



RESEARCH REPORT

UNDERSTANDING WORKPLACE CONFLICTS



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Małgorzata (Gosia) Kowalczevska

Experienced coach and conflict resolution facilitator with nearly a decade of experience in personal and professional development. Her “conflict resolution journey” began with a realization of the pervasive stress caused by interpersonal conflicts, leading her to explore Nonviolent Communication and mediation.

Gosia is passionate about showing that differences in opinion can offer opportunities for growth, advocating for mindful approaches to understand oneself and others better.

With a rich background ranging from journalism to Agile Coaching, Gosia's diverse career has equipped her with unique insights into human dynamics and team collaboration.

She has dedicated herself to coaching individuals, and guiding teams and leaders mainly in IT sector through developmental workshops and Agile methodologies.

She holds a Master's Degree in sociology and has completed several Postgraduate Studies in Coaching, Social Psychology, and Business Strategy. She is continuously expanding her expertise, with certifications in Agile Coaching, Mediation, and various mindfulness and stress reduction techniques.



INTRODUCTION

“THE MOST INTENSE CONFLICTS, WHEN RESOLVED, LEAVE BEHIND A SENSE OF SECURITY AND PEACE THAT IS NOT EASILY DISTURBED. IT IS ONLY THESE INTENSE CONFLICTS AND THEIR HEAT THAT ARE NEEDED TO ACHIEVE VALUABLE AND LASTING RESULTS.”

– CARL G. JUNG

This report explores the dynamics of workplace conflicts through the analysis of the author's questionnaire, shared on various social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram during February and March 2024. The survey was anonymous, included a demographic information sheet and 7 closed questions:

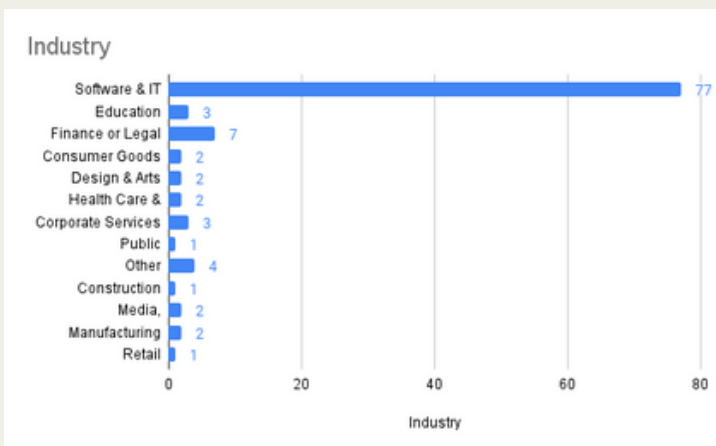
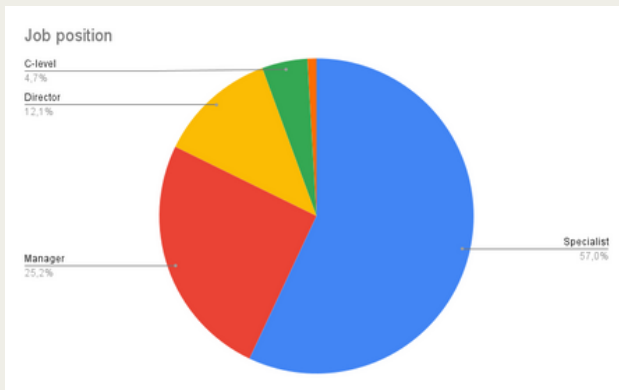
- 1. What is your most common reaction to approaching a conflict situation at work?*
- 2. How are conflicts most often resolved in your company?*
- 3. How often do you feel misunderstood?*
- 4. What emotions commonly arise for you as a result of conflict? (pick max 3 answers)*
- 5. How much time usually does it take to resolve the conflict in your company?*
- 6. What are the most common causes of conflicts in your workplace? (pick max 3 answers)*
- 7. Who, in your opinion, should be responsible for managing the conflict?*

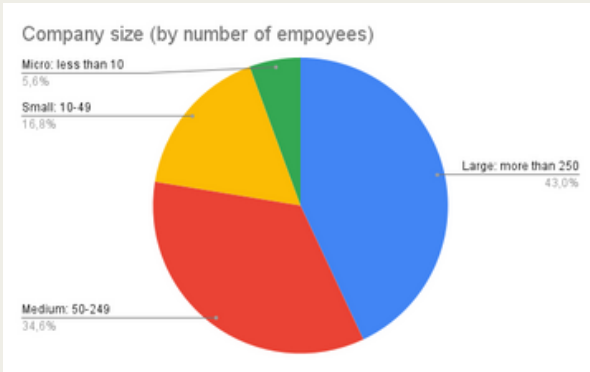
Understanding how individuals react to and resolve conflicts within professional settings is crucial to maintaining organizational effectiveness and a harmonious work environment with teams and individuals. In this report you will find key findings from the survey, in-depth analyses, and conclusions with actionable recommendations for organizations.

