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Survey report

April 2015

Getting under the skin of *workplace* conflict: Tracing the experiences of employees

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The not-for-profit organisation champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 135,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

Getting under the skin of workplace conflict: Tracing the experiences of employees

Survey report

Contents

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Summary of key findings

'The single most common contributor to conflict is differences in personality or styles of working, supporting a relational view of conflict.'

Recent UK policy developments, including the introduction of employment tribunal fees, place more onus on employers to resolve conflict in-house and at an earlier stage. Organisations need to develop both effective conflict resolution practices and robust cultures in which it is easier to challenge without conflict escalating. To achieve this we need to understand the dynamics of workplace conflict more fully.

Based on a representative survey of 2,195 UK employees, this research contributes to this aim by tracing people's experiences of conflict, the impacts it has on them, how they respond and to what effect.

Our main focus is *relationship conflict* – in other words, interpersonal friction borne of annoyance or frustration – although this can be linked to *task* or *process conflict* rooted in different views on what should be done or how. We also focus on *individual conflict* as opposed to collective or 'industrial' disputes, or team or group conflict. Our concern is problems in one-to-one relationships and the impact on individual employees

People in conflict

Our survey finds four in ten UK employees report some form of interpersonal conflict at work in the last year, either *an isolated dispute or incident of conflict* and/or *an ongoing difficult relationship*. Conflict is most common with one's line manager, followed by colleagues and people who one's line manager reports to; in other words, with the people we work most closely and are less able to avoid.

Conflict is seen to be more common with one's superiors than more junior members of staff. This conflict with our line managers (or their bosses) is viewed as being most serious and having the greatest consequences, for example, in demotivation or stress. This points to an important power dynamic in conflict, which in turn highlights the importance of conflict resolution skills in line management.

Issues in conflict

We find that the single most common contributor to conflict is *differences in personality or styles of working*, supporting a relational view of conflict. However, our survey findings also support an issue-based view of conflict. Individual performance, target-setting and the level of support or resources are the typical foci, being far more common than employment contracts or promotions.

Behaviour in conflict

The most common negative behaviour reported in conflict is a *lack of respect*, again highlighting that a major aspect of conflict boils down to failing to relate to each other as individuals in a healthy way. Aside from this, we find a wide spread of reported behaviours, including bullying and refusal to co-operate, shouting and verbal abuse. Actual or threatened physical abuse is far rarer and typically comes from people outside the organisation.

We note major perception gaps in the behaviour we experienced from others and that which we believe others have experienced from us. This supports the theory of attribution bias, which proposes that we are consistently more favourable in interpreting our own behaviour than that of other people. It is also a worrying sign, as research by Jehn et al (2010) shows, that differences in perceptions of conflict are associated with decreased performance and creativity within groups.

Impacts from conflict

The most common impact of conflict is that people find it stressful and experience *a drop in motivation or commitment*. Fewer but still sizable proportions of employees in conflict witness drops in productivity or relationships becoming unworkable. One in ten cases of what we call conflict results in one or other party leaving their organisation or moving job.

Clearly, the greatest impact of conflict is on employee well-being, which has ethical implications for good employment practice. The more tangible business impacts, such as sickness absence, are less common, but the sizable impacts perceived on factors such as motivation and productivity highlight that interpersonal conflict is an important business issue. From any angle, the conflict this survey explores must not be brushed under the carpet.

The conflict that hits motivation and commitment hardest is that which undermines the basics of the employment relationship – favourable terms and conditions, a sense of progression and support when we are ill or cannot work. One or other party is most likely to leave their job due to conflict when it is seen to have roots in a personality clash.

Responses to conflict

Informal approaches to resolving conflict are by far the most common, including discussing the matter with one's manager, HR personnel or the other person directly. We also often talk to friends and family, although this does not appear to help resolve conflict – perhaps a case of complaining to the wrong person. We use formal options, such as grievance and discipline procedures, less often – in one in ten cases of conflict.

However, it should be noted that different approaches tend to be used for different issues. In particular, we are most likely to take a direct and informal approach in conflict about individual performance and levels of support or resources. In contrast, formal procedures are most likely to be used in cases of absence management.

Resolving conflict

Employees' views on how well their conflict was resolved are spread right across the board, from *fully resolved* to *not at all resolved*. We are most likely to feel conflict is resolved if it is with one of our reports; far less likely if it is with one of our superiors. This again points to the significant influence of power dynamics and thus the importance of having effective procedures that can cut through them.

The use of both informal discussions and formal channels substantially raises the chances that employees perceive a successful resolution. However, as mentioned above, to some extent this is a case of horses for courses, as we tend to use different approaches in different scenarios. Thus, it is crucial to have a balanced suite of options for conflict resolution. In particular this should include approaches such as mediation, which are currently rarer options than formal channels, but importantly provide a way to facilitate informal discussions. It does little good to rely on grievance and discipline procedures alone, as this will often mean conflict festers until it escalates to a serious level.

Organisational differences

Our survey suggests interpersonal conflict may be experienced more often in the public and voluntary sectors than the private sector. However, this may be as much a reflection of how conflict is dealt with and viewed as of the incidence of conflict. For example, on the one hand, bullying and harassment seem to be terms more readily applied in the public sector; on the other hand, public sector organisations are also more likely to use mediation.

A more influential factor in conflict is organisational size. It is particularly interesting to note at what point the greatest shifts occur: not between medium and large organisations, or even between small and medium, but between micro organisations (fewer than ten employees) and anything larger. Essentially, micro organisations appear to deal with conflict more informally and more effectively.

Thus, it seems that as organisations grow in size, their complexity and structures can very quickly get in the way of resolving conflict swiftly and effectively. Our organisations may be less social, and we may be less able to resolve our differences with open conversations, than we might like to think.

This reinforces the message that relying purely upon formal procedures to resolve conflict is not a healthy option. Alongside these, even in relatively small organisations, we need concerted action to develop the skills and encourage methods, such as mediation, that enable more direct and informal approaches. Such action may not make the more established grievance and discipline procedures redundant, but will help nip potentially very damaging conflict in the bud.

Introduction

'We need robust cultures in which it is possible to challenge and hold each other to account, and do so without undue risk of creating damaging relationship conflict.'

The changing context of conflict resolution

Recent years have seen some significant changes in policy on dealing with workplace conflict. In particular, following a shift over a number of years from collective industrial action towards the use of employment tribunals, July 2013 saw the introduction of employment tribunal fees and new tribunal procedure rules. Along with this, provision was introduced for settlement agreements that include 'without prejudice' conversations (Acas 2013); and in April 2014, Acas launched its Early Conciliation service, building on its experience of pre-claim conciliation.

Thus, policy has been developed, on the one hand, to directly reduce the number of employment tribunals, and on the other hand to help resolve conflict earlier on in the process. The logic behind the latter is that once conflict resolution becomes formal and legalistic, parties become more firmly entrenched and solutions that provide optimal outcomes for both parties become less likely (Gibbons 2007).

For employers and their organisations, this means that greater onus is being placed on them to resolve conflict themselves internally and at an earlier stage. In general, employers seem only partly prepared for such a shift. The great majority of employers have written policies for grievance and discipline procedures (89% for each of these – Wood et al 2014). But there seems to be an over-reliance on these procedural approaches to managing conflict, rather than focusing on developing interpersonal skills of managers. CIPD research finds that at all levels of management, having difficult conversations and managing conflict are very clearly seen as the top two leadership challenges (CIPD 2013c).

Furthermore, high-profile corporate disasters over recent years – for example in banking, the NHS and the BBC – point to a critical lack of courageous conversations. Conflicts of interest, process conflict (Behfar et al 2011) and task conflict will always emerge, and by injecting critical evaluation, the latter in particular can be beneficial (Jehn and Mannix 2001).

Now, perhaps more than ever, organisations need to be able to work through such conflict in a safe environment. We need robust cultures in which it is possible to challenge and hold each other to account, and do so without undue risk of creating damaging relationship conflict.

CIPD research programme on conflict management

Since the CIPD's 2011 *Conflict Management* survey report, a range of publications dealing with the subject of workplace conflict have emerged. These include the national studies of the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study (van Wanrooy et al 2013) and the 2012 Skills and Employment Survey (see, for example, Gallie et al 2013, Green et al 2013) as well as a growing body of research into workplace mediation (see, for example,

Bennett 2014, Saundry et al 2014). The CIPD has also published a second edition of its guide to mediation with Acas (CIPD 2013b).

The current report forms part of an ongoing CIPD research programme that aims – given the contextual changes described above – to shed further light on the current state of play of workplace conflict. Our focus is individual conflict, in other words that which occurs between individuals, as opposed to institutional or collective conflict.

In this report, we present findings from a survey of UK employees' experiences of workplace conflict. Separately, we are also publishing a report looking at employers' attitudes and approaches to individual conflict and how these may be changing in response to recent legislation (CIPD 2015). Following these, we will be undertaking research into the skills required by line managers and supporting HR professionals if they are to build healthy and robust teams, and head off and resolve workplace conflict when it arises.

How does this survey conceptualise conflict?

In looking at employees' first-hand experiences, the current report attempts to avoid pigeon-holing workplace conflict. This is in line with recent thinking, which maintains that the available channels for resolving workplace conflict – in particular employment tribunals – constrain how it is framed and understood (Saundry et al 2014). We are in danger of artificially labelling conflict, for example as *bullying and harassment*, when the real picture is more nuanced.

Thus, the survey took a broad concept of workplace conflict to include ongoing difficult relationships, as well as isolated disputes and incidents of conflict. This could include significant clashes or unworkable relationships that arise from performance or absence management, for example, and which may not be picked up by standard conflict resolution procedures.

Relating this to other established concepts, our survey emphasised *relationship conflict*, which Jehn and Mannix (2001) describe as *'interpersonal incompatibilities'* involving *'tension and friction … and feelings such as annoyance, frustration, and irritation'.* To a lesser extent, we also look at problems rooted in *task conflict* – in other words, clashes of viewpoints or opinions on what to do – and *process conflict* – disagreements about how to complete a task – which as noted by Behfar et al (2011) to some extent overlap. However, we maintain a focus on conflict that becomes problematic, as opposed to the low levels of task and process conflict that can equate to creative tension (Jehn and Mannix 2001).

We also focus primarily on *individual conflict*, as opposed to collective or 'industrial' disputes, or team or group conflict. Thus, we look at one-to-one relationships and interactions and the impact of conflict on *individuals'* well-being, performance and employment. This contrasts to work focused on group dynamics and team performance (Jehn and Mannix 2001, Jehn et al 2010, Lencioni 2002).

Research method

Overview

The survey that forms the basis of this report was conducted in March 2014, that is, before the introduction of Acas's Early Conciliation service but well after the introduction of employment tribunal fees.

The survey was conducted by YouGov on behalf of the CIPD as part of the spring 2014 *Employee Outlook* using an online interview administered to members of the YouGov Plc GB panel of more than 350,000 individuals. The sample was selected and weighted to be representative of the UK workforce in relation to sector and size (private, public, voluntary), industry type and full-time/part-time working by gender. Profile characteristics are normally derived from census data or, if not available from the census, from industry-accepted data.

