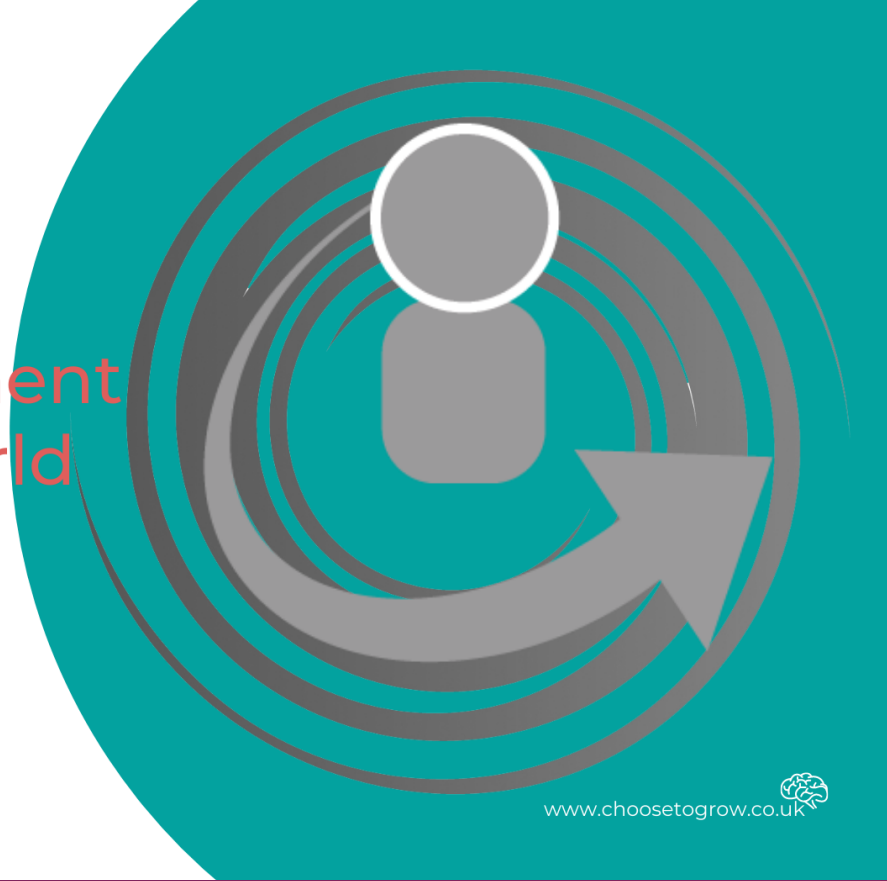


Conflict Management for the Virtual World



BY EMMA CARROLL

VIRTUAL CONFLICT

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People may not be comfortable with it, but virtual conflict is on the up. It's now a part of working life. Virtual conflict isn't all bad, it can just be more difficult to navigate than ways we have more traditionally interacted in the workplace. Some virtual conflicts can be useful and, therefore, should not be avoided at all costs. That said, virtual conflict at work needs managing and resolving. And though virtual conflict management and resolution don't come easily to many, there are skills that can be learnt to support you with your dispersed teams. However, managing conflict in remote teams comes with specific issues so you must prepare for before you attempt a resolution.

In general, there are six types of virtual workplace conflict:

1. Task Conflict

This is familiar to anyone who has ever worked on a group project. To finish the project, every individual needs the rest of the team to do their part. Without everyone "pulling their weight," the project can fail. In a virtual setting this is even harder to achieve.

2. Work Style Conflict

No two employees are exactly the same. Some like to schedule their tasks weeks in advance. Others enjoy the pressure-cooker feeling of waiting until the last minute. Everyone should work in the manner that is best suited for them. But when team members or even leaders and their staff have different work styles, one style may clash with another, and when dispersed, under the pressures of the pandemic, this can be challenging.