The survey data consists of responses from individuals regarding their experiences with conflicts at work. 107 people completed the survey. Majority (72%) of them comes from Software & IT Services Industry.

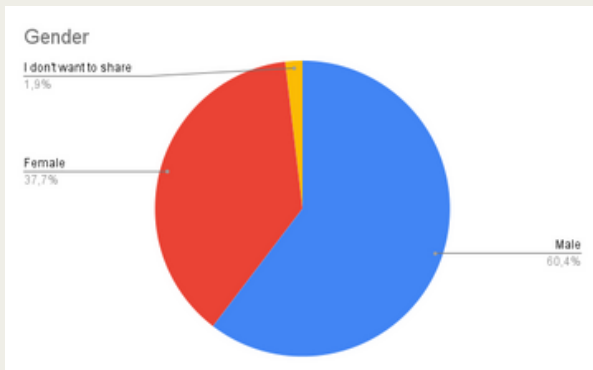
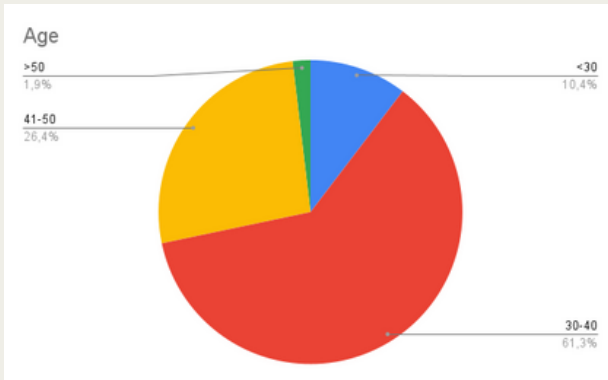
DEMOGRAPHICS

The survey respondents are diverse in terms of job positions, company sizes, age and gender. Most respondents are Specialists (57%) from large companies (43%) and the Software & IT services industry (82.4%).





Most respondents are between 30 and 40 years old, with around 60% male respondents and 38% women

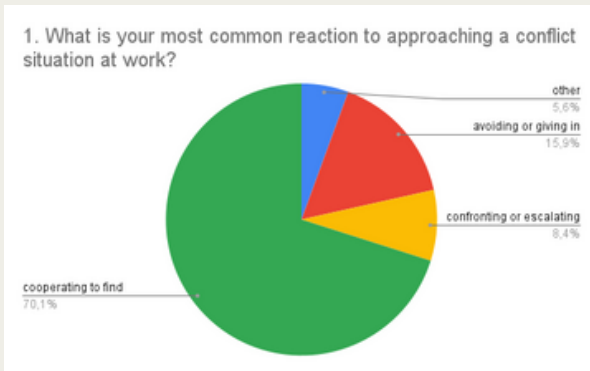




OBSERVATIONS ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION AT WORK

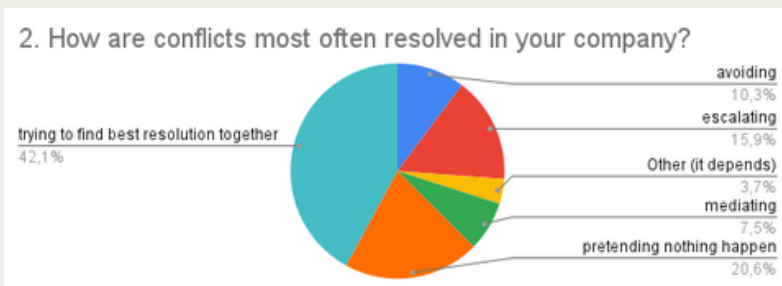
1. Common Reaction to Conflict

The majority of respondents (75 out of 107) indicated that their most common reaction to approaching a conflict situation at work is to cooperate to find a common agreement. However, people, who chose “other” option admit, that it may depends on situation and all three options are possible.