Scope and limitations of the survey

The survey returned 2,195 responses. 750 of these respondents reported having had an *isolated dispute or incident of conflict* and/or an *ongoing difficult relationship* at work in the previous 12 months and then went on to answer a series of questions about the conflict they had experienced. For the majority of this survey report, we focus on the experiences of this subset.

To make the survey manageable for people who experienced conflict with more than one person, we focused the majority of questions on what we described as: *the most serious problem (for example with the greatest consequences for those affected or the organisation)*. Each respondent was thus asked to consider this single case when answering the questions about the nature of the conflict and the course it took. This means that most of our data is, strictly speaking, not representative of all interpersonal conflict we experience at work. However, as discussed in Section 1, relatively few respondents reported more than one incident in our survey, so we can be confident of providing an accurate picture overall.

The strength of this survey is in its focus on the nature of conflict and how it is dealt with inside the organisation. It gives a representative view of how UK employees experience conflict at work and how this conflict plays out within the organisation.

A limitation is that we do not investigate group dynamics of conflict, instead focusing the respondent on the main person with whom he or she had conflict. The survey is also weak on the use of legal processes and of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) such as mediation, for which we record very low numbers. Nor do we go into depth on employers' approaches to conflict resolution, as this is covered in the companion report (CIPD 2015).

Question wording

Note that throughout the report, we use italics to denote specific wording used in the survey questions.

Overview of report

This report is structured to trace the different stages of development of workplace conflict. Thus, following this introduction, Section 1 looks at the overall incidence of workplace conflict, giving an idea of its seriousness and looking at how it differs between organisations and individuals. Section 2 looks at who the reported conflict is with and, following this, Section 3 looks at what issues the conflict focused on.

In Section 4, we look at the behaviour that is seen to be manifest in conflict, followed in Section 5 by the impact that employees report it had. Within these, we examine a range of contextual factors that relate to conflict behaviour, consider perception gaps between parties involved in conflict, and look at factors that help explain the extent to which conflict affects the individuals concerned and the employment relationship.

Section 6 looks at the range of ways people respond when they find themselves in conflict at work, in particular how they attempted to resolve it. We also look at how organisations and line managers help or hinder employees in conflict at work towards resolution, and how responses vary with different types of conflict. This is followed in Section 7 with a look at the extent to which conflict is resolved and what factors appear to influence this, and in the closing section, we summarise our conclusions.

Additional tables showing our analysis can be seen in the accompanying Appendix.

1 The scale of workplace conflict

How widespread is workplace conflict?

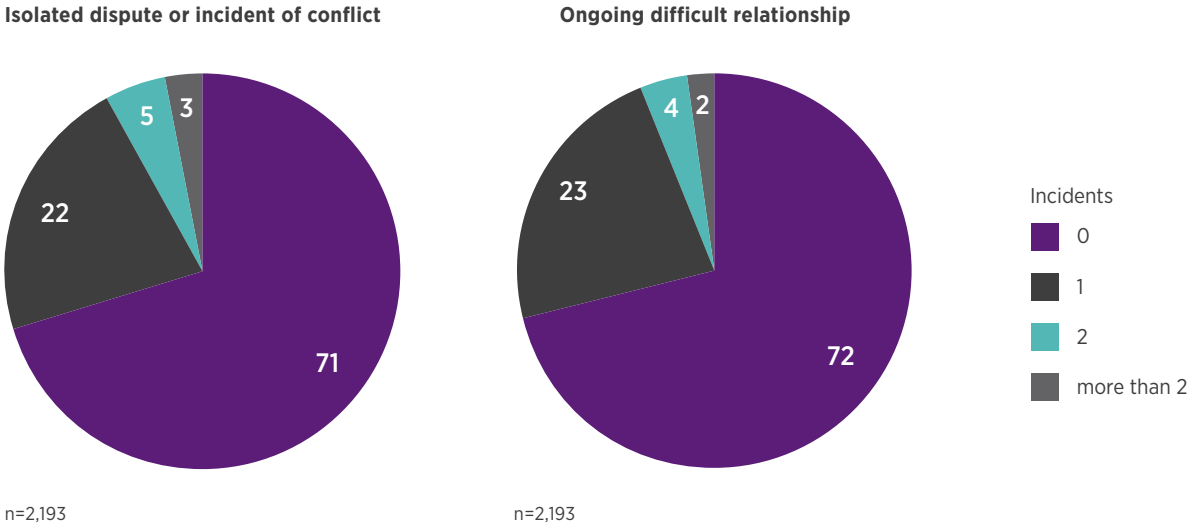
Our survey finds that nearly four in ten UK employees (38%) report some form of interpersonal conflict at work in the last year. This includes *an isolated dispute or incident of conflict* (29% of UK employees reporting at least one case) and *ongoing difficult relationships* (28%).

We tend to be fairly selective in identifying conflict, with relatively small numbers reporting more than one dispute or difficult relationship. This may be because in and of themselves, we do not consider most clashes to be serious enough to warrant labelling them 'conflict'. However, it may also be that we focus on the most significant or most recent clash, and under-report others.

Employee perceptions on how common conflict is in their organisations vary a good deal. There is a general tendency to think it is not commonplace, but it is nonetheless significant that one in four UK employees considers conflict *a common occurrence* in their organisations.

This should also be seen in the context that recent data has found a rise in workplace conflict (CIPD 2011) and in fear of discrimination or victimisation (Gallie et al 2013, Saundry et al 2014).

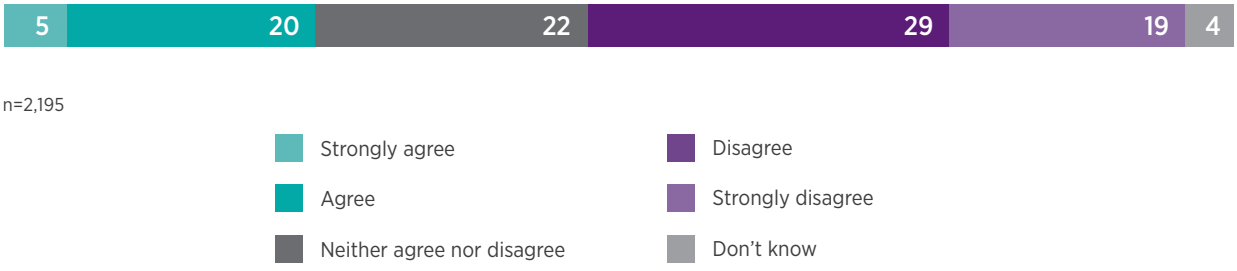
Figure 1: UK employees reporting workplace conflict in the last 12 months (%)



n=2,193

n=2,193

Figure 2: 'Conflict in my workplace is a common occurrence' (UK employees) (%)



n=2,195

What do we mean by 'conflict'?

For employees' own experience of conflict, which forms the main focus of this research, we are talking about incidents and difficult relationships that vary in the seriousness of their implications. Generally, though, what employees are prepared to label conflict often has a tangible impact on those concerned, but rarely escalates to drastic levels.

To give a more concrete idea of this, in terms of behaviour, most respondents citing conflict in the last year report a lack of respect (61%) but very few report *physical threat* (3%) or *physical assault* (1%). Similarly, regarding outcomes, the conflict is seen to lead to *a drop in motivation or commitment* two times out of five (39%). In one in ten cases, relationships become unworkable to the extent that one of the parties either changes job roles (5%), resigns (4%) or is dismissed (1%).

We discuss the behaviour reported and impact of conflict more fully in Sections 4 and 5.

Isolated disputes versus ongoing difficult relationships

The distinction between isolated incidents of conflict and ongoing difficult relationships seems to be useful, with most employees identifying either one or the other for specific people. For example, focusing on conflict with colleagues in one's team, less than one in three respondents (28%) report both an incident of conflict and an ongoing difficult relationship, with the clear majority reporting just the former (31%) or the latter (41%).

In the majority of our analysis, we do not distinguish between isolated disputes and ongoing difficult relationships. Rather, we focus on *the most serious problem* (see below), which could be either or both.

Organisational and individual differences

Sector

Employees are more likely to say they have experienced conflict in the last year if they work in public sector organisations (excluding publicly owned corporations) or the voluntary sector. Respectively, 45% and 44% of these employees report some form of conflict in the last year, compared with 31% of private sector employees. This difference lessens but remains statistically significant looking only at very large organisations, which includes the great majority of public sector bodies.[1]

In support of this view, conflict is perceived to be more common in the public than private or voluntary sectors: 31% of public sector employees agreed that conflict *is a common occurrence* at their workplaces, compared with 24% of those working in the private sector and 25% of voluntary sector employees. However, while there is a difference in perception between public and private sectors overall, comparing like with like in organisation size (that is, looking at 500+ employees only), this difference becomes statistically insignificant.

Our evidence for more conflict in the public sector is in line with research by Fevre et al (2012), which focuses on unfair treatment, incivility and disrespect. Interestingly, though, it is the reverse of the most recent figures on stoppages resulting from disputes, which are now slightly more prevalent in the private sector, although the number of working days lost remains higher in the public sector (ONS 2014). But clearly, interpersonal conflict is not the same as collective industrial disputes, which are the cause of most stoppages.

Our findings should also be seen alongside evidence that shows that conflict is dealt with differently in the public sector. For example, analysis of the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS) shows that grievance and discipline procedures are more common in the public sector (Wood et al 2014). In short, sectoral differences may be as much due to the different nature of conflict as the incidence of conflict.

Organisation size

More influential than sector is organisational size. Whereas more than a quarter of employees in medium or large organisations (28%) think conflict is common, the same is true for 19% in small organisations (10–49 employees) and 16% in micro organisations (fewer than ten employees). Again, this is in line with research by Fevre et al (2012) and is closely linked to the fact that small organisations generally take less formal approaches to employee relations (Forth et al 2006).

We can speculate as to why this may be the case. In small organisations there may be a stronger need for people to get on

[1] In organisations with 500 or more employees, 38% of private sector employees report having had some kind of conflict in the last year, compared with 45% of public sector employees.

with each other, as it is harder to avoid colleagues. There may also be less tension over competing resources and agendas in small organisations, if there are fewer business units with potentially divergent priorities.

It is interesting to note at what point the greatest shifts occur. The clearest differences are not between medium and large organisations, or even small and medium, but between micro organisations and anything larger. We explore this further in Section 6.

Gender

Overall, we find no significant difference in the proportion of men and women who report experiencing conflict in the last year. However, men are slightly more likely than women to say they have had an isolated dispute (27% compared with 23%), as distinct from an ongoing difficult relationship. This is particularly the case with people they line-manage (4% compared with 2%) and colleagues elsewhere in the organisation (7% compared with 4%). This would seem to add to research on WERS 2011 (Wood et al 2014) that dismissals and disciplinary sanctions are rarer in organisations where more women are employed. These are more likely when ill feeling has boiled over into overt clashes and become manifest in behaviour that can more easily be pinpointed as unacceptable.