3. Leadership Conflict

Just as no two employees are the same, neither are leaders. Some leaders have a very hands-on approach, and some like to hang back. While there is nothing wrong with either approach, direct reports can react differently to different management styles, which could lead to conflict. For example, if an employee likes a manager who maps out a task step by step in great detail, and the current working environment reduces this guidance, conflict could arise.

4. Personality Conflict

And, of course, no matter how diverse or how homogenous your team is, each team member has a different and distinct personality. This can cause differences at times. Creating a culture of discussion and respect when working virtually can help ease these problems.

5. Idea-based Conflict

Whether it's the slogan for a new product, an idea for the marketing campaign, or varying opinions on package design, when people on the team have different ideas, conflicts can arise.

6. Discrimination

Unfortunately, virtual conflict can arise from harassment and discrimination. Though you can create a culture of mutual respect and inclusivity, if conflict is happening due to discrimination, you may need to involve human resources to help resolve the issues.

WHY DOES CONFLICT HAPPEN IN A REMOTE TEAM?

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The types of workplace conflict are the same for all companies, no matter where the team is located. However, some of the issues teams face managing conflict include the unique ways it can fester and grow in a remote environment.

Lowered Inhibitions

One particular aspect of working remotely is that while you are part of a team, you work by yourself. You don't "see" your team mates every day, and you don't hang out with them by the coffee machine and chat about your weekend plans. Though some people may not enjoy "water cooler" chats about their personal lives, these random moments help build connectivity within a team and humanise team relationships. In a virtual work environment, your staff may suffer from the "online disinhibition effect," which can negatively impact their behaviours.

People feel less inhibited about what they say online and how they say it, even in a professional setting. They may share information virtually that they normally wouldn't in a face-to-face situation. People may also feel bolder when they are typing on a screen and know the response may not be seen for hours, saying things that they wouldn't say in the office.



Though some of the factors that encourage these behaviours (anonymity, for example), are not present in a virtual workplace, other factors, such as asynchronous communication, are. These may cause staff to disregard normal workplace etiquette in favour of getting their point across or "being right." Though virtual companies often help staff make an effort to connect, the reality is that when you don't have to see your teammate in the staff kitchen, you may be less motivated to resolve your conflicts.

Communication Problems

In remote-friendly companies, written communications tend to be the norm, particularly when the team is scattered. But, sometimes, what's meant to be a short, brief, and straight to the point message can come across as rude or demeaning. Though the sending party likely did not mean it that way, tone in an email message can be hard to create. When the receiving party is angered or hurt by the tone, conflict can happen. At the same time, you may frequently communicate with the team and use emojis (for example) to lighten the tone, but that doesn't mean you're communicating well. Poor and unclear communication can also contribute to workplace conflict. When staff are unsure about their role in the organisation, how to complete a project, or even what the company mission is, they are forced to make assumptions. Unfortunately, this leads to the possibility of incorrect assumptions. When that happens, they may start to feel unsure about their job and future at the company, which can lead to conflict.

Flying Blind

Because remote-friendly companies rely on written correspondence, even with the clearest of communications, misfires can happen. This is due, in part, to the lack of visual aids associated with written (and often asynchronous) communications. While charts and graphs are useful in explaining information, they don't tell you if your audience understands your message. If all you ever rely on is written communications, you may never know that people understand the message, even if you chat frequently and regularly with staff. In a verbal meeting (without video), you can hear some tone and inflection in the other person's voice, and this can help you communicate and get a sense of how team members feel. However, adding video to the mix can help you read facial expressions and see the visual cues the other two methods lack. This extra step can go a long way toward identifying and resolving team conflicts.

Don't Rock the Boat

Many people dislike conflict and will do whatever they can to avoid dealing with it. This can be as simple as not answering questions or ignoring the shouting coming from inside an office.

A remote team is no different, but it is far easier to hide conflicts when there are no doors to slam. Pretending that conflicts don't exist doesn't mean they aren't there. And, when you are aware of a conflict, you shouldn't bury your head in the sand and hope it goes away. As a manager, you not only need to find the conflict and help resolve it, you need to encourage your staff to speak up about it.

