



Guide

# Managing conflict at work

## A guide for line managers

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# Introduction

Managing conflict at work is becoming an increasing challenge for employers. In 2006–07 the number of individual employment disputes that resulted in employment tribunal applications increased to 132,577 compared with 115,039 for the previous year.

The high number of claims is partly explained by the public's increased awareness of employment rights and their recourse to litigation. 'No win, no fee' lawyers provide an avenue for disgruntled employees to lodge claims against their employer at no cost to themselves.

In addition, the introduction of new employment legislation in the last few years has added to the challenges faced by employers. Since 2003 new regulation has come into force prohibiting discrimination on the basis of age, sexual orientation and religion and belief, adding to existing laws outlawing discrimination against people for reason of their race, sex or disability. The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 is also increasingly being seen as another avenue by employees to make claims against their employer for stress or bullying.

The CIPD has welcomed the evolving legal framework as a means of promoting fair treatment and equality of opportunity at work. Organisations that embrace this agenda will gain from clear business benefits in terms of their employer brand and ability to attract and retain talent. However, changing ingrained prejudices and behaviours is not easy, so it's essential that organisations develop clear policies and procedures underpinned by appropriate training for managers and employees, outlining organisational values, and the rights and responsibilities of individuals.

The challenges associated with managing conflict at work have been exacerbated by the introduction in October 2004 of the Statutory Dispute Resolution Regulations, which introduced minimum standard three-step disciplinary and grievance procedures. The

principle behind the introduction of the Regulations – to ensure that employers and employees made every effort to resolve disputes in the workplace – was sound, but in practice the statutory procedures have led to a formalisation of how conflict at work is managed. The CIPD 2007 survey report *Managing Conflict at Work* shows that employers believe that the Regulations have generated more disciplinary and grievance procedures without reducing the number of employment tribunal applications made by disgruntled employees. It also shows that employers are more likely to rely on legal advice to resolve disputes since the introduction of the Regulations.

The CIPD survey finds that organisations are increasingly relying on their HR departments to manage conflict as managers shy away from tackling disputes in case they do or say something that might be held against them during any formal proceedings.

This approach is counterproductive, as by the time a dispute has escalated to the point where the disciplinary procedure has been triggered or a formal grievance lodged, opinions are often hardened and confrontational stances on both sides have developed that are very hard to change.

To prevent this, it is essential that line managers have the skills, knowledge and confidence to identify and manage workplace disagreements, and bullying and harassment at an early stage.

Line managers can be both the solution to, as well as the cause of, workplace disputes. The CIPD 2004 *Managing Conflict at Work* survey report found that line managers are most likely to be the source of bullying within organisations. Management style is also the number-one cause of stress at work according to the 2007 CIPD *Absence Management* survey report. Managers need to have the appropriate people management skills to ensure the way that they

manage is not affecting the health and well-being of the individuals within their department or team.

This guide draws on research to identify the behaviours that will help line managers identify and manage disputes at work proactively. It also covers the people management skills needed by line managers so they don't become part of the problem rather than the solution to workplace conflict.

# Section 1 Managing conflict at work: a competency framework for line managers

This guide makes use of previously unpublished research – jointly sponsored by the CIPD and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) – that identifies the positive and negative management behaviours that manage and mitigate against conflict at work. It is an offshoot of a joint CIPD and HSE project exploring the links between line management behaviour and stress at work. In total, 369 managers and employees from the healthcare, finance, education and local and central government sectors were interviewed to identify the behaviours that influence stress at work. This led to the development of a management competency framework for preventing and reducing stress at work.

The CIPD recognised that there was some overlap between this framework and the specific competencies needed by managers to manage conflict at work. As a result, the ‘managing conflict at work’ competency framework was developed. This is based on 100 behavioural indicators relevant to managing conflict that were identified as part of the stress management research (see Table 1).

This guide draws on the key management behaviours that were identified by the research as being most important in helping line managers prevent and manage conflict in the workplace.

## Dealing with issues

CIPD research into managing conflict at work in 2007 and 2004 emphasises the importance of line managers having the knowledge, skills and confidence to be able to intervene at an early stage to nip disputes in the bud – before they escalate.

This is also a key finding from the joint CIPD and HSE research into line management behaviour and conflict management.

## Intervening quickly in cases of conflict

Managers should be sensitive to when banter becomes bickering or when teasing starts to have a hurtful edge. They should be prepared to step in and have a quiet word with the team members involved. The manager should inform those involved that while lively interaction is encouraged, it's important that there is mutual respect and that certain standards of behaviour are expected at work. The manager should have noted examples of the types of behaviour or language that have been used that are inappropriate at work so that those involved will understand what is unacceptable.