2. Conflict Resolution at work

Trying to find the best resolution together stands out as the most common method, reinforcing the value of collaboration and joint problem-solving in the workplace. Interestingly, a significant number of respondents also reported that conflicts are often avoided or dealt with by pretending nothing happened, pointing to a potential lack of effective conflict resolution strategies within these organizations.



3. Feeling Misunderstood

The most common response for the question: “How often do you feel misunderstood?” is “sometimes” (57 out of 107), indicating that misunderstandings are not constant but do occur with some regularity. This suggests a need for ongoing efforts to improve communication and understanding among team members.

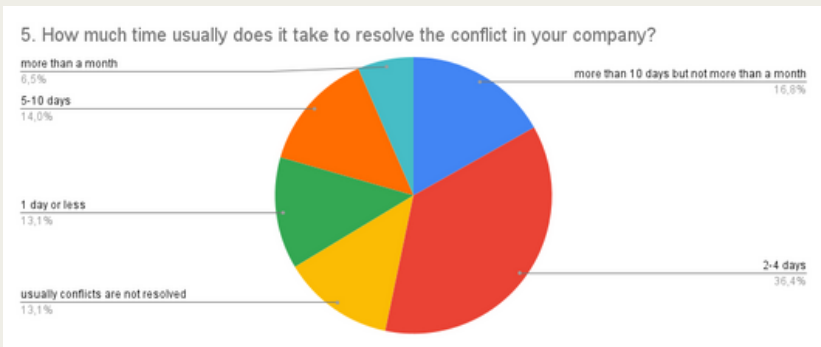
The responses “often” and “rarely” are also notable (respectively 31 and 16), reflecting a range of individual experiences with communication challenges in the workplace.

4. Emotions Arising from Conflict

Vast majority of respondents experience negative feelings. The top three emotions cited were frustration (77 respondents), bad mood (46 respondents), and anger (38 respondents). Notably, 13 participants selected this exact combination of negative emotions. Respondents could pick max 3 answers for this question. What is interesting 29 people chose combination of positive emotions (either excitement, curiosity or motivation) alongside negative feelings. Only 5 respondents declares they feel good about conflicts and feel only positive emotions. Other emotions pointed out are: distraction, guilt, fear, stress, tiredness, apathy and anxiety.

5. Time to Resolve Conflict

The most common duration for resolving conflicts is 2-4 days (39 responses), suggesting that while conflicts are addressed relatively quickly, they are not always resolved immediately.





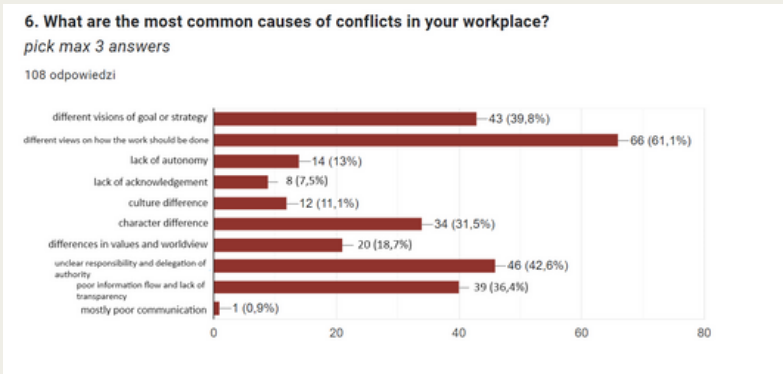
6. Causes of Conflicts

When it comes to why conflicts happen at work, respondents have pointed out a bunch of different reasons. One of the big ones is when people have different ideas about what the goals or strategies should be, or how to actually get the work done. This means that people aren't on the same page about what they expect from each other or how they see things unfolding the workplace.

Another common issue that came up is lack of accountability and clarity - people aren't sure who's supposed to be doing what, or who has the final say on things. 46 people mentioned that unclear responsibilities and confusion about who has authority can lead to arguments and conflicts.

Quite a few people also brought up that when information isn't flowing well or there's a lack of transparency, it can cause problems. So, when people feel like they're out of the loop or things are being kept from them, it can create tension.

Lastly, a lot of respondents pointed out that sometimes, conflicts happen simply because people have different personalities or character traits that might clash. We're all unique, and sometimes those differences can lead to misunderstandings or disagreements.