Figure 3: Employees who reported any conflict in the last year, by organisational size (%)

2 Which relationships are most prone to conflict?

We find that conflict is most common with one's line manager, followed by colleagues in one's team and elsewhere in the organisation, followed by people who one's line manager reports to. In short and perhaps unsurprisingly, conflict is most common with the people we work most closely with, and less frequent with people it is generally easier to avoid.

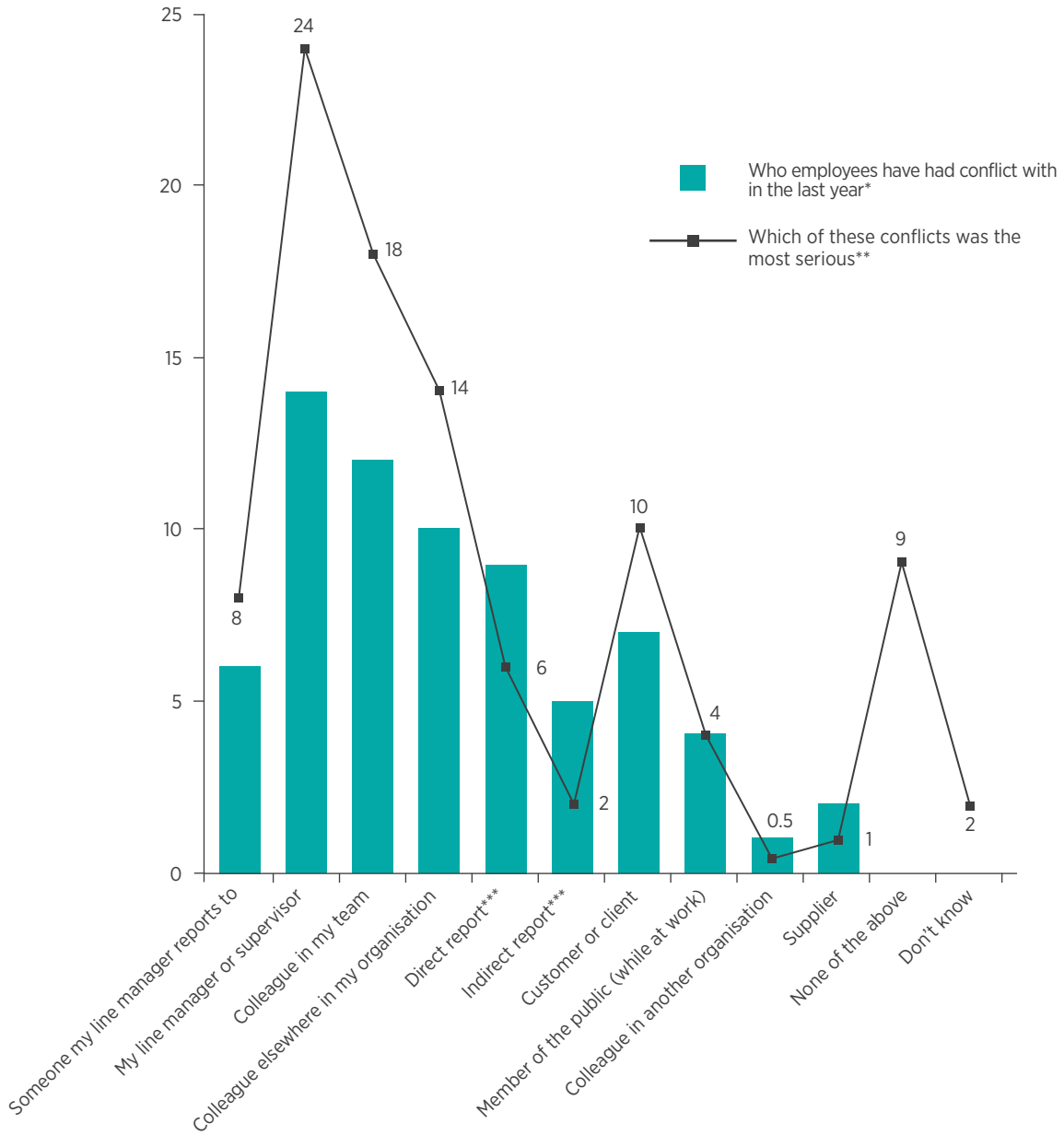
There are clear perception gaps and power dynamics in workplace conflict. On the grounds that it 'takes two to tango', one could logically expect that employees are at least as likely to report having had conflict with someone they line-manage (assuming they do have this responsibility) as with a line manager; more likely if we take into account that line managers on average have more than one direct report. But that is not borne out by our survey. Rather, employees are much more likely to perceive conflict with their superiors than their juniors.

This difference is exaggerated when one looks at the impact the conflict has. Firstly, as shown in Figure 4, the most serious cases of conflict that we asked respondents to focus on are disproportionately identified as ones with managers. Secondly, as discussed in Section 5, the negative impact of conflict on factors like motivation or commitment is significantly greater when it is with our superiors.

For the remainder of our analysis, when we look at the characteristics and progression of conflict according to who the conflict is with, we use a more manageable group of four categories. Thus, we look at conflict with:

- a line manager or other superior (36% of cases)
- colleagues inside the organisation (36%)
- direct or indirect reports – that is, people who we line-manage personally and people who they in turn line-manage (10%)
- people outside the organisation (18%).

Figure 4: Incidence of conflict and 'most serious conflict', by relationship (%)



* UK employees – includes *isolated dispute or incident of conflict* and/or *ongoing difficult relationship* n=2,193

** UK employees who have experienced conflict in the last year n=854

*** Figures for managerial positions only

3 What issues spark conflict?

Of course, conflict can be as varied and complex as the relationships we have with colleagues. It focuses on a wide range of issues and often has its roots in more than one. Our survey asked respondents about a range of potential issues or causes of conflict and asked them to give their own description.

The survey finds that by a clear margin, the single most common cause or contributor is *differences in personality or styles of working*. At source this may be because we fail to understand difference, or it may simply be a frustration with or dislike of a colleague's style, or it may be historic, having roots in past behaviour that has caused hurt or created grudges. Regardless, it supports a relational view of conflict and highlights that it cannot simply be viewed as, for example, a question of conflicts of interest. If it were not for the strongly relational aspect, people may well see points of disagreement as issues that can be resolved without the tension escalating.

However, conflict is unlikely to be only down to personality clashes, and we also support an issue-based view of conflict. The other common contributors are individual performance and target-setting; and what may be the flipside to this, namely the level of support we enjoy in our job or the resources we have at our disposal. This broad area of performance and resources is far more likely to cause conflict than factors such as employment contracts or promotions.

However, this is not to say that these issues cause the most serious conflict. As discussed further in Section 5, it is conflict focused on promotion, contracts and terms and conditions (T&Cs) and absence that we are most likely to find demotivating.

Common issues in different relationships

What problems arise most often in different relationships? There are some predictable associations here. In particular, conflict within the line management hierarchy – that is, either a direct or indirect boss or report – is much more likely to focus on contracts of employment, agreeing deliverables and setting targets, or absence and absence management.

More specifically, those in conflict with a boss are much more likely to see the focus of conflict as promotion or frame it in terms of levels of support or resources.

Conflict between colleagues not in a line management relationship are most likely to be seen to have roots in differences in personality or styles of working, but interestingly are also slightly more likely to be framed in terms of individual competence or performance.

Figure 5: Issues the most serious incident of conflict focused on (%)

n=750

4 How do people behave in conflict?

In this section we look at the behaviour manifest in workplace conflict. This is more similar to the focus of ill-treatment, such as incivility and violence, described in Fevre et al's (2012) *Trouble at Work*.

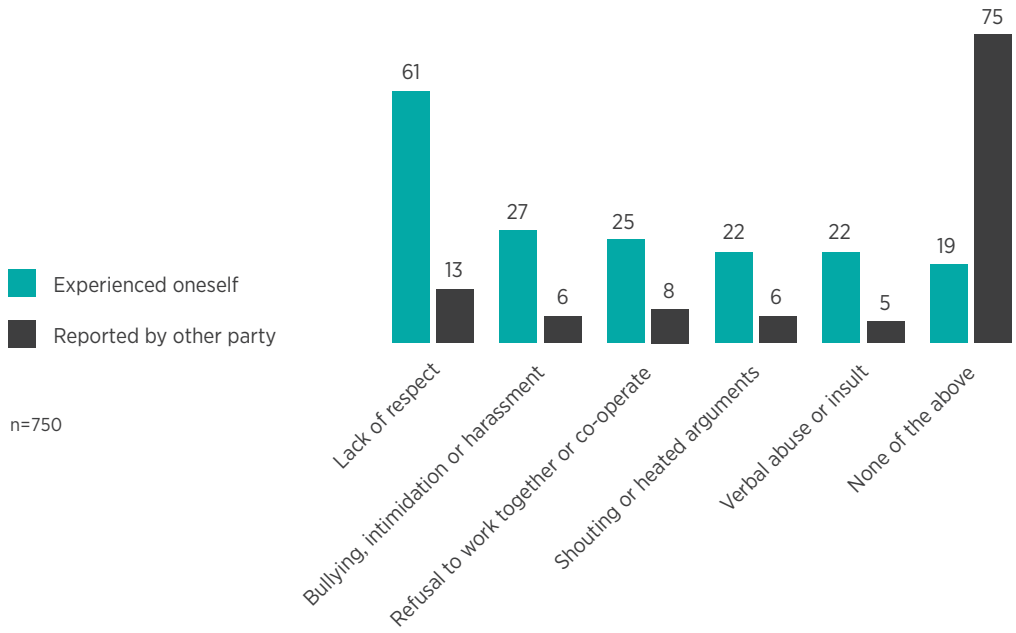
The most common negative behaviour reported in conflict is a *lack of respect*, which our respondents perceived in a clear majority of cases. This could largely be the cause of conflict – a moment when we let our guard down and say something uncivil that we may regret – or more a manifestation of the conflict – the moment we decide we've had enough of someone and tension boils over. Either way, as with the prominence of personality clashes discussed in Section 3, it highlights how failing to relate to each other as individuals in a healthy way is a major aspect of conflict.

It is not surprising that disrespect comes top in the list of complaints, as it is a very generic term. Aside from this, we find a wide spread of reported behaviours, with one in four respondents reporting each of *bullying, intimidation or harassment* and *refusal to work together or co-operate*; and about one in four reporting each of *shouting or heated arguments* and *verbal abuse or insult*.

At the more extreme end, we find that 1 in 25 employees who report conflict in the last year say they have suffered *physical threat* or *physical abuse* while at work. This translates to 1.4% of all employees in our UK sample, more than 1 in 100, a figure many may find surprisingly high. However, as we now discuss, we should be careful about drawing conclusions before we consider the context of these cases.