It's much easier to have this conversation as soon as a manager starts to have concerns about behaviour or early signs of conflict – to prevent habits from being formed and to ensure that the manager is taken seriously. It's much more difficult to be respected if a manager has appeared to give certain behaviours tacit approval by letting a situation drift on for weeks or months.

## Dealing with conflict head on

Taking action to manage conflict can appear quite daunting to some managers, but it's a core part of their role and responsibilities. If managers ignore unacceptable behaviour, problems will escalate until the disciplinary process has to be used or a formal grievance is lodged, by which time it will be much harder to achieve a successful resolution.

Some potential sources of conflict at work are obvious, such as:

- excessive personal use of the Internet or email
- poor attendance and time-keeping
- any form of bullying behaviour or harassment
- any form of discriminatory behaviour
- unacceptable language
- theft
- drink or drug problems.

Table 1: Managing conflict at work: a competency framework for line managers

	Competency	Examples of manager behaviour	
		Positive	Negative
Action orientation	Dealing with issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• intervening quickly in cases of conflict</li> <li>• dealing with conflict head on</li> <li>• protecting employees by removing them from conflict situations</li> <li>• removing a disruptive team member when necessary</li> <li>• following up on conflicts after resolution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• avoiding confrontation</li> <li>• leaving conflicts between team members to sort themselves out</li> <li>• not addressing bullying</li> <li>• allowing a situation to develop before intervening</li> <li>• stepping in to intervene in conflicts without understanding the issues</li> <li>• allowing a disruptive team member to return to the team</li> </ul>
	Use of official processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• communicating procedures and policies available to each employee</li> <li>• use all available procedures to investigate incidents of abuse</li> <li>• using official procedures to set an example of how seriously complaints are taken</li> <li>• escalating issues to senior management where appropriate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• making a complaint official before seeking to resolve locally</li> <li>• making a complaint official against the complainant's wishes</li> <li>• not following correct procedure in dealing with a conflict</li> <li>• using 'red tape' associated with procedure to discourage employees from making official complaints</li> </ul>
Team focus	Participative approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• acting as a mediator in conflict situations</li> <li>• speaking to each party individually</li> <li>• bringing both sides together to communicate</li> <li>• supporting both sides in a complaints procedure</li> <li>• gather ideas of how to address the issue with the team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• taking sides</li> <li>• not giving equal time to each side of the conflict</li> <li>• speaking to employees in a parent/child manner</li> <li>• not listening to employee complaints</li> </ul>
	Monitoring team relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• being aware of tension and keeping it at a low level</li> <li>• picking up on squabbles before they lead to conflict</li> <li>• acknowledging when a team member is causing stress to others</li> </ul>	n/a
Personal style	Acting as a role model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• maintaining professionalism</li> <li>• being clear about expectations of team conduct</li> <li>• not tolerating backbiting in the team</li> <li>• showing no interest in office politics or gossip</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• losing temper within discussions</li> <li>• deliberately creating conflict in the team</li> <li>• engaging in conflict with other managers</li> <li>• engaging in conflict with employees</li> </ul>
	Integrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• keeps employee issues private and confidential</li> <li>• treating all employees with the same importance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• making public where complaints have come from</li> <li>• bullying employees</li> <li>• threatening employees unfairly with disciplinary action</li> </ul>

However, frequently it is the more subtle behaviours that over time, if not confronted, will lead to workplace disputes.

Examples of less obvious sources of dispute include:

- taking credit for other people's work or ideas
- talking over people in meetings
- not inviting team members to team social evenings or events
- not covering for people when they are off sick
- not taking messages for people
- using someone else's contacts or customer/client information without permission
- not including people in round-robin emails
- ignoring people or being discourteous
- poor personal hygiene.

Managers should not ignore underlying tensions that are developing in their teams. It's vital that line managers have regular informal one-to-one conversations and catch-ups with the people they manage so that these kinds of issues can be aired naturally where possible. However, managers must also be prepared to be proactive and initiate informal discussions if they think a problem is brewing. Conflict at work can lead to absences, so return-to-work interviews are also a good opportunity for managers to ask questions about any conflict issues that might be bothering employees.

### Case study 1: an example of ineffective conflict management

A local government employee is talking about a situation when a new temporary member of staff started work in the interviewee's office. At the time, another team member, called Shirley, was on annual leave.