7. Responsibility for Managing Conflict

The majority (60 out of 107) believe that the people involved in the conflict should be responsible for managing it, emphasizing the importance of personal accountability in conflict resolution. 21 respondents pointed out team leaders as responsible and 16 think people managers should resolve conflicts that arise at work. Individual people also indicated: HR department, person who started it, the team, Scrum Master, more senior person and third person as a support in conflict resolution.



FIRST INSIGHTS

Understanding how we interact in the workplace is crucial for many of us as we seek avenues for connection. People see that cooperation is the best choice for resolving conflicts but sometimes our habits prevent us from choosing that option. That's why it's worth reminding people from time to time that anger/frustration/bad mood can be good signs that we care but our needs are not met in that moment. Therefore time and space to calm down is needed.

Now, have you ever had that "You just don't get me!" moment?

It's a common issue. Misunderstandings can really dampen the mood. The solution? Improving how we talk to each other. Imagine it like upgrading our communication skills, ensuring we're all tuned in to the same frequency. A helpful place to start is to assume good intention.

Let's not forget the emotional rollercoaster that conflicts can be.

It's like navigating a minefield of feelings. But what if we could be cool-headed ninjas, mastering our emotions with some top-notch emotional intelligence and stress-busting skills?





Fixing misunderstandings can vary – sometimes it's fast, other times it takes a while. Imagine if we had a special guide to help us navigate through solving disagreements, making the whole process much easier.

OK, we have a map, a view but... have you realized that we often see the end goal a bit differently?

It might be similar to looking at the same picture but seeing different things. Having frequent meetings or Q&A sessions to get everyone on the same page can really change the game, making sure we're all moving together towards our goal.



Plus, there's a powerful feeling in taking responsibility for the disagreements we encounter. It's about getting proactive and fixing things ourselves. Let people get to know each other better, e.g. through personality tests or discussions about cultural aspects of decision-making and giving feedback. You'll see amazing changes as people turn conflicts into opportunities for better teamwork.

We have some first thoughts and ideas but let's get back to the data once again.



FURTHER ANALYSIS AND DEPENDENCIES

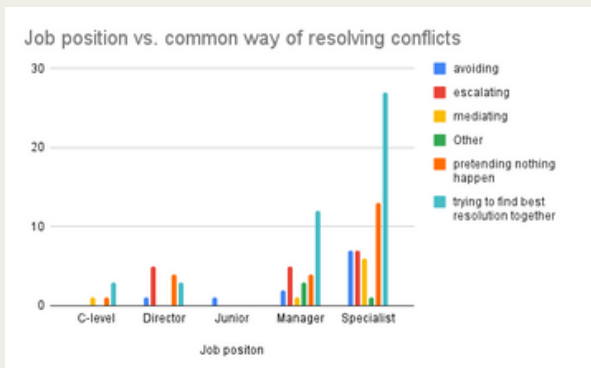
Job Position vs. Individual Common Reaction to Approaching Conflict Situation

The chart below shows the distribution of common reactions to conflict across different job positions. Interestingly, cooperation to find common agreement is the predominant reaction across all job levels, underscoring the universal preference for collaborative conflict resolution.



Job Position vs. Common way to resolve the conflict in companies

Although most respondents say they want to solve conflicts in a cooperative way, it can be seen that among specialists there is also a significant group of people declaring that they have chosen the "pretending nothing happened" solution. It is also worth noting that although the group of directors participating in the study was small, the dominant answers were "escalating" and "pretending nothing happened".

