

The whole is more than the sum of the parts managing conflict at work

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In recent years Acas has been using a case study approach to explore organisations' strategies for addressing conflict early, and in the most impactful and fair ways. Its latest report in this series, [Mediation and early resolution in East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust](#), by researchers from Westminster and Central Lancashire Universities, looks at a programme introduced by East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust.

Employing over 8,000 staff, it's easy to imagine how the natural dynamics of such a large, multi-disciplinary workforce will generate tensions and potential for conflict.

In their efforts to seek timely, less adversarial approaches, the Trust has embarked on a new journey, using a multi-faceted solution to address 'an ingrained dynamic of claim and counter-claim which destroyed employment relationships'.

The new report builds on earlier Acas research, including studies of [East Lancashire Primary Care Trust \(PDF, 579KB\)](#) and [Northumbria Healthcare Trust \(PDF, 611KB\)](#) – the latter having adopted a similarly multifaceted approach to conflict management. In the academic literature, seeking holistic solutions to conflict in this way falls under the so-called theory of 'integrated conflict management systems', which emphasises the value of holistic approaches and the importance of managing conflict being taken seriously by senior management.

Strategies used in East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust

So, what strategies have been used in East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust, and can we see evidence of an organisation adopting an approach where the whole has potential to have greater impact than the sum of the parts?

At this acute Trust they have:

- renewed investment in, and commitment to, workplace mediation
- introduced a new 'Early Resolution' policy
- increased focus on developing managerial skills

Renewed investment in, and commitment to, workplace mediation

A new cadre of mediators were trained, drawn from across key stakeholder groups, with dedicated time to focus on mediation and the support of a full-time co-ordinator.

The scheme moved from HR to occupational health, signalling the link between dispute resolution and wellbeing.

A new 'Early Resolution' policy

This focuses on the benefits of alternative approaches to dealing with problems at an early stage, while keeping open the option of a more formal approach.

It actively encourages individuals, in the first instance, to raise concerns and complaints with managers, and others including union representatives, occupational health, and the NHS Freedom to Speak Up guardians.

Increased focus on developing managerial skills

Finally, the Trust introduced a structured management training programme to improve people management capabilities.

Measuring effectiveness

It's still early days for the scheme, but there are promising signs:

- mediation referrals are up, with a resolution rate of over 90%
- three-quarters of cases brought to the early referral scheme so far have resolved informally
- key stakeholders have shown a willingness to shift from the previous focus on compliance and formal procedures
- key partners are working well together as part of the new joined-up approach

Assessing longer-term effectiveness at this point is difficult, not least as progress has been hampered by the pandemic. However, it is clear that one feature that could certainly make or undermine the sustainability of the Trust's approach is the emphasis placed on training or in the words of the Trust, in 'mak(ing) sure that our managers are the best managers'.

This is partly predicated on a desire to see a shift away from a previous focus in training on 'leadership theories' towards a type of learning that enhances skills competency, and helps managers feel 'comfortable in their role'. The Trust has also faced challenges in rolling-out widespread training, and in achieving an appropriate level of managerial capability – a capacity that the research report concludes is 'hard to find in most UK organisations'.

This may feel a tall order, yet it is increasingly difficult to envisage a workaround when it comes to people skills. As [strategic human resource approaches have grown](#), so have the range of responsibilities that fall to front line managers.

Simultaneously we have seen an escalation in job intensity and work-related stress. All these factors are as much part of NHS establishments as many other organisations.

Line management may not be 'rocket science' as they say, but equally we should not underestimate the demands it presents for a combination of technical and emotional intelligence to be managed alongside the day job. That's why Acas and Sheffield and Westminster Universities were recently granted an award from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), to explore the

question of 'conflict competence' in more detail (more about the tool developed to enable this, and the progress of the project on the [Skilled Managers website](#)).

Stepping up training in the Trust, and in other organisations embarking on a similar journey, is therefore going to be key to advancing sustainable approaches to conflict management, and fully realising the benefits of a whole, integrated approach to managing conflict at work.

Drawing on research evidence like this new study will be fundamental to this process. It has been a pleasure leading the Acas conflict management research programme across a number of years, and I look forward to continuing to engage in the future of Acas's work in this area, and that of the wider analytical community.

[Read the full version of this blog post on the University of Central Lancashire website](#)