*'I think one particular day I just sort of said to her, I prefer it if you didn't sit at that desk because that's Shirley's desk and she's a bit funny about people using her desk. I said if you could sit at your own desk. Anyhow she must have really taken offence to it. The next time I had my supervision, supervision fine, brilliant, no problem but then my line manager's manager came in at the end and said that somebody had expressed the opinion that they thought I was bullying. She filled me in on what it was about and I said, I asked her not to sit at that desk because I know that that person is quite protective of her own environment. She just wanted her own desk, she'd got everything just so. I said I wasn't really nasty about it at all but she said well we've had it reported and we've got to mention it to you.'*

The complainant was then prepared to accept an apology and so an apology was made. The interviewee goes on to describe the impact of the situation following this.

*'After that, because of what had been said previously, I was really really paranoid about saying anything that might offend. When I had the next supervision, it was mentioned that I was very quiet and I wasn't talking to anybody, I wasn't being part of the team and I said I really do feel uncomfortable. I was disappointed that my line manager felt that she'd had to bring her line manager in to tell me something like that when really if she had raised the matter with me I'd have just apologised for what I said.'*

This situation continued with a bad atmosphere in the office for the next two or three months.

### Protecting employees by removing them from conflict situations

Managers also need to understand what to do if a conflict does blow up into a major disagreement. If someone loses their temper then it is important that they are taken out of the situation or away from the person or people that the dispute is with until they calm down. If this does not happen then the danger is that someone will do or say something in the heat of the moment that could become a bigger source of grievance than the original problem.

Once the disputing parties have been separated it will then be possible to have a calmer and more rational conversation about what sparked the disagreement and start to consider possible resolution.

### Removing a disruptive team member when necessary

In some circumstances there may be personality clashes that are hard to resolve and remain an ongoing source of tension, or a particular member of staff who consistently causes tensions and conflict. If this is the case then the line manager should consider whether

there is any chance of moving the individual to a different job role or team, which they may be more suited to. Any change would have to follow full consultation with the individual.

Alternatively, if an individual's behaviour is consistently disruptive and does not improve after attempts have been made to resolve matters informally then the line manager will have to consider using the disciplinary process. The disciplinary process will ensure that the individual concerned understands the seriousness of the situation. The disciplinary meeting will allow the manager and HR to set out clearly the standards of behaviour and performance that are expected going forward. Ultimately, if there is no improvement over time then hard decisions will have to be taken regarding possible dismissal – but only once the disciplinary procedure has been followed consistently.

Recognising the point at which informal approaches to resolving disputes have failed and when formal disciplinary action must be taken is an important judgement that line managers have to make. HR can provide useful advice at this point.

## Case study 2: an example of ineffective conflict management

A central government manager talks about a situation of conflict emerging following a new member of staff being brought into the team from another department.

*'We knew that this person wasn't very well thought of, there had been quite a lot of problems with this person, he'd been caught going off site in the middle of the day, leaving early etc, etc, so we weren't very keen to have him. But we decided we would give him a try because it's quite a nice team of people that I work with and we thought we would perhaps be able to sort him out, get him motivated and enjoying the work. But things didn't work out at all, they just went from bad to worse and personnel wouldn't actually believe us that it wasn't working out and that, you know there were serious problems. This chap really was having a rough time, and so he was coming into the office looking as if he was sleeping out of doors, it was really that bad. My senior manager said to me, "Do something about him, tell him that he can't dress like that in a public office."*

*'So when I did actually do that, because I felt as if I had to do it for everyone's sake really, he actually walked off site and refused to come back to work. He also threatened some of the staff, including me, with harassment. So it was a horrible stressful thing to happen and in the end after about six months he actually gave his notice in and so it all just went away.*

*'But personnel were very worried that we would be sued and none of my line management supported me, especially the one who said "do something about him".'*

### Following up on conflicts after resolution

It's very tempting for line managers to hope that once a conflict has been resolved – either informally or once a disciplinary or grievance procedure has run its course and appropriate sanctions have been taken – that the problem has gone away for good.

However, in many cases one party or another will still feel aggrieved to a greater or lesser extent. So it's important that line managers talk to the individuals involved during informal one-to-ones or during discussions around development or performance appraisals to find out whether the conflict really has been resolved or is being managed, or if there are renewed tensions or unhappiness. The danger with old conflicts is that if they do re-occur there will be no slow build-up, as animosity and resentment already exists. This is why it's important that line managers use 'temperature checks' through regular communication to ensure that old disagreements are not brewing again.