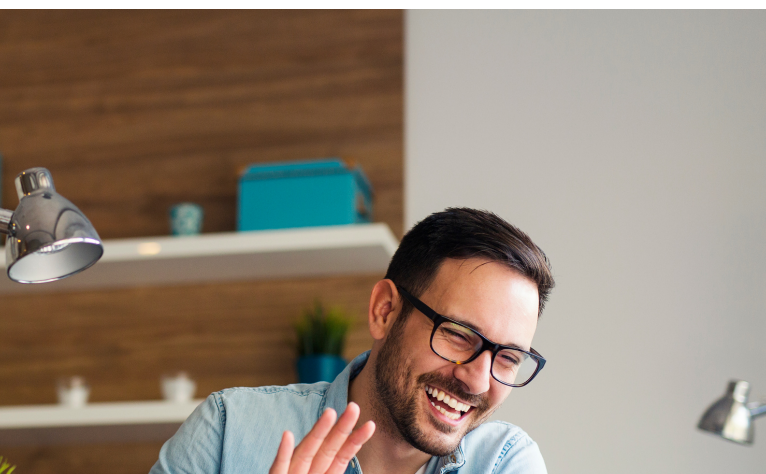
HOW TO STOP CONFLICT BEFORE IT STARTS

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Of course, the best way to manage workplace conflict is to stop it before it starts. And while there are things you can do to minimize conflict, it's important to note that you should not completely eliminate it. Conflict has a place in every virtual and physical office, because some conflict can be healthy for a company. Healthy conflict can inspire unique and novel solutions to a problem. When you bring together a diverse group of people, you'll inevitably have a diverse set of opinions for solving a problem. Though it may be frustrating, difficult even, for a group to disagree, this disagreement helps reveal gaps in your plan that you may not have identified. This can help you create a fuller, more complete solution. That said, some conflicts are not healthy and can negatively impact the team. Consider some of these tips to help avoid conflict in your remote company by stopping it before it starts.

1. Lead Well

When it comes to conflict management for remote teams, being a "good" leader may not be enough. Clear communication about projects, tasks, and goals help avoid conflict. But you also need to build trust with and throughout your team, so your employees are comfortable bringing up conflicts and trust that they will be resolved amicably.



For example, if two team members are arguing over the right way to approach a task and you try to diffuse the argument with a “Now, now, children” type of approach, you devalue both team members and their opinions in front of the rest of the team. This can be demoralising, damaging their trust in you and each other. As the manager, you will have to diffuse and settle arguments. There’s no avoiding it. But doing it respectfully and with dignity will impact how the team manages and handles future conflicts.

2. Regular Meetings

To many, meetings are the bane of workplace life. In a remote setting, though, they are incredibly important in building a strong, connected team that can manage workplace conflict in a healthy way. Because there are fewer opportunities to meet up and casually chat, it’s harder for team members to get to know each other as people and not just teammates. This can, as noted above, lead to online disinhibition and contribute to conflicts. Regular meetings are the first step toward building a team that understands and respects each other, but don’t limit the meetings to “business only.” Help staff get to know each other as more than co-workers. They don’t have to become life long “besties”, but they should understand each other’s unique situations and personalities. Ask questions about hobbies, personal interests, or family to gain a deeper understanding of who everyone on the team is and how they think through and solve problems.

3. Make It Safe

When you manage remotely, it’s harder to “read the room.” You can’t see if someone is sulking at their desk after a meeting. Along with team meetings, regular one-on-one meetings with your direct reports are just as important to help you find and manage conflict when you work remotely. However, it’s not enough to identify conflicts. You also need to make your team culture one where staff feel safe talking about them.



