

# SQUARING UP TO CONFLICT.

## CONFLICT AT WORK IS NOT NEW, BUT IT IS GROWING.

Research from ACAS suggests that two fifths (44%) of employees in Great Britain experienced conflict at work in the last year. Meanwhile, *The Myers-Briggs Company's Conflict at Work* report found that employees spend around 4.34 hours every week dealing with workplace conflict, a figure that continues to rise. That is more than half a working day.

But the real question is not why conflict exists. It is whether we have misunderstood what conflict is.

Is conflict really dysfunction? Or is it simply difference?

Modern organisations are more diverse than ever before. Different generations, experiences, communication styles, and cultural backgrounds are coming together in the same teams. Add the complexity of hybrid working, where misunderstandings can escalate more quickly through email, messaging platforms, and fewer face to face conversations, and it is no surprise that tensions emerge.

Difference is inevitable and without the right conditions, conflict often is too.

The challenge for leaders is recognising that we cannot change someone else's behaviour. What we can change is how conflict is managed and responded to.

When conflict becomes polarised, when people move from discussing ideas to defending positions, trust erodes quickly. Conversations stop being productive and can become personal.

In high performing teams, conflict can look quite different. People challenge ideas openly and test assumptions. They bring alternative perspectives to the table, while keeping disagreement focused on the issue, not the individual. In these environments, conflict can improve decision making and strengthen relationships because people feel heard and respected.

Trust plays a critical role here. In hybrid and high pressure environments, people can slip into assumptions about tone, intent, and competence. Without trust, conflict divides. With trust, it can sharpen thinking and deepen collaboration.

Not all workplace conflict resolves itself. Misunderstandings build, communication breaks down, and sometimes individuals become stuck in patterns that are difficult to shift alone.

## What leaders can do

- Set expectations for healthy disagreement (challenge ideas, not people) and model that behaviour in meetings.
- Surface issues early-use 1:1 conversations to clarify intent, reset tone, and prevent "sides" forming.
- Use structure when topics are tense: agree the question being decided, give equal airtime, and summarise points of agreement and disagreement.
- Make communication explicit in hybrid work (what goes in email vs chat vs a call; when to pick up the phone).
- Agree an escalation path, including when to bring in a neutral facilitator.

This is where workplace mediation can help. Mediation provides a neutral and structured space for people to step back from entrenched positions, understand each other's perspectives, and rebuild dialogue.

Interestingly, the language we use around conflict also matters. At times, the word *mediation* can feel formal or even confrontational. Reframing the process as a facilitated conversation can help people engage more openly, focusing on what really matters, rebuilding understanding and finding a way forward.

Conflict is not something organisations can eliminate, and we should not try to.

**In a world of growing diversity, evolving workplaces and hybrid teams, the challenge for leaders is learning how to square up to conflict rather than avoid it. Managed well, conflict does not weaken teams; it makes them stronger.**

# PEOPLE SPARK

To discuss conflict management workshops or workplace mediation for your organisation

**Get in touch....**

email: [scott@peoplesparksolutions.co.uk](mailto:scott@peoplesparksolutions.co.uk)  
tel: **07795 515 701**

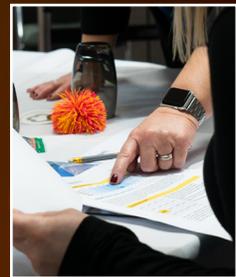
[peoplesparksolutions.co.uk](https://peoplesparksolutions.co.uk)

Mandale Business Park, Mullen Stoker House,  
Durham DH1 1TH

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