

Katherine Woods, Founder - Meeting Magic Ltd.

FYI: Katherine Woods

Uncrossing the wires

It's a fact of life that we can't get on with everybody all of the time. There are moments in the workplace when tensions can build between individuals and lead to conflict. Katherine Woods, Founder of Meeting Magic Ltd. explains that at the root of most conflict is misunderstanding.

Genuine personality conflicts at work can be intense and they are certainly not pleasant. However, the good news is that they are not common. There is no doubt that conflict occurs in the workplace, but despite broad assumptions, the root cause of tension is rarely down to people not getting on. The majority of conflict in the workplace is triggered by misunderstandings. Human beings are hard wired to reach conclusions quickly. The way we view someone in the workplace, or the 'frame' we have of them, is usually based on experiences we have of them. However, the initial opinion we form of someone is usually determined by our personal context and experience. Once we have formed an opinion, we tend to select data about a person that supports that opinion. Here are two practical approaches to help tackle conflict in the workplace. Both of these models come from the work of author, Peter Senge.*



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The ladder of inference

This model refers to the fact that we draw information from our surroundings, make assumptions based on the data we've collected and then take action based on those assumptions. It is a very human reaction to 'jump up the ladder' by making incomplete assumptions. We often feel that our beliefs are the truth and that this is based on real data. The key to successfully unpicking conflict is to be aware of one's thinking and reasoning and the basis for it. By checking the data we are basing our assumptions on, we can stay grounded and avoid making unfounded assumptions.

Balancing advocacy and inquiry

This approach refers to a common cause of conflict; one person states their point of view and the other states theirs, with little listening going on! When emotions are running high it can be tempting to keep putting forward your point of view in a desperate attempt to be heard. This is an example of a conversation with too much advocacy. Equally, conversations that are only inquiry can seem threatening. If someone only inquires, without stating their view, then it can cause the person being questioned to wonder about the motives of the inquirer. The best quality conversations have a balance of inquiry and advocacy from all involved. Below are some guidelines as to how to apply this:

High quality inquiry

Refrain from stating your view. Instead, ask questions to find out the other person's view. Ask

These two models have been around for decades. The challenge is to apply these in a conflict situation. When we are in the heat of conflict we tend to be triggered and react without thinking. An important first step is to train ourselves to press 'pause' when we find ourselves triggered. Next, try to apply these approaches to get to the heart of unpicking misunderstandings. The majority of day to day conflict at work can be eased and tackled by using these two pragmatic approaches. Unlike our friends, we can't choose our work colleagues. It is worth reminding ourselves that we don't have to be best of friends with colleagues, but we do need a sufficiently good relationship to work together.

Fundamentally, we are all human beings.

Finding a way to communicate can transcend job descriptions, hierarchical structures and perceived differences. Having said all of this, some people just don't get on and can find it hard to keep their feelings in check. In certain cases, conflict may have built up over a long period of time and trust levels can be very low. In this scenario, when faced with high levels of conflict at work, you may need to call on a professional third party. This may seem extreme, but a professional coach or mediator can help work through such complex issues.

*The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook by Peter Senge.

questions that help you to understand the data they have drawn on, and used, to form their opinion, their reasoning and conclusions. It usually takes some time to unpick this thinking. Questions like, 'what has led you to believe X?' can help bring people down their ladders of inference.

High quality advocacy

State your view by showing the listener your 'workings out'. Work through the ladder of inference by sharing the data you have selected, your reasoning and the conclusions you have formed.



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