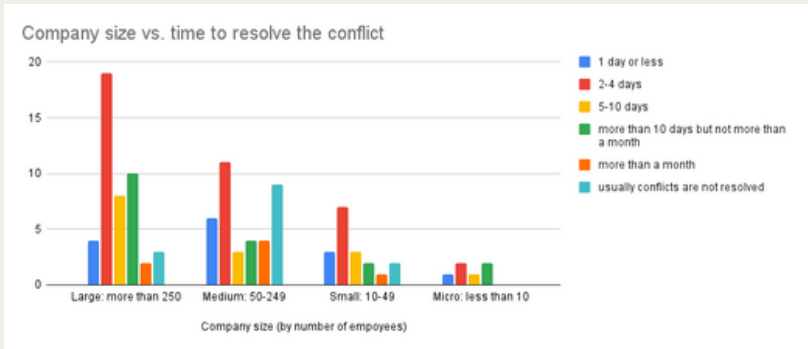




Company Size vs. Conflict Resolution Time

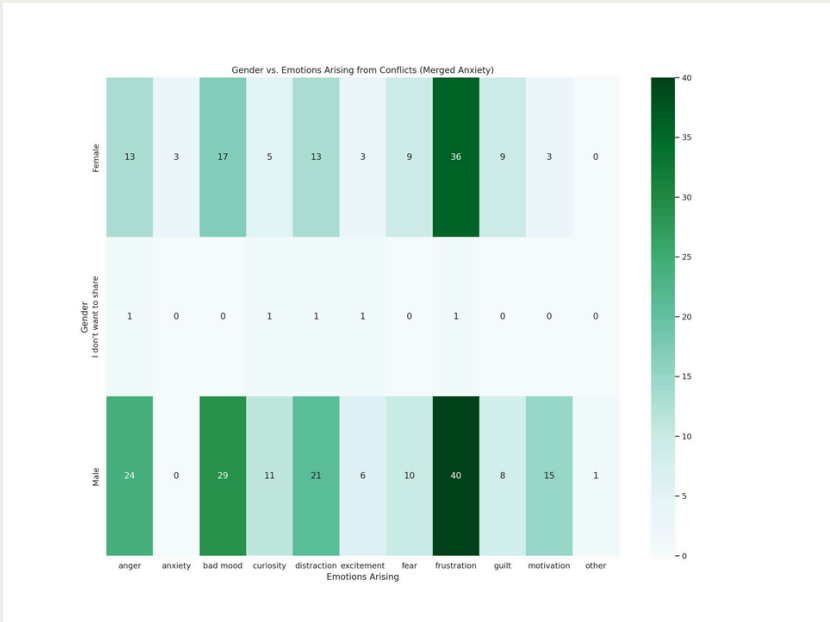
The relationship between company size and the time it takes to resolve conflicts reveals that most commonly it takes between 2 and 4 days to resolve the conflict. However in larger companies we have significant portion of answers above this time (5-10 days and more than 10 days).

What's interesting, in medium companies respondents more often pointed out the problem of not solving conflicts at all. The bigger a company is, the more difficult communication and building trust are. In small companies getting things done is easy as there are often direct interactions with everyone.



Gender vs. Emotions arising

The analysis of the heatmap showcasing the relationship between gender and emotions arising from conflicts in the workplace reveals insightful patterns about how different genders experience and express their emotions during conflicts. It's evident that frustration, anger, and a bad mood are common emotional responses shared by both male and female respondents, highlighting a shared emotional landscape in the face of workplace disputes. This universality suggests that certain aspects of conflict are perceived similarly across genders, possibly due to the inherent stress and challenges conflicts pose, irrespective of gender.





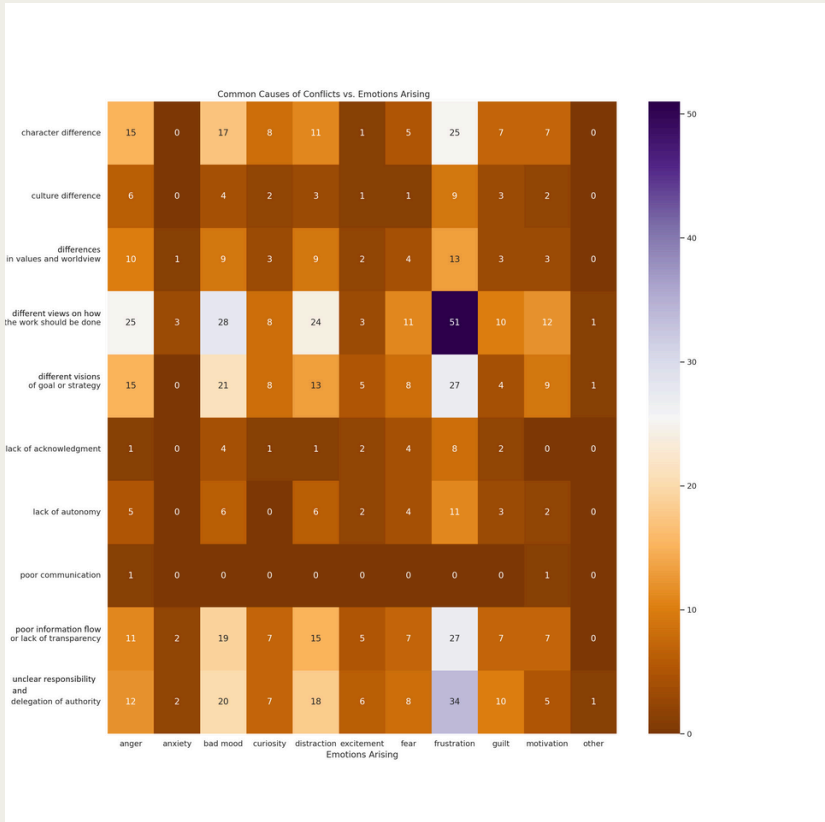
Emotions arising from conflicts vs. common causes of these conflicts