### Use of official processes

Of course, although all efforts should be made to resolve workplace conflict informally at an early stage, there will be many instances where formal disciplinary action should be taken. Line managers should not shy away from using the disciplinary process where an individual's misconduct or underperformance demands it.

### Communicating procedures and policies available to each employee

Line managers should ensure that all employees understand the formal disciplinary and grievance procedures that are in place. Line managers should also emphasise that where there are disagreements, efforts should be made to resolve matters informally (wherever possible) and employees should be encouraged to discuss any problems they're having with their job, colleagues or outside work.

### Use all available procedures to investigate incidents

Where serious incidents occur – such as alleged harassment, bullying or out-of-character outbursts of verbal abuse or physical intimidation – they must be dealt with and taken seriously. Any form of gross misconduct must be properly investigated and dealt with using the formal disciplinary and grievance procedure. Line managers must be wary of second-

guessing the results of any investigation and must ensure that other members of the team don't either.

In many cases conflicts can be defused by effective early intervention by the manager. However, there will be some situations that will blow up with very little warning, either because of the personalities of those involved or because of something happening in someone's domestic life that is putting them under pressure that they're having problems dealing with. However, regardless of the reason, where an individual's behaviour leads to serious misconduct, the formal disciplinary or grievance procedure must be used so that the matter is investigated fairly and decisions are not made in the heat of the moment.

### Using official procedures to set an example of how seriously complaints are taken

Used properly, the official disciplinary and grievance procedure can reassure those involved in conflict at work that the matter is being taken seriously and dealt with consistently and fairly.

### Escalating issues to senior management where appropriate

In some cases – particularly where the line manager is involved or is the cause of the conflict – it may be appropriate to involve a senior manager in the formal disciplinary or grievance procedure to ensure that the process is seen to be objective.

Line managers should also have access to a senior manager or HR practitioners who can give them advice about managing difficult situations at work before they escalate to conflicts.

### Participative approach

#### Acting as a mediator in conflict situations

All line managers should have informal mediation skills to allow them to step in and attempt to resolve disputes before they escalate. Line managers can help individuals in dispute identify what is at the root of their disagreement, what they need to happen to resolve matters or move forward and any changes or compromises they're prepared to make in their behaviour or attitudes.

#### Speaking to each party individually

The starting point is for the manager to have informal one-to-one conversations with the parties in dispute to

identify the crux of the problem and hear the different individual perspectives on what is happening and the grievances that they bear.

### Bringing both sides together to communicate

Once a manager has a clear understanding of the problem and the individuals' different perspectives on the problem, they can bring the disputing parties together and act as an objective broker to help find common ground and changes that can be made by either side to help find a solution. The manager should be careful not to take sides in this process but should simply assist the individuals in dispute to reach resolution.

### Supporting both sides in a complaints procedure

Where informal attempts to resolve a dispute fail and matters deteriorate to the point where one or both of the parties submit a formal grievance, it is important that the manager is not seen to take sides – unless of course they have objective evidence that is relevant to the dispute. Taking sides will not help resolve the conflict successfully and will create tensions back in the

workplace once the formal process has been completed and any disciplinary sanction imposed.

### Gather ideas of how to address the issue with the team

In situations where there are disputes that affect the whole team, for example as a result of the tensions that arise from meeting particular deadlines or changes to working practices, managers can help find solutions that the whole team can buy into by having an open discussion or brainstorming meeting with their team to find possible solutions.

Managers can also use one-to-ones with employees to get a clear picture of what is creating team disharmony from different people's perspectives.

Managers can help to avoid conflict by having regular consultation with their team to ensure that their views are taken into account before making changes that affect their work or working environment.

## Case study 3: an example of effective conflict management

A financial employee describes a situation when a new manager came into their team, at a time of high conflict and low morale.

*'Most of the issues centred around one person and the effect that person had had on the team. There was lots of arguments, lots of bitching, lots of issues that just were not being addressed and hadn't been addressed for a long, long time. This new manager was more or less put into the lions' den to see how she would cope with it. So it was pretty unfair to her but, she came through it and she actually turned the team from being one of the most negative or one of the most unproductive teams to probably being the best in the department within the space of a couple of months.'*

The employee goes on to explain how they think the manager created this turnaround.