'The most common negative behaviour reported in conflict is a lack of respect, which our respondents perceived in a clear majority of cases.'

Figure 6: Perceived behaviour in workplace conflict (%)



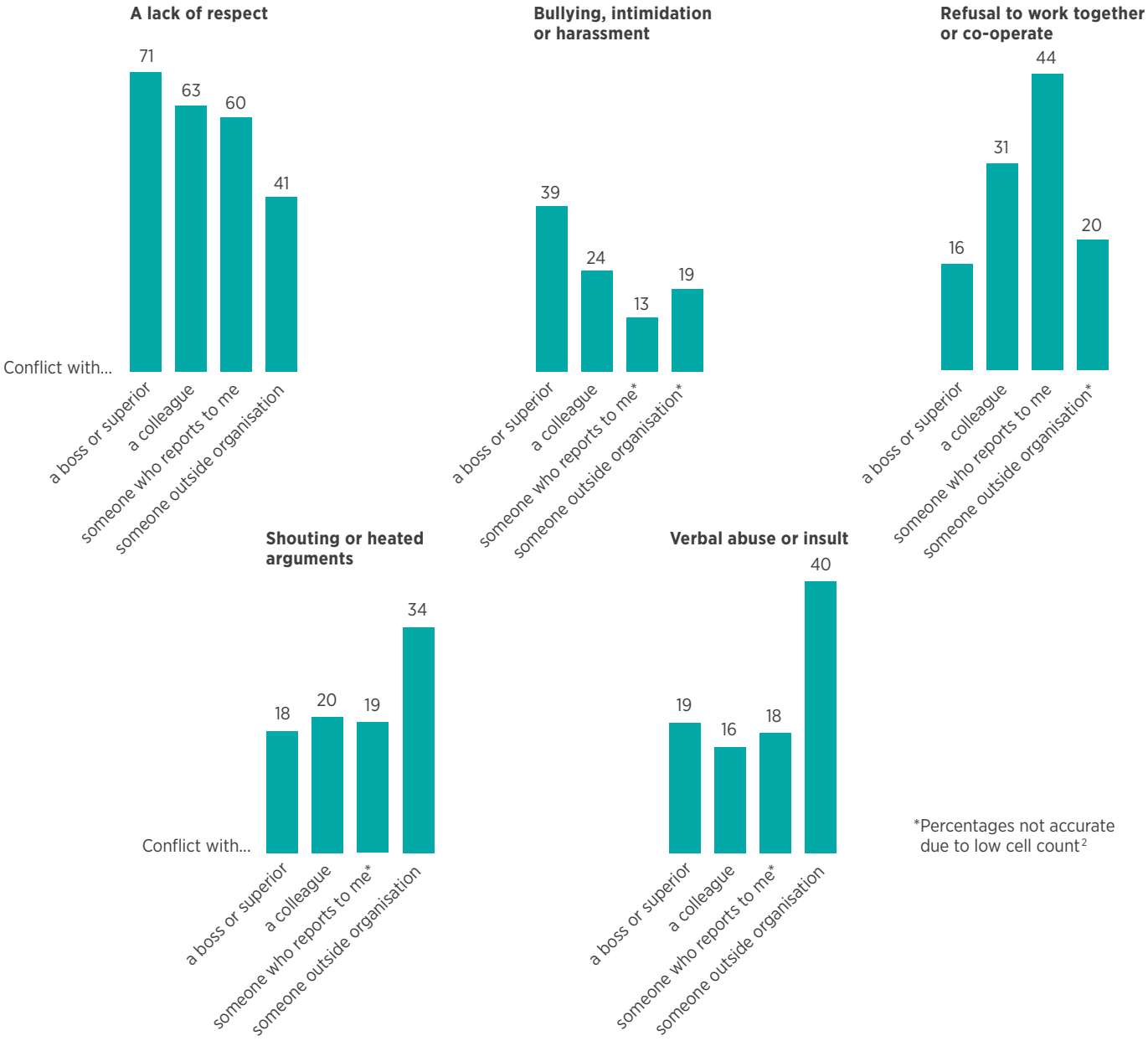
Contextual differences in conflict behaviour

We now look at contextual differences that help us understand people's behaviour in conflict. In particular, we tested for differences in the behaviour that employees reported according to who they were in conflict with. To conduct this analysis, we used the four categories discussed in Section 2, namely: one's boss or other superior; a direct or indirect report; a colleague, either in the same team or elsewhere in the organisation (but not someone in a line management relationship); and anyone external to the organisation, be they client, supplier, partner/colleague or member of the public.

Lack of respect and bullying

Our analysis finds that we are most likely to perceive a lack of respect, or bullying and harassment, from our boss or other superiors. This highlights the role that the power differential can play in how we experience interpersonal conflict, as well as the importance of conflict management skills for line managers (see also Section 6).

Figure 7: Behaviour experienced by employees in conflict, according to who the conflict was with (%)



2 Some percentages given in this report should be considered indicative not accurate, due to a low cell count (n).

We also tested for differences across personal characteristics of respondents. Bullying and harassment is very clearly seen as more common in the public sector than the private or voluntary.[3] Seemingly related to this, it is also reported more by women than men.[4] This sectoral difference may in part be a product of how conflict is framed in organisations. In the public sector, with its stronger tradition of trade unionism and employee rights, employees may well identify with the phrase 'bullying and harassment' more readily than their counterparts in the private or third sectors would do. Thus, while the difference appears stark, we may to some extent be comparing apples and pears and it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions about bullying being a particular problem in public sector organisational culture.

Refusing to work together

Refusal to work together or co-operate is most commonly reported by people in conflict with their reports (either direct or indirect reports) and colleagues (within or outside one's team but not in a line management relationship). This can also be seen to reflect power dynamics, as these are relationships in which we will generally be less able to influence change without recourse to formal procedures. It is thus not surprising that we resort to a form of withdrawing from the relationship.

Overt aggression

The more overt conflict behaviours are most often reported in conflict we have with people outside our organisation. This is true of verbal abuse, shouting (which is also more commonly reported by men[5]) and physical threat or abuse. Likely related to the last of these, we also find that junior managers, who are often in the firing line of public-facing services, are more likely to report physical threat or abuse than non-managers.

Thus, as striking as our finding is on the level of threatened and actual physical abuse, the strong likelihood is that the perpetrator is someone outside the organisation. As such, we should avoid grand pronouncements on the state of employee relations within organisations. But this fact may not make it any more bearable for the victim, so we can nonetheless flag up the level of overt aggression as a serious concern.

On the one hand, it has implications for how employers protect their people from those outside the organisation. For example, public notices that 'violence and abuse towards our staff will not be tolerated' may seem unnecessary to many, but they are clearly justified. This supports existing research on the need to effectively protect staff from violence, for example in the healthcare (Zarola and Leather 2006) and in licensed and retail settings (Gore et al 2009).

On the other hand, there is a flipside to this, as the members of the public causing violence are likely to be employees elsewhere. Thus, there are ethical implications for the standards of conduct that are set for employees in dealing with people outside the organisation. Employers will often not be aware of incidents where their employees are acting as members of the public rather than representatives of the organisation, but there is still a moral case for employers to use their influence to curb aggressive behaviour from employees wherever they can.

'We find that junior managers, who are often in the firing line of public-facing services, are more likely to report physical threat or abuse than non-managers.'

3 This difference between private and public sectors holds when we only look at the largest organisations with 500 or more employees.
4 We find women statistically more likely to report bullying than men overall, but the difference becomes insignificant when we look within the public and private sectors.
5 26% of men reporting conflict say that they have experienced shouting or heated arguments, compared with 17% of women.

Perception gaps

It is interesting to note the marked differences in conflict behaviour that we report about the other person and what we believe they have experienced or claimed about ourselves. Logically, given an unbiased appraisal based on full knowledge of the situation, one could expect equal figures of, for example, whether you shouted at your colleague or she shouted at you.

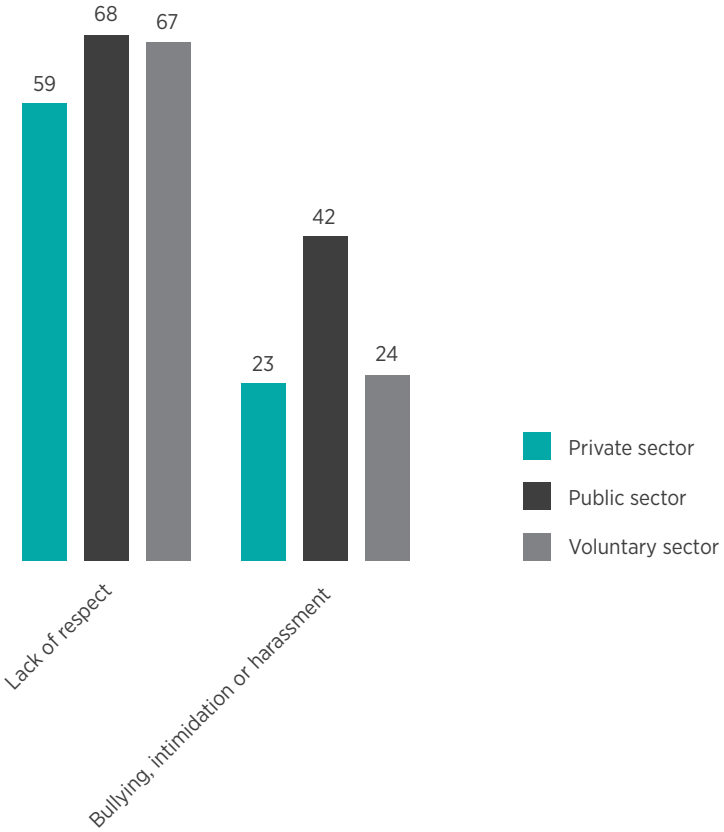
The differences are particularly large when it comes to lack of respect, harassment and verbal abuse, for which we are five times more likely to report for ourselves than the other party. This is perhaps not surprising. They are especially subjective labels – in other words less objectively observable – and we will often be relatively unaware of the other party's experience of conflict.

But the general difference is consistent across all the categories we listed, including more observable behaviours such as refusal to work together or shouting. Thus as well as a lack of awareness in what has been reported by the other party in conflict, the data highlights how we do not always notice our own actions.

This finding is in line with the theory of attribution bias, which proposes that we are consistently more favourable in interpreting our own behaviour than that of other people. It is also a worrying sign, given that research by Jehn et al (2010) has demonstrated that 'conflict asymmetry' within groups (differences in perceptions of conflict) decreases performance and creativity. In short, perception gaps highlight that conflict is dysfunctional.

The findings also have an implication for how we use this survey data. Specifically, data based on employees' views of the other party's experiences of conflict should not be treated as reliable.

Figure 8: Behaviour experienced by employees in conflict, according to sector (%)



5 The impact of conflict

The most common impact of conflict is that people find it stressful, closely followed by *a drop in motivation or commitment*, each of which was reported in two out of five cases. Women are especially likely to say conflict has been a stressful experience, this being reported in 47% of cases, compared with 38% for men.

