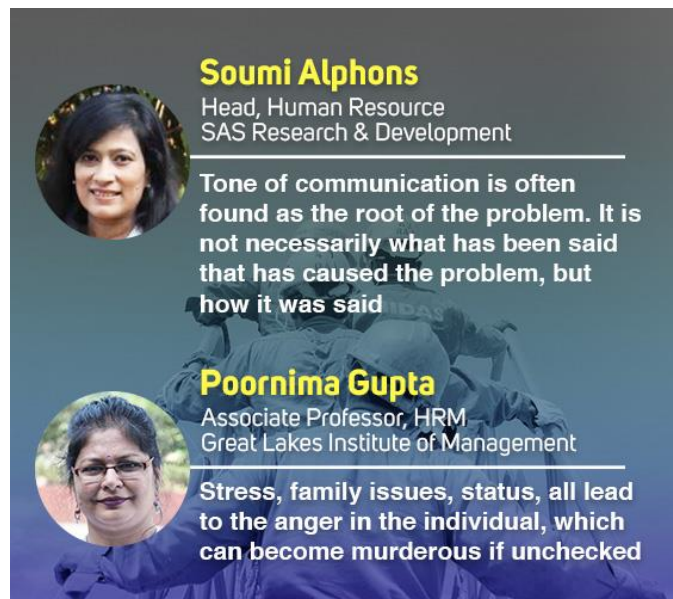# How HR leaders of Indian businesses handle workplace conflicts among employees

Employee conflicts are commonplace irrespective of the size of the company. It is up to human resource leaders of an organisation to resolve such conflicts. Indian HR professionals are keeping pace with global trends in finding solutions

Soumi Alphons
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Tone of communication is often found as the root of the problem. It is not necessarily what has been said that has caused the problem, but how it was said

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Stress, family issues, status, all lead to the anger in the individual, which can become murderous if unchecked

Anushruti Singh 13 July 2018

> Conflicts, however small, should never be ignored. If allowed to fester, they result in situations where an employee lets the anger come out in annihilatory ways, which may result in a demotivated employee, depression or in some cases direct violence

Conflicts are inevitable at the workplace. Poor professional relationships sometimes cause incidents that might be a spoiler for employees, managers and owners alike. Differences in personalities, thoughts, work processes or other factors sometimes just get chaotic. This results in uncomfortable office environment, which scares employees and can keep them away from office, thus resulting in the loss of productivity and even job. Such conflicts, when ignored or allowed to fester, also result in situations where employees vent out frustrations in deleterious ways.

There are several triggers to workplace conflicts. Work-style conflict for instance is one. Gen X leaders' style of working differs from that of millennials. For a Generation X leader, success and promotions come from hard work and experience. For millennials, the lack of experience is not much of a bother if you are good at your work. This attitude sometimes makes them restless and impatient towards a due course of progress.

However, employee management has come of age in India. The human resource departments of Indian businesses have learnt from global trends in employee management and adapted them to Indian needs, keeping in mind the temperaments, leadership issues and overall productivity of the organisation.

Tone of dispute

Experts believe that the current generation is impatient and any dispute can lead to violent confrontation or agitation. A study conducted by an HR consultancy Mettl and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), titled "Uncovering the Dark Traits of Human Personality", has identified the behaviour in human beings that is responsible for the conflicts. "These traits proceed to cause distressing events that impact the safety and well-being of anyone who comes in contact with them. At workplace, they impact the well-being of co-workers and customers, which in turn impacts organisational productivity. The impact level depends upon the intensity of dark traits at play and the job industry/job role type. Merely the presence of dark traits in a person does not guarantee that they will behave in an undesirable manner. Dark traits have to be triggered for dark behaviour to manifest. They get triggered by various factors, such as trait level, situation and environment."

According to Soumi Alphons, the head of human resource at SAS Research and Development, "We must watch out for passive communicators in our teams. There are individuals who avoid expressing their opinions or feelings. As a result, passive communicators may not respond to anger-inducing situations. Instead, they allow grievances and irritations to mount, usually unaware of the accumulation. But, once they have reached their high tolerance threshold for unacceptable behaviour, they are prone to explosive outbursts, which are usually out of proportion to the triggering incident."

Tone also plays a role in conflicts. "In my role advising on a wide range of employee situations, 'tone of communication' is often found as the root of the problem. It is not necessarily what has been said that has caused the problem, but how it was said. There is an unattributed quotation which sums it up neatly as '10 per cent of conflict is due to difference of opinion and 90 per cent to tone of voice'," says Alphons. According to her, most people are able to control the words they use most of the time; but it is harder to control the tone. "However, the effects can be damaging to workplace harmony. If a manager sounds irritated, disinterested or bored when providing supervision, this can send the message to their employees that they and/or their opinions are not valued and that their questions are not welcome. Metaphorically, the office door may be open, but the tone is closed. This can impact heavily upon how employees see and relate to their manager. It can also mean that employees become unwilling to raise problems or issues at an early stage when they may be most easily resolved," explains Alphons.