4. Discuss It Online

Though it may seem counterintuitive, discussing things online in a shared forum (like a discussion board) can help reduce conflict. Studies have shown that the most successful virtual teams use online discussion boards to discuss their work and manage their conflicts. Using an online forum helps teams avoid and resolve conflicts by solving problems quickly. Discussing things in a virtual forum allows the team talk about issues that arise as they happen, instead of letting them grow and worsen in the background. Much like an in-person brainstorming session, team members can ask for input and advice online, which can help them solve problems and see things from a different perspective. Though online disinhibition can create conflict, it can stop it, too. People are more likely to “speak their minds” online than in person. That means they are more likely to say what they really think, instead of voting “yes” because of peer pressure.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT FOR REMOTE TEAMS

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Even though you may have taken all the necessary steps to stop conflict before it starts, on occasion it's going to happen anyway. Healthy conflict should be encouraged and embraced. Unhealthy conflict should be resolved as quickly as possible. Here are some tips to help you resolve conflict in your remote team.

1. Clear, Timely Communications

One of the biggest causes of conflict in any team is, as we've identified, communication issues. Of course, there are different types of communications (asynchronous or synchronous, for example), and each requires its own kind of management. When conflict arises, it's often better to put down the pen (or keyboard) and pick up the phone or camera. As soon as a conflict bubbles up, talk with the other person. This gives you a chance to hear their tone instead of reading, and possibly misinterpreting, it. And, in the case of video, you can see the visual cues you might otherwise miss. But, make sure you're talking with and not at the other person. To do that, you'll need to engage your active listening skills. This means really listening to every word the person is saying, not coming up with your response when the person is only halfway through speaking.

2. Don't Ignore the Small Stuff

Addressing conflict sooner rather than later is the best way to manage it. However, it's just as important not to overlook something that may seem minor. For example, sometimes an employee may think they are doing the team a favour by not mentioning a conflict, or agreeing for the sake of avoiding conflict. If it happens repeatedly, that "quiet" person may grow resentful. As a manager, it's essential for you to ask the right questions about what may seem minor and to draw it out so it can be resolved before it blooms into a larger, harder-to-resolve conflict.



3. Accentuate the Positive

Because it's difficult to understand tone in written communications, help your team start from a positive position, not a negative one. For example, when someone receives a brief, blunt email, help the recipient reframe their assumptions. Instead of assuming the sender is being snippy because they are angry, encourage your employee to start by thinking they were just having a bad day. Perhaps they were buried with work and fired the message off quickly to move on to other tasks, and weren't upset with the recipient at all. On the flip side, train the team to be positive with their messaging. Encourage them to not respond to messages when they are busy, stressed, or having a bad day. Give them permission to take an appropriate amount of time to create a thoughtful, intentional message that cannot be misinterpreted. Encourage everyone on the team to drop certain types of written communications if they create more problems than they're solving.

4. Ask Often

If, as a manager, you sense that the team is in conflict, simply ask if conflict exists. Of course, you may not want to be so blunt. Try one of these questions to root out the conflict (and its cause): I sense there's some disagreement here. Am I right? What's the best approach, in your opinion? Am I wrong in thinking this might create problems for you? In a trusting, open workplace, people should feel safe answering these questions openly and honestly.

5. Get Confirmation

Even with video enabled, a virtual meeting isn't the same as a face-to-face one. You can't "feel" what's happening in the room. And, you don't have the same face-to-face view in a video chat as you might in a conference room. Confirm everyone is in agreement and that everyone understands what is happening. This can go a long way toward eliminating conflict before it starts.

SUCCESSFULLY MANAGING CONFLICT WHEN YOU WORK FROM HOME

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Dealing with conflict is generally not an enjoyable experience for managers. However, recognising that conflict is inevitable and that it can be healthy for your company goes a long way toward managing it and your team in a positive and proactive way.

The pandemic may have shifted the conflicts you and your team are facing. Given the uncertain future of work (and where your team may work from), you may be a remote manager for a long time.

To help you, watch our 'Conflict Management in the Virtual World' webinar that we delivered for Wales HR Network. Here we show you how you and your teams can move from conflict to collaboration using neuroscience. It can be downloaded from our resource library at www.choosetogrow.co.uk