Looking at the emotional landscape of workplace conflicts, it becomes evident that certain emotions frequently surface as reactions to various conflict situations. Frustration, anger, and bad mood stand out as the most visible emotional responses, underlining the intense emotional background that conflicts can stir within individuals. These emotions are not isolated to specific triggers but rather span a wide range of conflict causes, suggesting a universal emotional thread in the face of disagreements and misunderstandings.

Particularly noteworthy is the emotional fallout from conflicts arising due to different views on how work should be done, divergent visions of goals or strategies, and poor communication. These causes are closely linked with heightened feelings of frustration and anger.

Heatmap also shows the link between conflicts over lack of autonomy and emotions such as guilt and frustration points to the deeper complexities of conflicts that touch upon issues of control and independence.

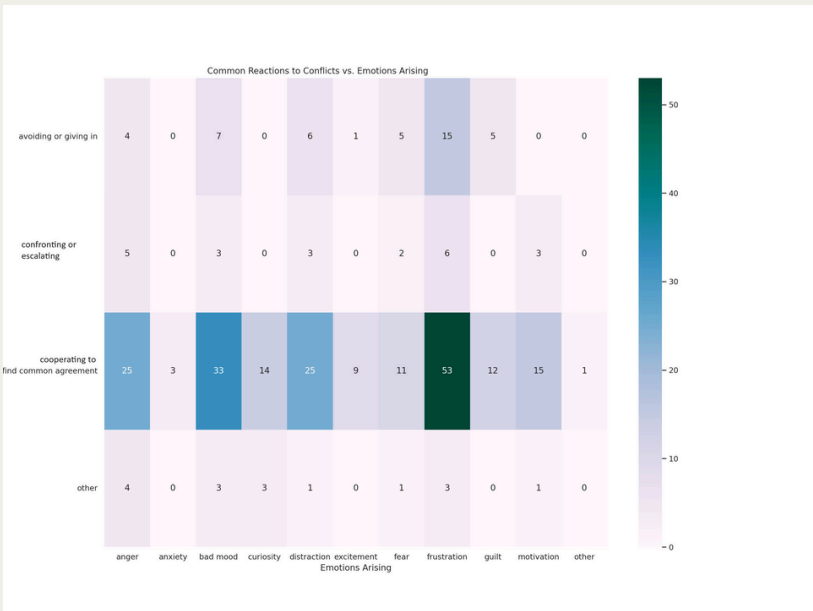
Emotions arising from conflicts vs. common causes of these conflicts



Emotions arising from conflicts and the most common reactions to these conflicts

Cooperating to find common agreement, a prevalent reaction, is associated with a range of emotions, including frustration and anger, suggesting that even collaborative approaches to conflict can evoke strong emotions. Confronting or escalating relates mainly to anger and frustration, whereas avoiding or giving in strongly associates with frustration.

The presence of excitement and curiosity as emotional responses, particularly associated with cooperating to find common agreement and other reactions, suggests that some individuals may view conflicts as opportunities for learning or growth, leading to more positive emotional experiences.





DEEPER INSIGHTS

Navigating through the complexities of workplace conflicts, it's clear that beneath the surface of disagreements and challenges lie immense opportunities for growth, learning, and improved communication. Let's explore some more actionable insights and inspiring ideas that can empower companies to transform conflict into a catalyst for positive change.

Leverage the Preference for Collaboration

It turns out, most people at work, no matter which job position they have, want to resolve things out together rather than going solo. This is a big thumbs up for the potential for harnessing collaborative tools and strategies, like structured team dialogues or collaborative problem-solving workshops, to address conflicts. Encouraging teams to share perspectives and co-create solutions can turn conflict into a springboard for innovation.