One in seven cases (14%) of what we class as conflict is seen to lead to a drop in productivity; the same is true for unworkable relationships. This gives us 5% of all UK employees who report such conflict in the previous year.

It is also relatively common that relationships reach the point where they are recognised to be unworkable to the point where one or other party either changes job roles, resigns or (less commonly) is dismissed. Overall, someone leaves their job one way or another in one in ten cases (9%) of what we are prepared to call conflict.

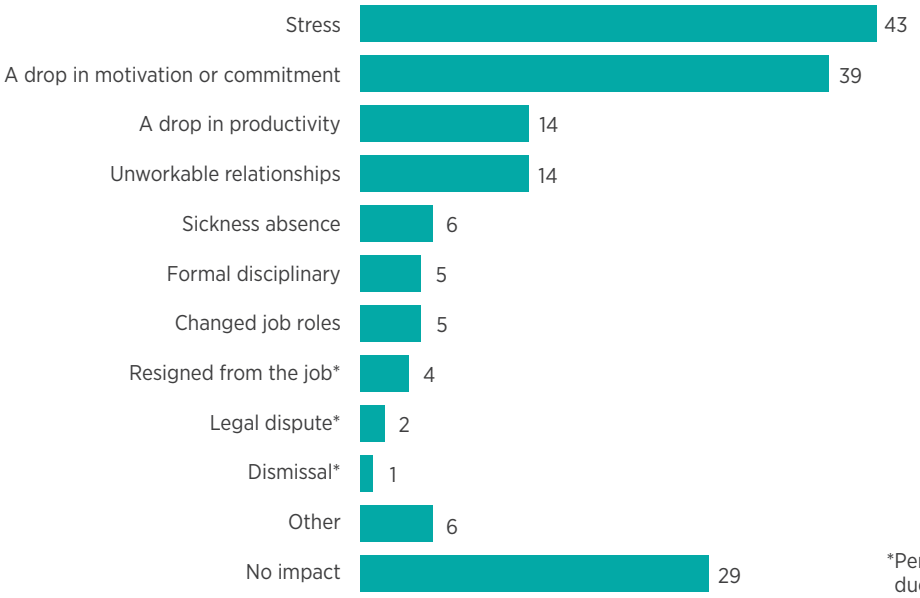
The chances of stress levels escalating to a point where people go off sick are smaller, at 1 in 20 cases of reported conflict.

Clearly, the greatest impact of conflict is on employee well-being. From an ethical perspective of creating a healthy, positive working environment, this is enough to warrant concerted efforts to find faster, more effective routes to conflict resolution.

When it comes to business outcomes, the more tangible

'The most common impact of conflict is that people find it stressful, closely followed by a drop in motivation or commitment.'

Figure 10: Perceived impact of conflict on either party (%)



*Percentages not accurate due to low cell count

n=750

impacts of conflict (such as moving jobs or sickness absence) are relatively uncommon. Nonetheless, the above figures highlight the damage to organisations. The common hit on employee commitment, motivation and well-being mark conflict as an important business issue, albeit one that is not always visible. The tangible damage that conflict is seen to bring in reducing productivity and making relationships unworkable should certainly make it worthy of attention.

What affects the impact of conflict?

We now analyse how the impact of conflict varies across different types of conflict. In doing this, we use the variable of 'a drop in motivation or commitment' as a generic indication that the conflict has tangibly affected one or both of the people involved.

Seniority and power dynamics

One striking finding is that the impact of conflict on motivation or commitment is significantly greater when it is with our superiors. This is clearly a question of hierarchy: when it is a superior of our own line manager it is worse still than if it is our line manager her/himself. This is the other major perception gap, along with those mentioned above on conflict behaviour.

This finding also highlights the importance of line management skills in resolving conflict (see Section 6). Firstly, in having greater influence, it reinforces the view that they need to take a lead in building robust, healthy relationships in the team. Secondly, if they are involved in disputes or difficult relationships with employees who report into them, it is not good enough for managers to simply reach what, in their own eyes, they consider resolution. They also need to ensure that, as far as is possible, their view of a satisfactory outcome is shared by the more junior party. As mentioned in Section 4, perception gaps on the extent of conflict are a sign that it is dysfunctional and damaging to performance (Jehn et al 2010).

Issues at the core of the employment deal

Regarding the issues conflict focuses on, we find it is disputes over promotions, contracts and T&Cs, and absence that we most often find demotivating. Conflicts relating to performance and resources are also more likely than average to demotivate, but markedly less so than these issues that cut to the core of the employment deal.

Figure 11: Cases of conflict that led to a drop in motivation or commitment, according to who the conflict was with (%)

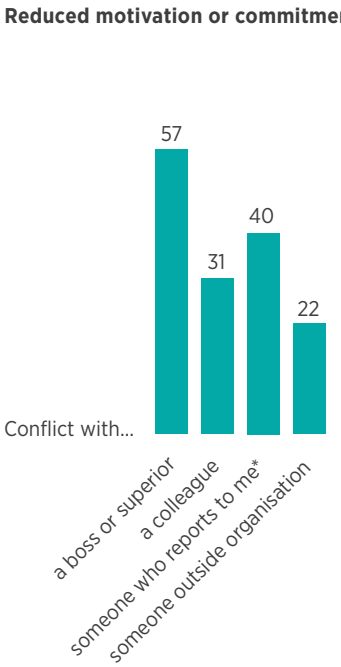
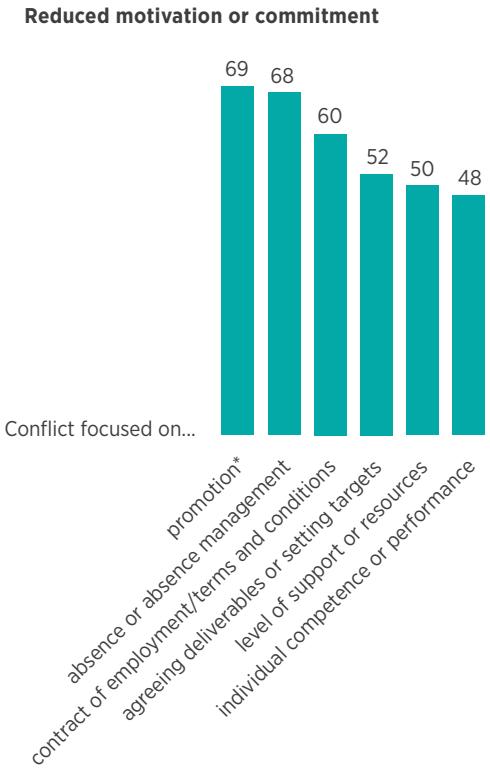


Figure 12: Cases of conflict that led to a drop in motivation or commitment, according to issues or causes of conflict (%)



*Percentages not accurate due to low cell count

This suggests that we place most importance on the basics of the employment relationship – favourable terms and conditions, a sense of progression and support when we are ill or cannot work for some other reason – and it is when these are threatened that conflict is most likely to become serious. In short, what is at stake is not only the technical aspects of employment contracts, but the wider psychological contract that underpins the employment relationship (see, for example, Conway and Briner 2005, Guest and Conway 2002).

However, taking another indicator of the seriousness of conflict, namely deciding to look for a new job, it is cases rooted in personality clashes that also stand out, alongside those focused on contracts (see Section 6 below).

Conflict behaviour

Certain conflict behaviours are notable for being more detrimental to motivation or commitment. In descending order, these are: bullying, intimidation or harassment; shouting or heated arguments; lack of respect; and verbal abuse or insult. Two things stand out in this regard: firstly, the persistence of negative behaviour that is a hallmark of bullying; and secondly, the intensity and tone of exchanges, with shouting generally having a greater impact than insults.

'What is at stake is not only the technical aspects of employment contracts, but the wider psychological contract that underpins the employment relationship.'

6 Responding to conflict

In this section, we look at responses to conflict from two angles: firstly, from the point of view of individual employees as actors; and secondly, considering the perceived level of support within the organisation for resolving conflict.

How do employees respond to conflict?

Informal discussion

By far the most common response is an informal approach, discussing the matter with one's manager, HR personnel or the other person. We also frequently look to friends and family to lend us an ear – in particular women, who are almost twice as likely to do this than men – although as discussed in Section 7, this does not look like an effective strategy in itself.

Exit strategy

The next most common is the exit strategy of looking for a new job, a course of action followed by one in eight employees. A fifth of this number actually left their organisation as a result. This equates to 0.8% of all UK employees, or just under 1 in 100. This is a relatively small figure compared with overall levels of turnover, which the CIPD measured at 11.9% in 2013.[6] However, as discussed in Section 5, many of the business costs of conflict are harder to quantify.

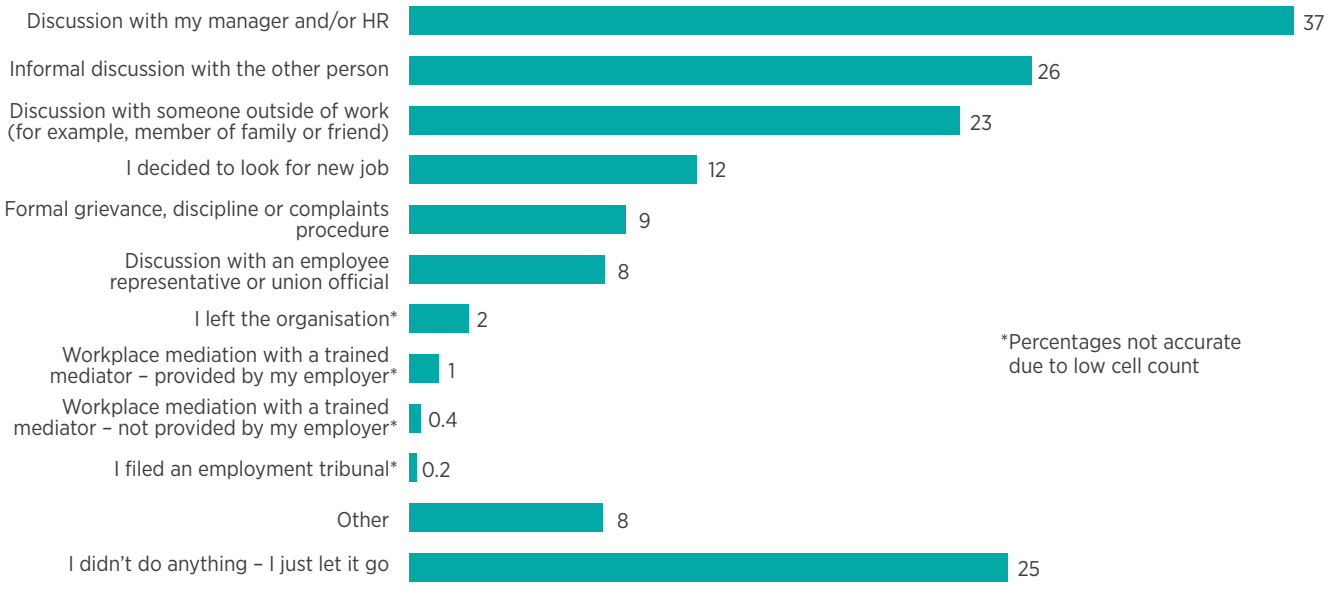
Formal procedures

Slightly less frequently (one in ten cases) employees use their organisation's formal grievance, discipline or complaints procedures. Obviously, this decision can be a simple reflection of how serious the employee considers the behaviour of the other party. However, it can also reflect how formal systems treat different types of incident. For example, procedures may be very clear that verbal abuse over a protected characteristic[7] such as race or sexual orientation is unacceptable, but employees may be less clear where they stand when facing abuse on the basis of their socio-economic class. If people do not see their particular issues reflected in formal conflict resolution structures, they may feel deterred from escalating them, even if they personally feel they are very important.