*'I think it was her attitude to the work and it was her attitude to the people. She started with a clean slate and didn't listen to the "tittle tattle" that went on before. She came in and she immediately had a one-to-one with every member of staff and allowed them the opportunity to air their views, get the rant and rave out and then she sat back and quietly watched the team dynamics, watched the team, watched how they interacted, and on a couple of occasions she had to maybe move seats, move people's seating arrangements. But she did that as a trial and error over a period of time, watched people how they were at their work and how they interacted with each other. So by her becoming really involved with the people in the team, she made a real difference.'*

## Monitoring team relationships

### Being aware of tension and keeping it at a low level

In any team there will be tensions or disagreements that arise from time to time, but line managers should be aware of signs that serious disputes are developing. Line managers should also be aware that different personality types will deal with conflict in different ways. Some people will show their annoyance very quickly and openly, for example by confronting someone as soon as their behaviour bothers them, or making their displeasure over work issues very clearly known. Other people may on the surface appear more laidback and tolerant but will be gradually getting more annoyed by a colleague, their manager or a work problem until they lose their temper spectacularly, often over something quite minor that has proved to be the last straw. Some individuals will sulk and become withdrawn when they have a grievance. This is why managers should try and get to know the employees in their team or department as people and find ways to have regular informal conversations to help them pick up on issues that are beginning to fester away beneath the surface.

### Picking up on squabbles before they lead to conflict

Many disputes will start off as innocuous disagreements that appear to be resolved or forgotten straight away. However, where such niggles recur on a regular basis, managers should intervene and talk to the individuals concerned about what is happening and how to prevent the problem occurring in the first place.

## Acknowledging when a team member is causing stress to others

It only takes one person to cause disharmony within a team as a result of their negative behaviour or poor performance. Examples of behaviour and performance that can create stress at work include:

- being overly critical
- having a short temper
- taking out personal problems at home on people in the office
- making personal remarks
- not sharing information
- talking about people behind their back
- avoiding unpopular team tasks
- poor time-keeping or attendance.

Managers must be prepared to step in and talk to the individual as soon as it becomes obvious they are creating problems. In many cases they may be unaware of how they or their behaviour is perceived by others and will respond quickly to a quiet word. Where informal attempts, as well as the use of formal disciplinary procedures, fail to resolve problems, the manager in conjunction with HR will have to consider taking steps to remove them from the team (see page 7).

## Acting as a role model

### Maintaining professionalism

Managers must be seen to set an example by being seen to follow the organisation's policies and procedures. If managers don't comply with company policy on, for example, reporting absence, then it is

## Case study 4: an example of effective conflict management

A healthcare manager describes how she prevents conflicts from occurring in her office.

*'I make sure that if I do pick up on anything, because I do get wee squabbles and things sometimes that I actually pick one out and ask what's wrong because I can see there's an atmosphere. I try and get them through it in the best way without interfering too much. Often, it might be that somebody's been particularly not helping with a clinic that day or not training and they're doing their own thing. You know it's silly things sometimes but silly things like somebody looking at the intranet when they should be doing something else can cause a little bit of you know, a disagreement or something.'*

difficult to expect employees to do the same. Managers must also set an example by being consistent in how they deal with the team and not showing favouritism. In social situations managers must also be careful not to let their hair down in front of the people they manage to the extent that they regret or are embarrassed by their behaviour when they are back in a work environment.

#### **Being clear about expectations of team conduct**

As well as spelling out what behaviour is not tolerated, managers should also demonstrate what positive behaviours employees should aspire to both in terms of how they interact with each other and other people in the organisation, as well as customers, clients and the public.

#### **Not tolerating backbiting in the team**

Managers should also intervene to prevent employees from talking about other people in the team or department behind their backs. Ignoring this type of behaviour will lead to resentment building, cliques developing and encourages a work culture where bullying is more likely to occur. The manager should establish if there is a genuine problem and then deal with it openly by talking to the individuals concerned.

#### **Showing no interest in office politics or gossip**

Office politics and gossip can be a source of disputes at work, as they can cause anxiety, uncertainty and resentment. A certain level of office gossip is inevitable and need not cause any problems, but managers should avoid adding fuel to the fire by joining in and adding to any speculation. Where gossip is malicious, managers should intervene and spell out clearly to those involved that spreading unsubstantiated rumours is unacceptable and could be construed as bullying or harassment.

A manager who has a reputation as an office gossip or politician is unlikely to be trusted and will not be seen as someone an employee can go to discuss any home or work difficulties they may be having.

#### **Integrity**

##### **Keeps employee issues private and confidential**

If managers are to create a working relationship with the individuals that they manage that is based on mutual trust and respect, then they have to make sure that they protect people's privacy and respect confidential information. People who trust their line manager are more likely to talk to them if they are having difficulties, whether in the workplace or at home, that might lead to or contribute to conflict at

### **Case study 5: an example of effective conflict management**

A healthcare manager describes going into a department where the employees had been bullied by their previous manager.