Psychological interpretation

Poornima Gupta is an associate professor at Great Lakes Institute of Management, Gurugram. She specialises in organisational behaviour and human resource management. According to her, the reason for violence has more to do with the mental process of the worker. "Stress, family issues, status, all lead to the anger in the individual, which can become murderous if left unchecked," she feels.

But, Sudeep Sen, assistant vice-president at Bengaluru-based TeamLease Services, has a different theory to why these acts occur. TeamLease Services provides different HR services across India and Sen deals with a number of such situations on a regular basis. He expresses that differences and conflicts are inevitable; they can also occur over a small matter of AC temperature. No one can stop them. But the reason why these conflicts grow is due to the gap in three E's, i.e. education, exposure and engagement.

He further explains his theory, "While education and exposure teach the dos and don'ts, engagement plays a key role in terms of understanding the ways to handle issues, sharing of past experiences, outcome of a hasty act and its possible effect on life, etc. Employee engagement – be it with permanent and or contractual workers – needs to be stronger. It means involvement: the workers should feel that they have a window to express their views and at the same time, the dos and don'ts need to be very categorically expressed and also the workplace policies and their interpretations need to be explained, displayed and repeatedly reminded. For example, the organisation can put displays in canteen about workplace ethics, policies and behaviour and reward workers who exhibit such qualities." According to him, if three E theory is fulfilled the number of conflicts at workplaces will drastically reduce.

These days, organisations pride themselves on leveraging a diverse workforce, one that is made up of individuals with a wide range of characteristics and experiences. In such workplaces, leaders are bound of be dealing with a variety of working styles, approaches and cultural elements. According to the Mettl-SHRM study, managers spend up to 40 per cent of their time dealing with interpersonal problems stemming from poor behaviour and misunderstandings, while 60 to 80 per cent of all difficulties in organisations come from strained interpersonal relationships among employees. The study finds three main sources of conflicts in workplaces: task conflict, where argument involves tasks or goals that are to be focused on; process conflict, where employees have different opinions about how they should be done; and, relationship conflict, which is about disagreements about people in the workplace. This can become dangerous if not checked in time.

Anatomy of conflict

Alphons shares her experience on conflicts and explains how they arise: "One common workplace conflict that I have noticed is the work-style conflict where the Gen X leader has a different style of working than his subordinate who is probably a millennial. Generation X leader would think that success and promotions come from years of hard work, experience and expertise in the field. In their views, the path to promotion is long, hard and almost unattainable. Millennials, however, differ from them greatly on this point. As this generation was raised around the lines of 'your opinion matters' by their encouraging parents, they think that the long path to promotion can be shortened with sharp wits. For millennials, the lack of experience is not much of a bother if you are good at your work. This attitude sometimes makes them restless and impatient towards a due course of progress."

Conflicts, however small, should never be ignored. If allowed to fester, they result in situations where an employee lets the anger come out in annihilatory ways, which may result in a demotivated employee, depression or in some cases direct violence. Gupta says that when employees face undesirable situations in the workplace, they may react in various ways: they start to do things only for their own benefit; they can ignore signals of their inefficiency and blame others for their inadequacies; Or they act out their anger instead of trying to resolve it.

Sen has a case study of how a given situation escalates into something out of nothing. In the case of Akshay and Junaid, who work in the accounting department of a firm, the latter was hired a few months ago and the former has been with the company for a few years. Junaid, while being a proficient worker, tends to wait until the last minute to get his work done. Akshay works more steadily and keeps on top of his work daily. Akshay complains that he feels he has to worry now about both of their work. And, because they rely on each other for certain tasks, he is uncomfortable with waiting until an hour or so before a deadline when they are forced to collaborate. Because of the conflict, Junaid is missing more work, while Akshay is facing anxiety and rage issues. In this case, unless the manager intervenes, it is only a matter of time before one of them can lose control. "The key in all such cases is to be involved. Managers should not just instruct on mails but had to communicate to clear the air. Managers motto should be GO and no EGO," says Sen.

Conflicts grow due to unexpressed emotions, poor communication, a lack of resources, flaws in employees, errors in assumptions and weak leadership. According to the Mettl-SHRM survey, 42 per cent of the respondents feel that their leadership does not contribute to a positive work culture. In 2016, TeamLease has done a survey on the relationship between bosses and subordinates, which states that generation gap is a biggest reason for misunderstanding at a workplace. The survey quotes a finance coordinator at a hotel management group, who says, "There are differences of opinion simmering between the generations. And it all comes to boil at crucial moments of a company's journey." He believes that though such occurrences are entirely preventable, and that the onus is on the boss. "The friction is inevitable. But, the dust must settle within a short period of time, or else it will all accumulate and hit the fan."

