

The conflict slot

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Who owns the management of conflict at work? New Acas research seems to be pointing to a multiplicity of players. Employers, employees, unions, employee representatives, line managers and HR all have a role to play. This fits with the Acas mindset that everyone should have a stake in the important workplace matters. But confusion-creep can also result first where there is no single strategic owner and, more importantly, when the different players are not entirely sure of the part they are to play.

Our research has been looking at the place of HR in the management of workplace conflict – earlier studies ([Reframing Resolution](#) [Managing Conflict and Resolving Individual Employment Disputes in the Contemporary Workplace](#)) (PDF, 217KB, 21 pages) have demonstrated that their role is crucial. We found changing and fluctuating roles for HR, often inside the same workplace. And with this came a frequent downgrading of the significance and seriousness of conflict at work.

The role of conflict in working life

In this sense our latest report, [Managing workplace conflict - The changing role of HR](#) (PDF, 457KB, 38 pages), tells us much of what we already know. Managing conflict at work is so often seen as an administrative and process function rather than a strategic one. And it can be very low on the list of HR priorities. But why? Although we accept that differences of interest are a natural feature of playgrounds, partnerships and commercial agreements, we don't seem able to accept them as a part of working life.

The emergence of the idea of a shared agenda between employers and employees around engagement has been seen as a positive one. But it may have inadvertently created the impression that all conflict is inherently negative and disruptive and overlooked the nub of working relationships. Worse still would be to deny the existence of conflict.

Collective disputes that manifest in strike action are on the decline, but other measures of discontent remain, including stress, absence, grievances, turnover and, following the abolition of fees, a resurgence in the number of employment tribunal claims.

Having a culture that acknowledges conflict is important. But as our new report looking through the HR lens finds, incentives for such an environment are challenged where expertise in conflict management and employment relations is so often seen by HR practitioners as 'counter-aspirational'. The structure for career progression and the clash between front-line and strategic roles means that progress is often associated with leaving such work behind. And it's not always clear how much conflict resolution, negotiation skills and indeed, employment relations are part of the modern day HR skills base.

The purposes of conflict

Part of the problem may be that we have not only a negative view of conflict, but also a rather narrow one. In my view, there are several distinct purposes for conflict.

1. First is the obvious perhaps: it provides a mechanism for speaking about any intentional or unintentional imbalance in interests. It is the routes to finding a solution that are most important – they should be early, expedient and seek creative and lasting answers.
2. Secondly, conflict has the dual purpose of protecting employee rights and promoting awareness of employer responsibilities. This is about everything from managers' approaches to preventing discrimination and to being paid the national minimum wage. Unfortunately, too often this form of rights-based conflict is seen as a transactional, administrative burden.
3. Finally, conflict can help to challenge current orthodoxy and prevailing culture. It may be easier to espouse the right values, for example around equality and diversity, than to change attitudes and behaviours. The problem with not taking conflict seriously, especially latent conflict, is that responses to important issues are, as our report states, often 'reactive, late and focused on the management of risk'. Opportunities get missed.

HR's role

One of the values of conflict at work is that it helps surface issues that may otherwise fester or escalate. The real challenge is how we manage and learn from it. And HR has a role to play in this, in helping steer an organisational approach to conflict management, and in supporting the day-to-day handling. This isn't necessarily about the default of knowing how to run a grievance process. It's much more. How do we begin? The Acas reports suggests that 'fairness needs to be a core consideration of HR practitioners' and that HR has the 'opportunity to go beyond being the keeper of procedures'. This may be a good starting point and one which is discussed in more depth in the Acas policy paper [Fairness, justice and capability - repositioning conflict management](#) (PDF, 258KB, 14 pages).