*'And the person who was bullying them actually had control and therefore, me trying to come in and say, "Actually I'm supportive, I'm nice, I'm fair", didn't wash for quite some time. And as part of that we then ended up with a disciplinary case and allegations of bullying and harassment [against the previous manager]. That then proceeded with I think 20, nearly 20, 21 or 22 staff being interviewed and out of that came an awful lot more of the stresses and pressures people had actually taken on board and lived with for quite a number of years. There were an awful lot of meetings, it was a very very hard time for me in respect of I was giving an awful lot of emotional support to people. I had pressure on to actually make sure everything worked out okay for them because they'd put their trust in me. It was through these discussions and interviews that I actually succeeded in what I needed to.'*

*'However I also supported the person who the allegations were made against because you've got to ensure you do that in order to get an objective view of what you're looking at.'*

work. Someone who has suffered a bereavement or is going through a relationship breakdown may well be more emotional and have a lower tolerance level at work than they would do under normal circumstances. Likewise individuals whose behaviour is affected by a drink or drug problem are much more likely to open up and talk to a manager who they trust and who they know will respect a confidence.

Managers who get to know the people they manage as individuals and have an awareness of issues in their home lives that might affect them at work will be much more likely to be able to talk frankly with them about problems they are having with colleagues or the job.

### Treating all employees with the same importance

Managers who are not even-handed in how they manage people will struggle to build working relationships based on mutual trust and respect. Any sign of favouritism is also likely to lead to resentment and may well be a cause of conflict in itself. Managers that fail to treat all employees with the same

importance are also vulnerable to being accused of discrimination – regardless of the motivation behind their behaviour.

### Self-report quiz for managers

#### How do you manage conflict in your team... and how effectively do you do it?

The following self-assessment quiz (Table 2) can be used to help managers identify the approach they tend to use when managing conflict and the areas for further development to help them build their conflict management skills.

To interpret the scores in each of the three dimensions, use the following guidelines:

**0–14: Development need:** A score in this range is an indication that this is an area in which you would benefit from some development. Please refer to the competency framework in Table 1 (page 5) to see which behaviours you could use in the future to manage conflict, or which you may already use that may be proving less effective.

Table 2: Managing conflict at work: self-report quiz for managers (Please tick one box only in each row)

Behaviour or characteristic	Response scale		
	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
<b>Action orientation</b>			
<i>Dealing with issues</i>			
Do you tend to face conflict head on?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you intervene quickly in conflict situations?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you openly address bullying in your team?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you know the cause of the problem before stepping in?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Use of official processes</i>			
Do you use an official process...			
– to demonstrate how seriously complaints are taken?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
– to investigate incidents of abuse?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
– as a tool to demonstrate the support available to employees?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
– only after attempting to resolve the situation locally?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Now multiply each column total by the weighting factor.</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Total 'action orientation' score (maximum score is 40)</b>			

(continued)

Table 2: Managing conflict at work: self-report quiz for managers (continued)

Behaviour or characteristic	Response scale		
	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
<b>Team focus</b>			
<i>Participative approach</i>			
In situations of conflict, do you...			
– act as a mediator?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
– ask for suggestions from team members in how to move forward?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
– find it easy to remain objective?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
– speak to everyone involved individually?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Monitoring team relationships</i>			
Do you know how well your employees get on with each other?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you aware of low-level tension in your team?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you know when a team member is causing stress to others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you pick up on squabbles before they lead to conflict?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Now multiply each column total by the weighting factor.</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Total 'team focus' score (maximum score is 40)</b>			
<b>Personal style</b>			
<i>Role-modelling behaviour</i>			
Do you keep out of office politics and gossip?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have consistently good relationships with other managers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you communicate to your team what conduct you expect from them?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you appear calm at work (even when you don't feel it!)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Integrity</i>			
Do you see all employees as equally important?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you keep all employee issues private and confidential?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you aim to gain the trust of your employees?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you protect the anonymity of complainants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Now multiply each column total by the weighting factor.</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Total 'personal style' score (maximum score is 40)</b>			

**14–28: Reasonable:** A score in this range is an indication that you show a good awareness of the behaviours for effective conflict management in this area. It may be helpful to use the competency framework to see if there are any behaviours you could add to your repertoire in this area to increase your effectiveness in managing conflict.