When conflict is good

The experience of the call-centre executive Murali shows workplace conflict in a different light. He discussed his evolution at workplace in a social media post. He writes, "My previous company … [had] given me responsibilities to take care of 50% of my team lead's work. I had to complete my executive work within time frame and need[ed] to continue [with] what additional responsibility I had on that day. At that time, I felt it's tough to complete the team lead's work as an executive. I even had to face some jealous eyes, but I took it as a challenge and completed as per by TL's requirement. Finally, I got promoted as team lead." Murali's example shows how conflict could also be healthy competition.

Gupta shares this opinion and adds, "Some conflicts are necessary for an organisation to evolve. If everybody agrees on every activity of the organisation, no innovative solutions can come forth. Conflict is necessary to initiate a debate for any activity."

Manoj Pandey, head, HR, of Ador Welding also thinks that workplace confrontations may not be necessarily bad. He says, "Conflicts are almost an integral part of everyday workplace environment. They can be termed as necessary evils, as some amount of conflict brings with it different perspectives and thus are essential for organisational growth and progress. We face conflicts at workplace almost everyday. Conflicts among sales, manufacturing, production, quality and R&D teams are quite common."

Fair resolution

Whatever may be the reason, the management is bound to prevent incidents from escalating. Companies must ensure redress policies while workers should also ensure that they do not always have to shut operations or resort to hooliganism and violence, as they will only result in a blot on their careers. Says Sen: "The smoke before fire needs to be read well and brought to the notice of legitimate people, so that discussions can take place within the group and also decisions can be taken."

For Alphons, how a conflict is handled can make a difference in how employees view their companies going forward. She says, "Leaders and human resource departments are often tasked with mediating staff issues and working to provide a solutions that everyone is satisfied with, which can be quite a challenge. And the starting point to work through this challenge is *culture*."

Gupta explains the most common strategies that are used to deal with disputes in workplace. She says that confronting the problem and guidance works best. "Try to talk to the employee immediately when the problem is visible; do not wait for it to escalate. Most of the time the employee may not realise that he/she is the cause of the conflict and once made aware, is usually willing to look at methods to resolve it." In case the issue is due to inadequacy or attitude, counselling/training can be suggested after which employee performance is reviewed,she adds.

Alphons feels that sharp leaders identify workplace issues early and bring forth the issues on the table for discussion in an open way. The longer leaders wait, the more it can affect the workplace environment and productivity, she says. "Leaders should create an environment to get their people talking to each other.

The key to critical conversations is to always stay in dialogue. If the lines of communication go down, then there is no hope for a resolution. Only when people are talking can they get all the relevant information out in the open and this requires a two-way flow of information. We need to make people in discussion feel 'safe'. The safer they feel, the more likely they are to open up. The greater the fear in people, the more likely it is that they will either close down or fight back. Leaders and seniors need to develop a culture where people are willing to listen openly and respectfully to each other," explains Alphons.

This, feels Alphons, can only be done from an authentic place of compassion and curiosity. "The key is to find a mutual objective or a bigger purpose of the organisation that both sides agree to. If I want one thing (and you do not), then it is unlikely to be a successful conversation. An HR professional needs to spend time to find a mutual purpose or objective that both agree on. It is not about one side's agenda. The key is to get both parties to construct a bigger shared story. It is only when we have a shared meaning can we start to devise an action plan," she says.

Pandey feels that the true leadership shows itself in fair play at conflict resolution, while keeping in mind the utmost interest of the organisation. He says, "It is absolutely essential to note that while resolving a conflict you have a neutral outlook, no matter what. None of the parties should be favoured for any given reason and each one should be given a patient hearing to put forth their point of view. They should rather be enabled to see what is right for the organisation, as this is the only long-term solution for resolving workplace conflicts."

According to Alphons, in a company where conflicts are not confronted, there is a high employee turnover and high absenteeism. "Issues like low morale, stress and distrust arise when people suppress their feelings and aspirations. So, ignoring is no solution." Today's employees deal with a wide range of challenging situations, from stress on the job to a variety of personal challenges. This is where work-life coaching comes in: it provides an access to assistance programme, enabling employees to get the support they need to get through work and life's challenges.

It is important to convert workplace conflicts into healthy discussions and, thus, make way for improvements at workplace. Pro-active identification of issues can actually engage employees in a constructive way to bring in their creativity in resolution. Making them owners in resolving the situation can bring energy and enthusiasm in the teams. Leaders can leverage such conflicts in building stronger teams for future. And only a united business team has the ability to effectively come together on projects, communicate adequately, be jointly productive and stay positive.

To maintain a peaceful environment, an organisation can have employee engagement officers who can deal with such situations. As an HR service provider, Sen recommends strongly to hire these people. He says, "If organisations do not have employee engagement officers/staffs, I suggest to hire them irrespective of the gender. This team can engage employees and help them resolve their issues."

A good conflict resolution is where an HR professional does not have to step in and teams independently resolve their conflict situations. But, that does not mean that the HR manager does not have a role to play. The HR department of a company plays a big role in building the right leadership, a proactive learning culture, where employees listen and share openly, and tools that help them measure employee experiences and insights in an agile manner.

The story can be read online here.