

# The Five things you should know about Resolving Employee Conflict during the COVID19 Pandemic



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## The Five things you should know about resolving employee conflict

1. **What is conflict?** Conflict is defined by the Oxford dictionary as a “serious argument or disagreement” If you now take this definition into the workplace, there are of course many things that co-workers can either argue or disagree about – such as the time to go to lunch, who deserves to have more of the team manager/ or administrators time, when to take holiday. Add into that mix all the potential employee conflict around Furloughed and non-Furloughed staff, high absence levels, people feeling fearful and anxious about their futures , money worries, and all the other issues associated with Covid19, like “why am I on furlough and you have a hotbed of employee conflict scenarios you may need to address! Most of these things can be resolved easily and informally if people are willing to talk and behave reasonably and possibly compromise on their position.
2. Ways of **resolving conflict informally**. As a manager, if you start to see this happening either within your own team or within another, I can't stress enough how important it is to deal with the matter as quickly as possible. The reason for dealing with conflict quickly is that it can escalate if not dealt with. There are generally four recognised stages of conflict as described below, and if you deal with the issue at the earlier stages of the process, it's far more likely to be resolved amicably than when it gets to the Anger or Violence stages.

To deal with it informally, you should speak to both or all parties involved individually and listen to what the issues are, and also sound out whether you could facilitate a meeting with them all together to try and resolve things. If you have caught the issue early enough, people are highly likely to be receptive to this type of approach and most matters can be resolved through talking and discussing the issues with a manager to facilitate the meeting and keep things on an even keel.

**Stage 1 - Irritation** – the problems or difficulties are not significant; you could do without them, but they are easily ignored.

**Stage 2 - Annoyance** – The problem is becoming a growing frustration; stress is beginning to increase, and difficulties are becoming the norm. Objections and frustrations are being voiced logically.

**Stage 3 - Anger** – the problems bring about a strong feeling of injustice, hurt and animosity. Objections and frustrations are being voiced emotionally.

**Stage 4 - Violence** – the position taken is thought to be totally justified. Retribution and pay back become the order of the day, there is a need to win, irrespective of cost and for the other party to lose. Objections and frustrations are expressed physically because words have been to no avail. People can walk out, lash out, go on strike, or abuse the product or the Company.

3. The need for **third party intervention**. As we have said before, it's best if you can resolve things early and informally as there is a far greater chance of success. However, sometimes, people are so far apart in reaching a mutual agreement, whether it's because of their emotions, history, status, or a power differential, that they need help to find a resolution.

There are two types of third-party intervention; **Mediation** – where an external mediator helps both parties to understand the various positions of the stakeholders in the hope that a mutually acceptable agreement is made. **Arbitration** is often imposed by law. In arbitration the stakeholders involved make representations to the arbitrator who then presents a solution which is binding and often legally enforceable on all parties.

Different types of conflict will suit mediation, and some will suit arbitration and its best to get some professional advice at this stage about which route to take. **However in general, people with problems are best suited to Mediation and Companies go to Arbitration to resolve internal disputes.**

4. A **formula for preventing conflict**.

This is a good process that I was shown very early on in my management career and have used with great success for minor day to day issues.

- **Affirmative Statement** – You agree with the person
- **Softening statement** – you show that you understand their position
- **Flag** – you indicate that you have something to say
- **Reasons for your refusal** – You help them to understand your position
- **Negative statement** – You say no
- **Offer of a compromise** (if appropriate) – You offer an alternative where you can

Now let's look at how this might play out. An employee in your team has asked for next Thursday off to go to the Dentists. Using the process above, this is how you could respond;

**Affirmative** – Yes.

**Softening** – It's important to look after your teeth/health and regular check-ups are essential.

**Flag** – But I have to tell you.....

**Reason for refusal** – **that** this week as you know is month end and we need to get all the reporting done by Friday morning.

**Negative statement** – So I really do need you in on Thursday.

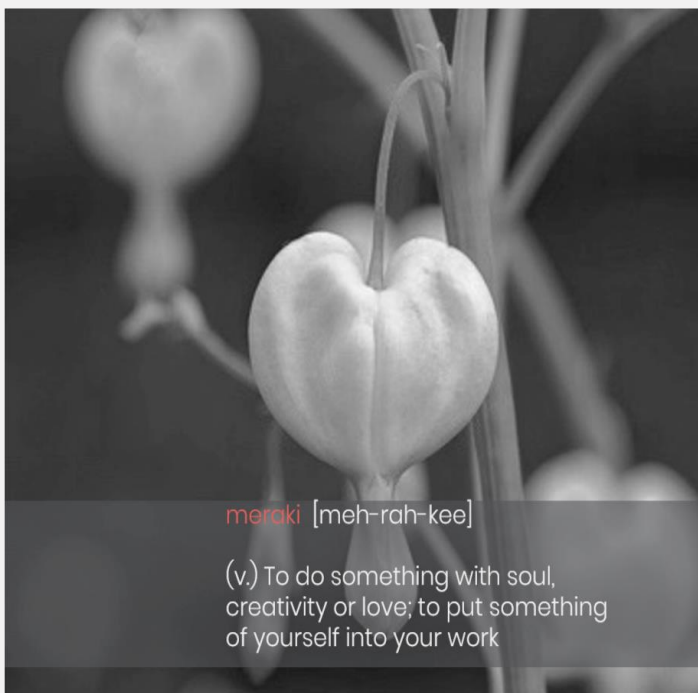
**Offer of Compromise** – Do you think you could see if you could change the appointment to next week when the reporting is finished?

5. It's important to be able to recognise the difference between general conflict in the workplace and Bullying and Harassment as they should be dealt with in a very different way to general conflict issues we've already described. If you are worried that either bullying or harassment is happening anywhere in your business, you should seek professional advice and support before tacking the matter with your team member.

**A definition of Bullying from ACAS** is; "Bullying is behaviour from a person or group that's unwanted and makes you feel uncomfortable, including feeling frightened ('intimidated'), less respected or put down ('degraded') you're made fun of and it makes you feel uncomfortable ('humiliated') or upset (insulted or 'offended')."

**The definition of Harassment** from the Equality Act 2010 harassment is defined as 'unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic, (such as sex, race, sexual orientation) which has the purpose or effect of violating an individual's dignity or creating and intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that individual'.

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