**28–40: Effective:** A score in this range is an indication that you demonstrate the behaviours that are effective in managing conflict in your team in this particular dimension.

### Your managing conflict profile

Fill in each of the right-hand columns. In the 'effectiveness' column, add 'development need', 'reasonable' or 'effective'.

If managers would like feedback on how others see them, this questionnaire can be given to the team they manage so they can see how they are rated as a conflict manager.

Your managing conflict profile		
Area of behaviour	Total score/40	Effectiveness
Action orientation		
Team focus		
Personal style		

# Section 2 Strong management, healthy conflict and the prevention of bullying

Managers are frequently the causes of conflict at work. CIPD research shows that line managers are most likely to be responsible for bullying within organisations, and management style is the number one cause of stress at work. One of the challenges facing most managers is that, in most cases, they have been promoted as a result of their technical knowledge or skill rather than how they manage people. This section of the guide is

designed to help managers to understand the positive management behaviours that lead to more motivated, committed and harmonious teams. A self-assessment questionnaire is set out below (Table 3). It's designed to help line managers look at their own management behaviours and style and help them see themselves as they are seen by the people that they manage.

Table 3: Self-assessment questionnaire: management behaviours and style (Please tick one box only in each row)

Behaviour or characteristic	Response scale		
	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
<b>People focus</b>			
Do you give people personal responsibility?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you actively seek out the views of others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you committed to team development?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you instil confidence in others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you encourage open feedback and debate?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Personal integrity</b>			
Do you do what you say you'll do?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you show respect to everyone?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can you say sorry when you've made a mistake?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you open and honest about your mistakes and do you learn from them?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you fair in all your dealings with others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Visibility</b>			
Do you actively promote an 'open door' approach?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you champion a culture of respect and dignity?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you 'available' to listen to the views of others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you prepared to talk to customers and clients about the need for respect and dignity at work?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you put building a culture of dignity and respect on your main agenda?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(continued)

Table 3: Self-assessment questionnaire: management behaviours and style (continued)

Behaviour or characteristic	Response scale		
	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
<b>Promoting standards</b>			
Do you establish individual and team goals?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you give personal recognition to others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you use feedback and coaching constructively?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you schedule regular time for improving interpersonal relationships?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are you constantly looking for opportunities for improvement?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Challenging the status quo</b>			
Do you openly challenge unacceptable behaviour?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you seek out prejudiced attitudes?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you critically examine policies and procedures to make sure they're fair to everyone?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>How did you do? Add up the ticks in each column.</b>			
<b>Now multiply each column total by the appropriate weighting factor:</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Total score. Maximum total score is 115</b>			

**0–50:** You don't yet understand what is needed to create dignity and respect.

**51–75:** You have some awareness of requirements but significant effort is needed.

**76–100:** You have reasonable skills in creating a culture of dignity and respect.

**101–115:** You have excellent skills in creating a culture of dignity and respect.

Now ask your team to complete the questionnaire anonymously and see how they rate you.

### Strong management and bullying

Often those accused of bullying find it difficult to recognise themselves as behaving in a bullying or aggressive way. Conversely, some managers are concerned about tackling poor performance and being accused of bullying.

When line managers find themselves having to deal with a low-performing team, part of their role is to motivate the team to perform more effectively. The process of bringing about changes in how teams work usually involves a number of areas, including setting standards, identifying and dealing with errors and mistakes, increasing productivity, greater flexibility of roles, changing priorities and reducing unreasonable expenditure.

If these changes are introduced and managed correctly, they can bring about the necessary business improvements with little or no employee distress. However, if the line manager fails in their handling of the change, accusations of bullying can occur.

Table 4 looks at different ways of tackling poorly-performing teams and distinguishing between strong management and bullying behaviour.

### Healthy conflict and bullying

A certain amount of competition is normal and important in working life. However, bullying is different

Table 4: Differences between strong management and bullying when tackling poorly-performing teams