'I didn't do anything – I just let it go'

A quarter of employees make no active response to conflict in

Figure 13: How employees responded to conflict (%)



n=750

6 This measurement uses the standard 'crude wastage' method to calculate median labour turnover (CIPD 2013a). This is a percentage based on the number of employees leaving an organisation in a set period divided by the average number employed in total in the same period.

7 The full list of protected characteristics in the 2010 Equality Act is: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation (Acas 2014).

relationships, instead judging that it isn't worth the battle and simply 'letting it go'. Depending on the context and one's point of view, this may reflect that the conflict is not very serious, or that the person cannot find it within themselves to face up to it. However, it should be noted that the majority of us reporting conflict do make an attempt of some sort to resolve the situation.

Support for resolving conflict

We asked all employees in our sample – not only those who had experienced interpersonal conflict in the previous year – a series of questions on how their organisations supported conflict resolution.

Mediation

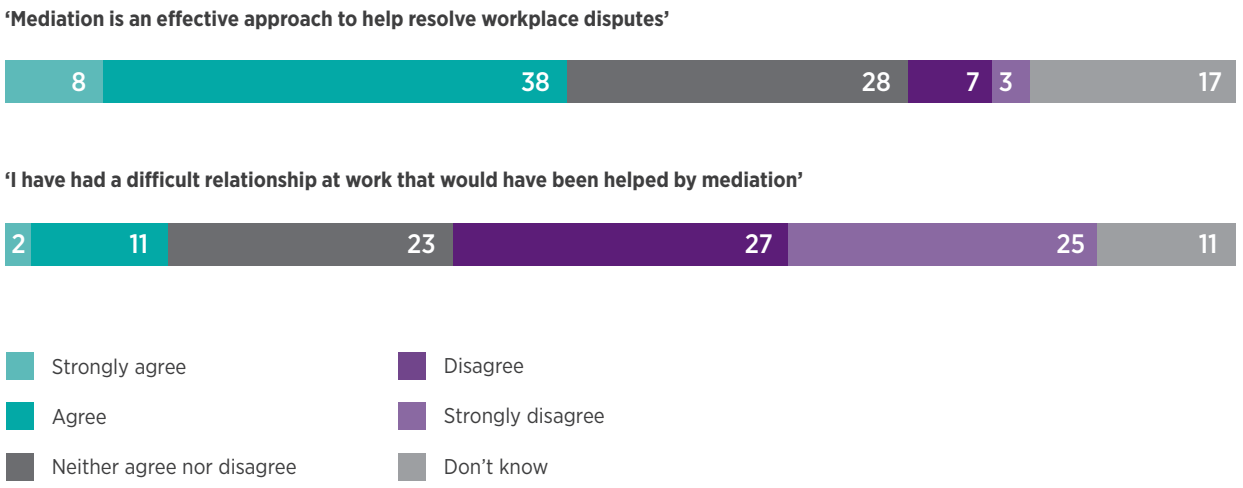
As can be seen in Figure 12, just 1.5% of employees who report conflict used mediation, most of which was provided by the employer. This is a far lower number than the 29% of employers who say that they have used mediation in the last year (CIPD 2015). However, one would expect a substantial difference in these figures purely on the balance of probability: the latter figures represent any use of mediation within the organisation and not (as the current survey indicates) the use of mediation proportionate to the number of cases of conflict.

More pertinent is that we find that the 1.5% of cases of conflict receiving mediation is far less than the proportion of employees who would value it. Going to the entire UK sample of employees, we found that 46% believed that mediation was an effective approach to dealing with workplace conflict and 13% were of the view that they personally had had a relationship that would have benefitted from mediation. That they don't use mediation could be due to either not being aware it's on offer, not thinking of it at the time, not being referred to it, or not having access to it.

Either way, it seems that while an increasing number of employers recognise in principle that mediation is a useful approach to be able to draw upon, they do not make it sufficiently available and/or actively encourage its use within the organisation. This may be because they do not consider that the negative business impacts of conflict are typically sufficient to warrant the costs of mediation. Alternatively, it may be due to a lack of awareness of the extent of conflict: for example, that it is only when conflict escalates to a serious level and one party raises a grievance that the HR function realises there is a problem and can propose mediation.

We can expect this to change over coming years. Our accompanying research into employers' attitudes and approaches to conflict management (CIPD 2015) indicates that many employers plan to make more use of mediation and introduce it at an earlier stage in the conflict.

Figure 14: UK employee views on workplace mediation (%)



n=2,195

'Line managers play a central role in creating, avoiding or resolving conflict.'

Line management

We also asked employees across the whole sample how well their line managers helped their teams avoid or resolve conflict. We find that employees tend to be positive about their manager's ability to build strong, healthy team relationships, although there is a fairly broad spread of opinion on this. They are also typically positive, albeit less so, about line managers' ability to resolve conflict when it does occur in a swift and effective way. And a clear majority disagree with the statement that their manager is a source of conflict in the team.

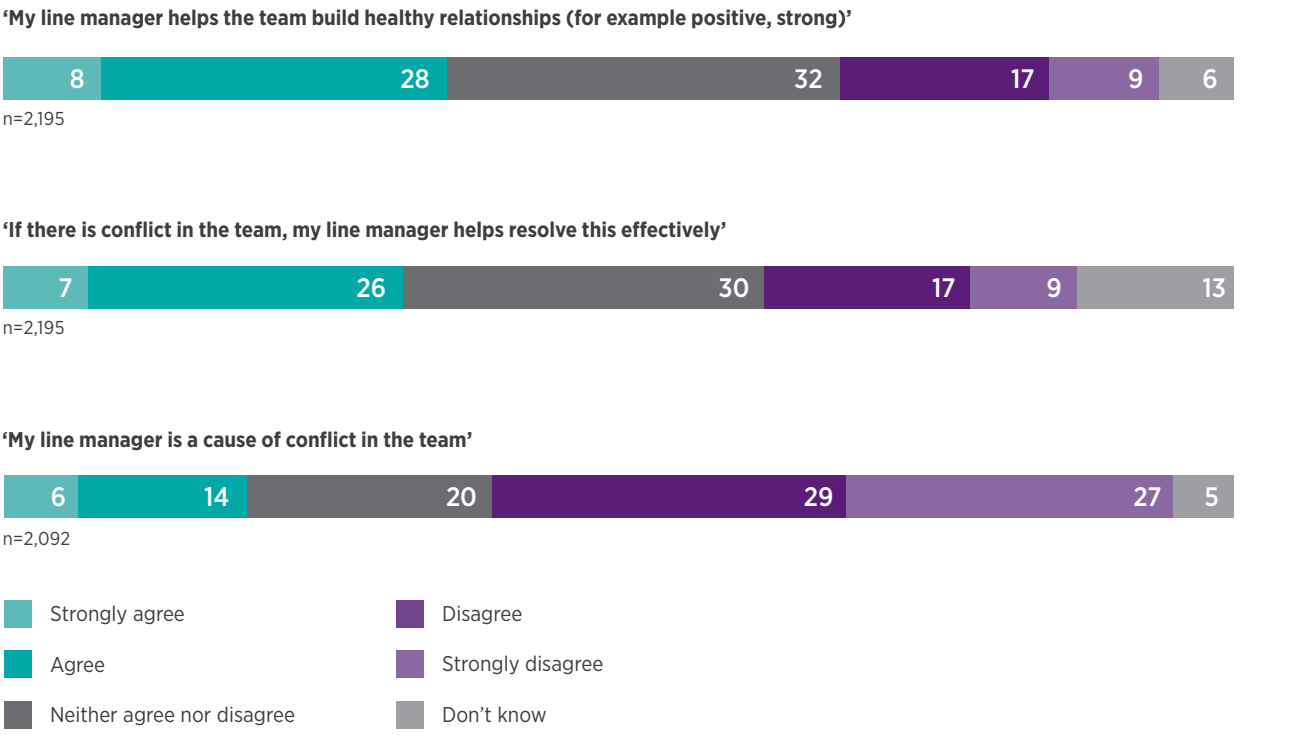
However, there is no room for complacency and a strong case for developing management skills in building robust teams and managing conflict. One in four employees do not think their line manager helps build good team relationships; the same proportion do not think they manage conflict well. And a worryingly common one in five employees are of the opinion that their line manager actively creates conflict.

Line managers play a central role in creating, avoiding or resolving conflict. The 2011 WERS survey finds that unfair treatment or poor relationships with line managers is the single most commonly cited trigger for employee grievances (Wood et al 2014). As well as lacking the skills to nip conflict in the bud (CIPD 2015), line managers are also seen to have a lack of confidence, fearing the ramifications of making mistakes in conflict-handling, in particular the risk of litigation (Latreille 2011).

Effective procedures

Views on organisational procedures for managing conflict are slightly more equivocal, with only slightly more employees agreeing that these are effective than disagreeing (30% compared with 27%). In general, opinion on this is also less sure, with more people

Figure 15: UK employee views on line managers' roles in conflict (%)



not knowing how good their organisation's conflict management procedures are. This is not surprising, as most employees will not have had first-hand experience of these procedures.

Nonetheless, overall, UK employees typically feel confident to raise issues in their organisations (45%, compared with 28% who do not). Clearly we are not entirely reliant upon systems and procedures for this. The wider organisational culture and our own ability to help resolve issues also play a large part.

How do responses differ with type of conflict?

