEADERS

1 Recognize that one size does not fit all

Using the same approach to conflict in every situation will not get you the best results; different circumstances warrant different approaches, and the law of diminishing returns applies. It's important to weigh the best outcome you might achieve against the time needed to get you there. Does the disagreement really merit the work involved in collaboration?

While a “win-win” approach might eventually ensure you're both happy with where you end up, some issues may be better and more quickly addressed through your offering concessions, agreeing to compromise – or simply avoiding disagreement entirely. You will almost certainly have a preferred style of handling conflict, to which you will default. The trick is to identify this, and question whether it best suits the situation as you approach each issue.

2 Seek to understand underlying emotions

We have a mental habit of assuming that we do good things because we are trying to be good and do bad things because situations left us no choice. However, when it comes to others, we tend to assume that they do good things as a consequence of the situation, and do bad things because of who they really are. So it's essential to dig beneath the surface of the position the other party is taking to get to their genuine concern and their needs.

What you see in your “opponent” may not be a true representation of how they are actually feeling inside. You can't expect to penetrate their psyche, particularly when you may already be at loggerheads, but you can offer them the chance to see beyond your own surface impression, and the chances they may reciprocate are good. Many skilled negotiators share thoughts and rationale, but most warring parties forget even to do this much.

But there's more. Explaining your feelings may be difficult, but can create the kind of breakthroughs that strengthen relationships in the long term. So take time to spell out your personal needs from the situation and the emotional impact it has on you. Use “I” statements, and don't attribute blame. Invite the other party to do the same. Worst case, you'll have raised the quality of the dialogue to a level of honesty that takes much of the heat out of the situation.

3 Don't be seduced by “competitive arousal”

This is a term coined by Deepak Malhotra of Harvard Business School, and it describes vividly a state in which the desire to “win at any cost” dominates. As Malhotra suggests: “When we see our [adversaries] not just as opponents but as enemies, we often lose sight of our real objective. A new objective emerges: to beat the other side, whatever the cost.”⁴

This kind of interpersonal rivalry can set whole teams at war with one another. It's seductive because it creates a certain energy (the term “arousal” is not used lightly), and can provide a rallying call for team togetherness. So avoid dismissing your partner-in-conflict (e.g. as “incompetent”) or undermining them to your team, and try and recall the strengths you've noted in them in the past. As Malhotra advises: “If the perception of rivalry is too much to bear, consider bringing in someone else from your team to take over the discussion. [A resolution can only be reached by someone] who can evaluate the situation more objectively, and is not overcome by rivalry-fuelled competitive arousal.”

4 Life goes on tomorrow...and reputations last for ever

Burning bridges is never, ever, a good thing. While the satisfaction of unloading all your feelings may be immense in the short term, there are unimagined ways in which your words can come back to haunt you. It is wise, in the heat of conflict, to try and give yourself time to gather self-control, even if this means venting with someone you trust, finding your own space for a while, or “sleeping on it.” Often the publicity a major conflict can generate creates a communal suspense, and it's easy to find the spotlight that an argument casts attractive. Be drawn by these at your peril.

⁴ *Negotiation Genius: How to Overcome Obstacles and Achieve Brilliant Results at the Bargaining Table and Beyond*, Deepak Malhotra and Max Bazerman, Bantam 2008

Most people work in relatively incestuous industries and even if you ultimately leave a job as a result of failure to resolve an issue, it's unlikely your reputation won't at some point follow you into the next organization. If you've ever broken something of value, remind yourself how you felt when you awoke next morning – and avoid repeating that same mistake.

5 Know what you don't like about yourself, early on in your career

We often don't like in others what causes us discomfort in ourselves, so self-awareness is a key asset for a lifetime of effective conflict management. Completing a psychometric inventory⁵ and receiving feedback from a trained professional is a great way to accomplish this, and is something you can revisit in many situations, throughout your career. Write down five traits that rattle you when see them in others, and be aware that these are trigger points for you.

Other forms of “transference” include becoming energized about an issue because a separate irritating event has occurred and you have not yet processed it properly, or because it reignites destructive feelings from the past. It's possible, also, that at the root of your frustration with an individual now is the fact that they remind you of someone else with whom you're already angry. In relationships where egos routinely clash, certain reactions can become habitual and take over even before you are aware of them.

So, take time to ask yourself why this issue is so important to you and whether the emotions you're feeling are truly appropriate to this particular, present situation. If all else fails, ask another person to mediate – preferably someone who's trained and impartial.



COLLABORATION

Win-win is the ideal solution to any problem, and this approach can therefore be seen as a great goal: allowing both you and the others involved to meet your needs. Nonetheless, there are drawbacks: like all teamwork, collaboration relies upon trust and communication. Moving to collaboration without having this base will be very difficult. A second drawback is that collaboration takes longer. Those who rely on this approach will find that even small decisions can take a long time, although in the long term working with someone that you trust becomes quicker and more efficient.

⁵ The TKI instrument – *great for identifying your preferred conflict handling style and for learning alternative techniques.*



The FIRO-B® instrument – *great for revealing discrepancies between what people want versus what they ask for.*



The MBTI® instrument – *great for appreciating individual differences and working with them.*





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