Addressing poor performance in teams	Strong management	Bullying
Identifying the performance issue	Involves looking at all the potential reasons for poor performance, for example people, systems, training and equipment	No attempt to identify the nature or source of the poor performance
Seeking the views of the team or individual to identify the cause of the unacceptable level of performance	The team takes part in looking for the source of the problems in performance and helps the manager to identify solutions for the whole team	No discussion of the cause of the performance deficit, or opportunities for the team members to discuss their difficulties
Agreeing new standards of performance with all team members	Involves setting and agreeing standards of performance and behaviours for each team member and the manager	Imposing new standards without team discussion on appropriate standards of performance or behaviour
Agreeing the method and timing of monitoring/auditing team performance	Wherever possible the team or team member takes part in the monitoring process. The outcome of the monitoring is openly discussed	Without agreeing standards, the monitoring can occur at any time and can involve areas that are unexpected by team members
Failure to achieve the standards of performance is dealt with as a performance-improvement issue	Opportunities are taken to identify individuals who are struggling, and support is provided. Where individuals are unwilling to comply with the agreed performance-improvement process, disciplinary actions may be taken	Individuals who fail to achieve the standards of performance are put under pressure to conform. This may include ridicule, criticism, shouting, withholding of benefits, demotion, teasing or sarcasm
Recognising positive contributions	Recognises and rewards improvements in performance, attitudes and behaviours	With no monitoring, it's impossible to recognise where there have been positive contributions. Rewards and recognition are therefore arbitrary and open to acts of favouritism

from normal conflicts because it involves unfair and unethical behaviours that cause extreme distress and disruption to the individual, group and ultimately the whole organisation.

The World Health Organisation (2003) produced a guide to raise awareness of bullying and psychological harassment at work in which they chart the contrasts between healthy conflicts and bullying situations (see Table 5 on page 18).

One of the most important ways to distinguish between healthy conflicts and destructive situations that may

lead to bullying is to identify the type of issue involved. Conflicts can be related to an issue, idea or task, or to a personal value or belief. The resolution of issue-related conflicts is generally easier to achieve than that of a conflict related to strongly held values or beliefs.

#### Issue-related conflict

For example, a work group may have a conflict in deciding what strategy to pursue or how to allocate responsibilities. These conflicts can have a fruitful outcome if managed correctly. Problem-solving approaches allow participants to vigorously debate the issues involved and come to a creative solution.

Table 5: Differences between healthy conflict and bullying situations

Healthy conflicts	Bullying situations
Clear roles and tasks	Role ambiguity
Collaborative relations	Unco-operative behaviour/boycott
Common and shared objectives	Lack of foresight
Explicit interpersonal relations	Ambiguous interpersonal relations
Healthy organisations	Organisational flaws
Ethical behaviour	Unethical activities
Occasional clashes and confrontation	Long-lasting and systematic disputes
Open and frank strategies	Equivocal strategies
Open conflict and discussion	Covert actions and denial of conflict
Straightforward communication	Oblique and evasive communication

### Personal conflict

Personal conflict involves issues that threaten the individual's identity or values system and are characterised by intensely negative interpersonal clashes. The types of issue involved in personal conflict are commonly viewed as non-negotiable. It is therefore much more difficult to deal with personal conflict than issue-related conflict.

# Conclusion

The CIPD's 2007 *Managing Conflict at Work* survey report found that on average organisations devote more than 350 days in management time a year in managing disciplinary and grievance cases. The survey also found that employers face average annual costs associated with employment tribunal claims and hearings of £20,000. These findings show the very significant costs that organisations face if disputes escalate to the point where the formal disciplinary or grievance process has to be used. Of course it is not just management time wasted and financial costs that employers must take account of, but also the personal cost of individuals under stress, employee absence, dysfunctional teams and damage to morale and productivity. In many cases employees will simply vote with their feet and leave organisations if conflict is not managed effectively.

However, despite the huge impact of conflict at work, only 38% of organisations provide training for their line managers in managing conflict at work. And just 29% of respondents rate their line managers' abilities in managing conflict informally as good, compared with 69% that rate their line managers in this area as average or poor. If HR practitioners want to try and prevent conflict at work issues increasingly being passed on to them to manage, then line managers must be given the training to enable them to fulfil this role.

Line managers must be sensitive to how their employees are interacting, as well as to how they are handling any increase in their workloads or organisational change. Managers must be confident to intervene at an early stage if there are signs that employees are in dispute, or there is any hint of bullying behaviour emerging, or of indications that anyone is suffering from stress. Managers are best placed to establish the cause of any problem as soon as it emerges and find a resolution before attitudes have hardened and confrontational stances have had time to develop.

Managing conflict at work for line managers is an integral part of good people management. To a large degree it is about good communication, providing ongoing feedback and effective coaching and development. It is also about recognising good work and effective performance management.

# Further reading and references

CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF PERSONNEL AND DEVELOPMENT. (2004) *Managing conflict at work [online]*. Survey report. London: CIPD. Available online at: [http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/empreltns/general/\\_mngcnflt04.htm](http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/empreltns/general/_mngcnflt04.htm) [Accessed 14 January 2008].

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