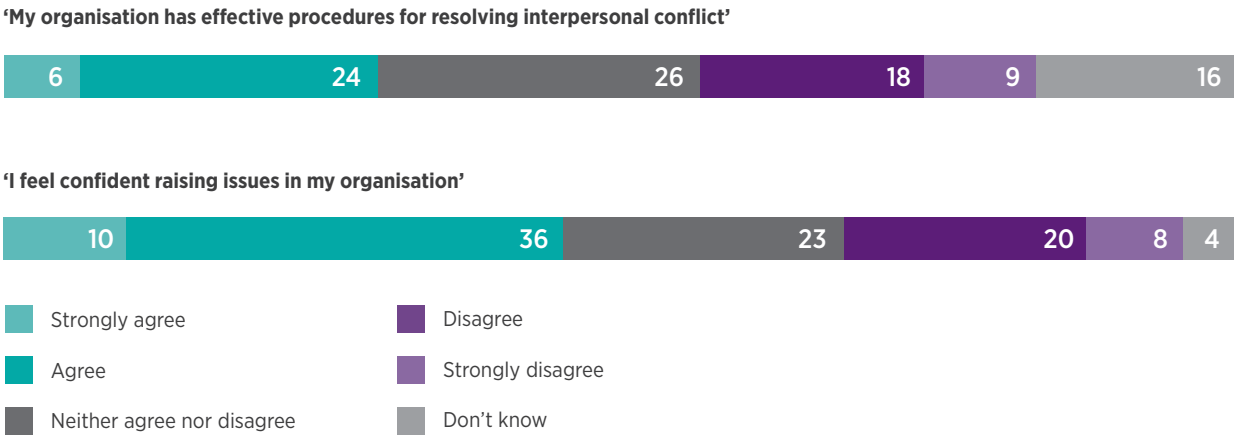
Returning to how people try to resolve conflict, we find differences according to the type of conflict and the organisational context.

Balance of power in the relationship

How does an employee's position in the relationship affect how they respond to conflict? In line with our other findings, the differences here again tell a story of the balance of power in workplace relationships. On the one hand, managers in conflict with their reports indicate that they are far less likely to 'just let it go', far more likely to initiate an informal discussion with the other person or to use formal complaints procedures, and more likely to discuss the issue with their own manager or HR.

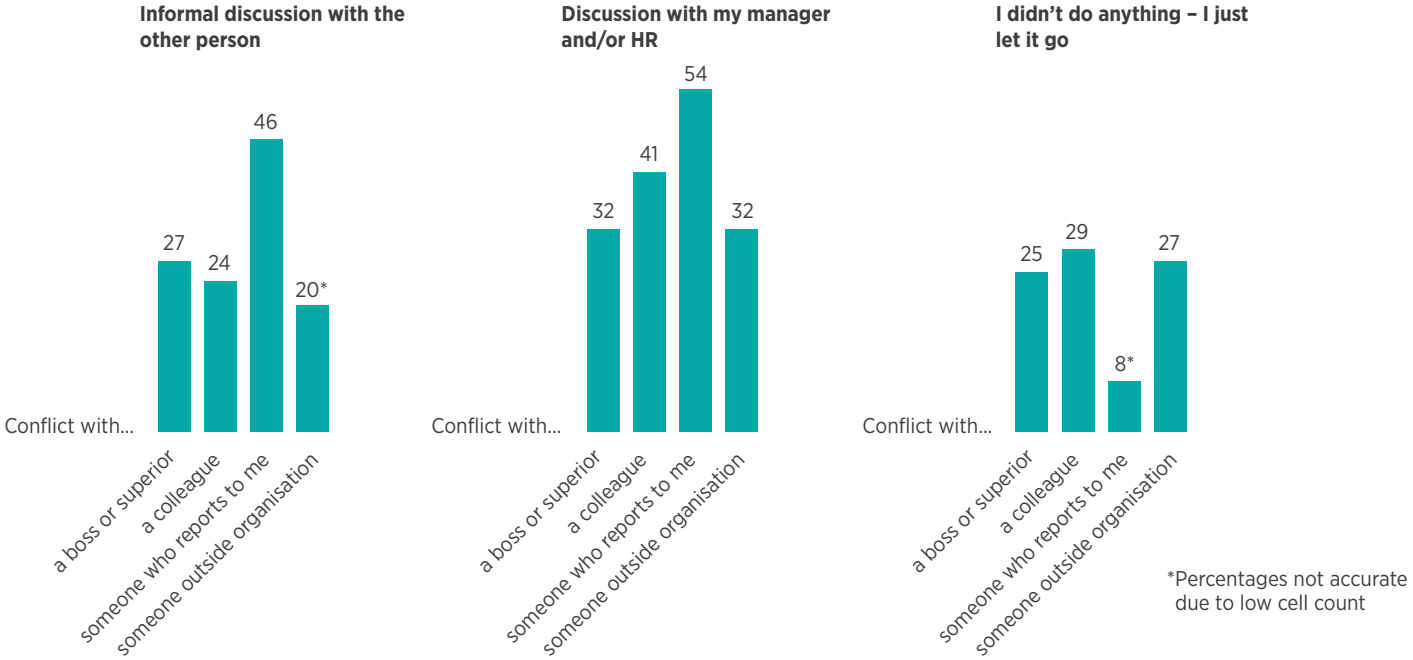
On the other hand, employees in conflict with their line manager or their line manager's boss are far more likely to discuss the matter with an employee representative or union official or to decide to look for a new job.

Figure 16: UK employee views on organisational support to resolve conflict (%)



n=2,195

Figure 17: Response to conflict, according to who the conflict was with (%)



*Percentages not accurate due to low cell count

Focus of the conflict

There are a number of statistically significant relationships between the focus or perceived origin of conflict and how people respond to it. Below we highlight the most notable differences.[8]

Some issues we are markedly less likely to 'just let go', namely, contracts of employment or terms and conditions, and individual competence or performance.

We are most likely to take a direct and informal approach, discussing the issue with the other person, when the problem focuses on individual competence or performance, or (typically the flipside to this) levels of support or resources.

Formal grievance, discipline or complaints procedures are most likely to be used in cases of absence management. There are also various issues we are substantially more likely to discuss with an employee representative or union official – in descending order these include absence management, level of support or resources, contracts of employment and promotion.

Following through to a more serious level of action, we are most likely to decide to look for a new job when conflict focuses on contracts of employment, followed by personality clashes; and to some extent more likely to do so if it focuses on levels of support or resources, or promotion.

There is an interesting mix of tendencies regarding conflict rooted in personality clashes. On the one hand, people are less likely in these cases to resort to grievance, discipline or complaints procedures. This is understandable, as these formal channels will not generally suit the more relational cases, which are less clear cut and tangible.

However, on the other hand, employees also find disputes rooted in personality clashes among the most insurmountable: as noted above, in these conflicts we are substantially more likely to look for a new job. Yet it is clear we do want to talk about these issues. We are slightly more likely to discuss such cases of conflict directly with the other person and much more likely to do so with a friend or member of our family; although in and of itself, the friends and family option is not an effective route to resolution (see Section 7 below). Furthermore, it is worth reminding ourselves that differences of personality are the single most common cause that we identified of conflict, being a factor in 44% of cases.

This has important implications for forms of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) such as mediation and facilitated discussions. In line with views on the usefulness and availability of mediation (see above), these findings point to an unmet need for support in resolving conflict informally, person to person. Although formal channels remain a necessary tool and can be effective (see Section 7), a great deal of conflict may be unsuited to these methods and the cost – to the individuals involved and the organisation – of not plugging this gap may be high.

Conflict behaviour

There are also various significant relationships between what behaviour is reported in conflict and how people respond to it.

In particular, the type of behaviour that stands out is bullying, intimidation or harassment. In cases of conflict where this is perceived, people are least likely to do nothing (let it go). They are also much more likely to discuss such cases with their line manager or HR, an employee representative, or a family member or friend, and more likely to look for a new job. As mentioned in Section 5, a characteristic of bullying is the persistent nature of the behaviour. It is this repeated and unfair singling out of themselves that we can surmise prompts people into action.

Aside from this, another finding that stands out is that cases involving verbal abuse or shouting are much more likely to be referred to the formal channels of grievance and discipline. This is understandable, as these behaviours are relatively easy to assess objectively.

Organisational factors affecting responses

Organisational sector

Looking at broad sectors, we find that public sector employees are more likely both to approach an employee representative and to have used mediation. The former is no surprise, given the stronger presence of unions in the public sector. The latter is interesting and potentially an indication that the notion of using an independent trained mediator comes more naturally to public sector organisations.

These two findings may be related. A defining characteristic of mediation is that, in looking for win–win solutions, each party has an equal chance to talk through

8 It is worth noting the limitation of our data set here. The numbers of employees responding in certain ways, such as using mediation or filing employment tribunals, are generally too small to find any significant relationships. It is thus likely that the relationships we focus on here are far from complete.

their experiences and put forward their views. This disrupts to an extent the normal hierarchy in relationships where there is a clear subordinate: managers, in short, have to give up some of their usual prerogative (Saundry et al 2013). Thus, one can see why in unionised organisations, where open negotiations between management and employee representatives are more common, there may be more access to mediation or people may be more open to trying it.

A related reason may be the stronger tradition in the public sector of taking a formal, quasi-judicial approach to employee relations problems (Saundry et al 2011) and in particular, as noted in Section 1, making greater use of grievance and discipline procedures (Wood et al 2014). Although mediation is sometimes described as 'informal' dispute resolution, this is only really true in comparison with legal options. Compared with informal discussions, it follows a clear structure and process, so may seem less alien in public sector settings. Equally, with the greater use of grievance and discipline procedures, public sector organisations may also be more aware of their limitations in certain types of conflict (see above and Section 7) and thus more amenable to trying mediation as an alternative or complementary route.

However, a readiness to try mediation does not necessarily translate to effective conflict resolution. We also find that in general, public sector employees have less confidence in their line managers to help them resolve conflict than their public sector counterparts.[9] Public sector employees are particularly more likely to flag up slow responses from their line managers and to some extent more likely to point to ineffective line management responses. This may be more to do with cumbersome processes than poor skills sets, as there is no public/private difference between how well line managers are seen to build healthy team relationships.

Organisational size

We also find that employees working in micro organisations (up to nine employees) are far more likely to discuss the matter with the other person directly and less likely to raise the issue with a manager or HR personnel. Thus, 42% of employees experiencing conflict in micro organisations tried resolving it with an informal conversation with the other person, compared with just a quarter of employees (24%) in small, medium or large organisations.

In line with this, employees in micro organisations are substantially more confident to raise issues in their organisations. Further, there are less pronounced but similar organisational differences when we look at the skillsets of line managers: in micro organisations, they are less likely to be seen as being poor at building strong teams or dealing with conflict.

This broad difference is no surprise, given the more closely knit and informal environments typical in the smallest organisations. But it is interesting to note at what point the change occurs; for example, how sharply the practice of sorting things out with an informal chat dwindles. Already when one looks at small organisations (10–49 employees), the likelihood of taking this simplest of approaches has almost halved; and there is no difference between small, medium and large organisations in this respect.

In short, as organisations grow in size, or we move to larger setups, it seems we are remarkably quick to become institutionalised in this respect. Whether it is because we feel penned in by organisational processes or because we don't see enough gain to be had from taking an informal direct approach, it seems the structures of organisations quickly make us less social in how we deal with conflict. This would seem to underscore the case for mediation and facilitated discussions as mechanisms for facilitating person-to-person conversations that may not happen otherwise.

9 This analysis controls for organisational size by looking only at those with 500 or more employees.

7 Finding resolution

Overall, our survey shows a very even spread in the degree to which our respondents reached a resolution in their conflicts. We now consider a range of factors that appear to influence this.