Support may come from a facilitator or from outside the circle of people involved to ensure a calm flow of conversations and help in listening to each other.



Adapt to Company Size Dynamics

It's worth remembering that the more people on board the more complex communication we get. Scaling is not easy, not only in sales, marketing or value delivery but most of all in communication. It's hard to resign from simplicity. That's why leaders should always remember to build solid relationship in their teams, care about transparency and openness. This makes things easier and helps solve conflicts faster.

Reid Hoffman and Chris Yeh, authors of "Blitzscaling", mention 5 stages of scaling the company (by number of employees). "By the time an organization reaches the Village stage of blitzscaling (at least one hundred employees), the mesh of person to person interaction is insufficient, especially when culture needs to be synchronized across multiple offices."^[1]

Medium companies can struggle with scaling up processes and communication because it's very difficult to frame in dynamically changing environment. It can be easier to avoid conflicts or not resolving them as previously it was not an issue. The managers can assume things like conflicts happen and people talk to each other and solve them.

Meanwhile, with fast changes and more people on board it's not that easy any more.

[1] Reid Hoffman and Chris Yeh "Blitzscaling", page 229



Emotions have reasons

Frustration and anger that arise from different views on how work should be done together with misalignment on goals and decision underscore the significant emotional toll that such mismatch and communication breakdowns can impose on individuals.

Another, very important issue to mention is that conflicts can challenge an individual's sense of autonomy and decision-making capacity. In this case people may experience more nuanced emotional response, intertwining feelings of frustration with guilt.

This indicates that conflicts centered around autonomy and control not only disrupt workflow but also deeply impact the emotional well-being of employees, calling for a sensitive and thoughtful approach to conflict resolution that considers the intricate emotional dynamics at play.

The area for organizations to focus on here is enhancing alignment and communication. Not only can that prevent conflicts but also mitigate the intense emotions that accompany them.





CONCLUSION

THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF SOMETHING GOOD.

In conclusion, navigating the complex terrain of workplace conflicts requires a nuanced understanding of both the specific issues and the emotional undercurrents that drive them.

We were not taught how to deal with conflicts. And we are struggling. Most of people want to talk, want to cooperate but don't know how.

We are used to interpreting what others say instead of actually listening to them.

The journey towards resolving conflicts with others begins with a deep understanding of oneself. Recognizing your own triggers, communication styles, and emotional responses is the first step in navigating and resolving conflicts with others. Companies that encourage and facilitate this self-awareness among their employees are laying the groundwork for a more cohesive, understanding, and ultimately more efficient workplace.

However, in cases where the conflict has already escalated, it is worth considering mediation. It can be a vital tool in this process, serving as a structured method where an impartial third party, the mediator or any other impartial person, facilitates a dialogue between the conflicting parties to help them find a mutually acceptable resolution. The beauty of mediation lies in its ability to uncover the underlying issues that may have been obscured by layers of escalated tensions and emotions.

Turning to a mediator should not be seen as a sign of failure or weakness; rather, it's a proactive step towards preserving relationships and ensuring a productive work environment. Mediators are trained to navigate complex emotional landscapes and can often bring fresh perspectives that the parties involved might not have considered. This approach not only helps in resolving the immediate conflict but also in building a foundation for more effective communication and understanding in the future.



If you are not sure, when people are able to manage conflict on their own (maybe with a little encouragement) and when it's worth asking for help, read my article: [Empowering Leadership: Harnessing Mediation for Effective Conflict Resolution in the Workplace](#). It helps to understand how conflicts escalate and how we can deal with it on different stages.

Promoting mediation and self-understanding not only addresses the immediate challenges of conflict resolution but also fosters a culture of empathy and cooperation, driving the organization towards greater success.



HOW CAN I HELP YOUR ORGANIZATION?



Coaching leaders

- conflict management
- helping others in dealing with difficult situations
- leading better conversations
- listening to people
- encouraging autonomy
- agile methodologies



Mentoring

- agile leadership
- being a coach for your team
- Nonviolent communication
- mediation in conflict resolution



Mediation

- helping individuals and teams getting along
- finding common ground when conflict has already escalated
- finding win-win solutions



Trainings and workshops

- educating about conflict resolution
- case studies
- practicing conflict conversations
- learning about neuroscience of conflict
- workshops for teams in conflict



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**LET'S TALK ABOUT
COMMUNICATION AND
RESOLVING CONFLICTS**

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COACHING & MEDIATION