Who the conflict was with

Overall, conflict is seen to be resolved most fully when it has been with people outside our organisation.

Inside the organisation, the picture is all too familiar, speaking again of the role the power differential plays in how conflict plays out. On average, we judge that conflict has been resolved most satisfactorily when it was with someone who reports to us, less so when it is a colleague, and less again when it is our line manager, or one of their bosses.

Focus of the conflict

We find no obvious trends overall in what types of issues tend to be resolved more fully. Correlation analysis shows that the cases of conflict least likely to be resolved adequately are those relating to levels of support or resources, followed by absence or its management, contracts of employment and differences in personality or styles of working. Conflict focused on promotion, targets and performance seems to be easier to resolve in comparison.

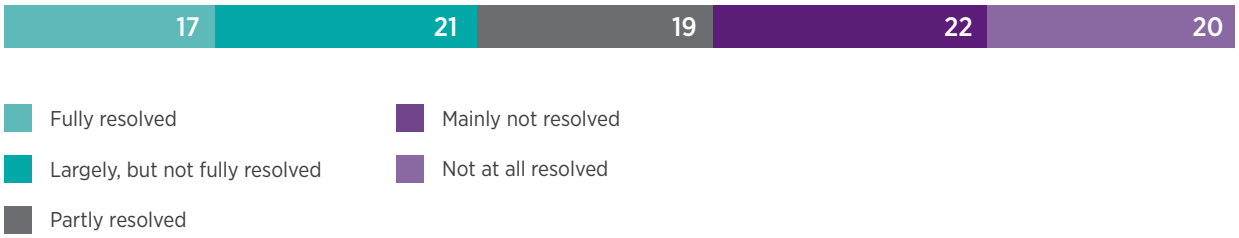
Response to conflict

On the basis of our survey findings, the best chance of resolving conflict comes either when we informally discuss the matter with the other person or when we use a formal grievance, discipline or complaints procedure. Respectively, 45% and 58% of these cases are seen to be *largely* or *fully resolved*, compared with 39% overall. While these two approaches to dealing with disputes seem fields apart, they will often be used in very different situations (see Section 6).

But it is an important point that overall, the informal and formal approaches both have a clear place in resolving conflict. This provides some evidence contrary to the argument, sometimes put forward by advocates of mediation, that the more formal procedures are ineffective because they encourage parties to set battle lines, fostering a zero-sum game mentality and making views more entrenched, instead of encouraging a more balanced and positive win–win outlook. There may be some truth in this view, but our survey underlines the importance of providing formal approaches.[10] Their merits – potentially providing a fair process, redress for unfair treatment and a degree of closure – should not be overlooked. The problem is that they are clearly inadequate on their own and, as discussed in Section 6, may be largely irrelevant in many types of conflict.

This is in line with other research that finds mediation and grievance and discipline procedures being used in conjunction with each other, not only in a broad sense, as approaches made available to give people different options to suit their situation; but also specifically within

Figure 18: To what extent has the conflict or difficult relationship so far been resolved? (%)



n=750

10 This is in line with Acas/CIPD guidance that argues that in some cases, formal procedures will be the only option (CIPD 2013b).

a case of conflict, as approaches that can be used at different stages as appropriate (CIPD 2013b, Saundry et al 2013). Thus, despite the label of 'alternative' dispute resolution, mediation may be better thought of as being *complementary* to the more formal approaches such as grievance and discipline procedures.

We also find evidence to suggest that we are better off dealing with conflict head on: it is not likely to go away if we decide to do nothing and 'let it go'. Interestingly, and perhaps related to this, those who discussed the issue with a friend or family member outside of work were also less likely to reach resolution. This seems to play to the stereotype of the English that they may often complain, but may not be so good at directing complaints to the right people (Fox 2005).

We don't find a significant relationship between how fully conflict is resolved and whether mediation has been used, but this is not surprising considering the small numbers who use it.

We draw out implications of these findings in the next and final section.

Figure 19: Proportion of cases of conflict largely/fully resolved, according to who the conflict was with (%)

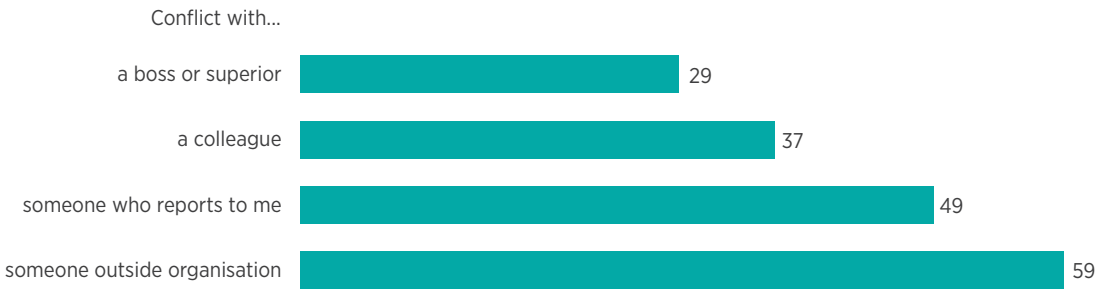


Figure 20: Proportion of cases of conflict largely/fully resolved, according to how employees responded (%)

Conclusions

The scale of the problem

Workplace conflict is a major issue for organisations that should not be brushed under the carpet. Both ongoing difficult relationships and isolated incidents of conflict can have serious ramifications for employees' personal well-being and morale, which has clear knock-on effects for the organisation through demotivation, absence, unworkable relationships and people leaving the organisation; not to mention the management and HR time it takes to help resolve disputes (CIPD 2011, 2015).

The basics and the relationships

There are two broad areas that we need to focus on in understanding the impact of conflict and how it can be resolved. Firstly, the basics of the employment relationship: T&Cs, support when we are ill, a sense of progression. Secondly, the interpersonal relationships: the differences and clashes in personality and working styles that create tension and misunderstandings that can lead to conflict.

Both are important and have serious ramifications, but our evidence suggests that they may need different strategies for resolution. Informal approaches are seen to work better when there is a personality clash, or when the problem focuses on individual performance or levels of support or resources. Formal grievance, discipline or complaints procedures are most likely to be used in cases of absence management. Employee representatives are most often used in conflict about absence management, level of support or resources, contracts of employment and promotion.

Power dynamics and perception gaps

Throughout this report, our findings highlight the influence of power dynamics in workplace conflict. If people are the more junior person in a work relationship, they are more likely to frame a difference of views as conflict; more likely to rate that conflict as serious; and more likely to report stress or being demotivated as a result; and less likely to say that the conflict has been adequately resolved.

The power dynamic has a very clear influence on how workplace conflict is recognised and experienced. Comparing incidents of conflict people have with their line managers or others higher up in the hierarchy with disputes or difficult relationships people have with a direct or indirect report, there are some very clear-cut findings. When we are the more junior party in conflict, we are more likely to suffer adverse effects from the conflict and less likely to judge it has been resolved sufficiently. We also approach the conflict differently, for example being less likely to use formal channels such as grievance and discipline.

Gender differences

We also find some interesting differences in the experiences of conflict reported by men and women. Men are more likely to report having had an isolated dispute (as opposed to a difficult relationship), especially with their direct reports and colleagues elsewhere in the organisation. In line with this, men are also more likely to report shouting or heated arguments.

On the other hand, bullying and harassment is more often reported by women, who are also more likely to report that conflict has been a stressful experience, and are twice as likely to discuss the problem with family or friends.

Despite these differences in how conflict is manifest and dealt with, it must be said that at a macro level, the gender differences are limited. Overall, women are just as likely as men to report interpersonal conflict, and we find no significant difference between how fully men and women judge conflict to be resolved.

Organisational differences

Public sector organisations appear to fare worse, reporting more conflict and being less able to deal with it in a timely way. But the biggest difference across organisations is in their size. In particular, it is micro organisations with fewer than ten employees that deal with conflict more informally and more effectively. Even in small organisations of 10–49 employees, we find this more difficult.

It seems that organisational complexity and structures that develop as organisations grow in size very quickly get in the way of resolving conflict swiftly. One implication of this is that many of our organisations are less social and we are less able to have open and frank conversations to resolve our differences than we might like to think.

In search of solutions

Approaches such as mediation or facilitated discussions may be more necessary than we realise: we need practical support to deal with conflict directly and effectively. Our survey backs up this view. While only 1.5% of employees reported using mediation to help resolve conflict, many more are of the view that not only is it a valuable tool, but also that they personally would have benefitted from mediation.

This does not mean that grievance and discipline procedures do not work. Indeed, we find evidence that overall, these more formal channels have as big an impact in helping resolve conflict as sorting things out directly with the other person. But they are clearly insufficient and our data is consistent with the view that they do not help in many types of conflict. In many situations, a system that relies on grievance and discipline procedures alone will do little good, as it will simply mean that conflict festers until it escalates to a serious level.

In particular, conflict that has roots in personality clashes stands out in this regard. The scale and seriousness of this type of conflict is highlighted by our findings that it is the single most common issue or cause of conflict at work, and that it's particularly likely to prompt employees to look for a new job. We need to support line managers to build healthy, robust team environments in which individual differences are at least respected, if not positively appreciated,[11] and disagreements can be expressed safely.

Mediation and arbitration are typically referred to as forms of alternative dispute resolution (ADR). They are indeed an alternative to the more formal and legal processes, but employers may do better to think of them as complementary, working alongside grievance and disciplinary action. If employers are to effectively resolve the gamut of workplace clashes, disputes and difficult relationships in-house, they should make a collective suite of approaches available to employees. Relying solely on traditional channels and not actively promoting approaches such as mediation risks having a serious blind spot.

But this should not simply be a case of 'bolting on' mediation, for example by bringing in external providers. The role of the line managers in responding to conflict in a timely, informal way is crucial, in particular in the context of responsibilities being devolved from central HR functions (CIPD 2015, Saundry and Wibberley 2012).

A decade or two ago, when business coaching was still relatively uncommon, it invariably meant setting up a series of organised sessions with an external coach consultant. This still happens now, of course, but alongside this, we also talk about developing a 'coaching culture' in an organisation and of line managers 'drawing on coaching behaviours' as part of a core skillset.

A similar shift in expectations and practice needs to happen in conflict resolution. Far from being a bolt-on that is only ever led by independent external mediators, the methods of alternative dispute resolution should also make up part of the required skillset of the well-rounded line manager. There will always be a place for independent mediators or arbitrators, but we also need to enhance the ability of our workforces to engage in informal conversations to resolve or contain low-level conflict before it gets out of hand. This – in particular the focus on line management skills – will be a central theme in our next research project on workplace conflict.

[11] This has been argued to be the most business-relevant interpretation of workforce diversity (Lines and Hamill 2008).

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CIPD

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
151 The Broadway London SW19 1JQ United Kingdom
T +44 (0)20 8612 6200 **F** +44 (0)20 8612 6201
E cipd@cipd.co.uk **W** cipd.co.uk

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