

WHY HR & LEADERS NEED MORE COURAGE

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The management of conflict, and particularly bullying and harassment, has perplexed Human Resources professionals, line managers and organizational leaders for many years.

Much like coronavirus, unresolved conflict at work can be an invisible killer. For those involved, directly or indirectly, conflict can generate untold amounts of fear, stress, isolation and anxiety. High profile cases have demonstrated that an employee's mental health is affected, and in the most serious cases, people have been known to take their own lives. In the UK's National Health Service, increasing levels of data suggest direct relationships between incivility in the workplace and adverse patient outcomes.¹

The paradox is that the policies designed to create psychological safety at work make people much less safe. The traditional policies and procedures offer a blunt instrument for managing conflict at work. They are reductive, believing that there must be right or wrong and a winner and a loser in every case. They provide a mirage of justice and an illusion of fairness.

The reality of what I call the GBH processes (grievance, bullying, harassment), plus traditional disciplinary procedures, is that they perpetuate a negative, damaging, and corrosive tone within workplaces. They undermine trust, infantilize the workforce, sow the seeds of division, impede creativity and hurt people. The paradox that haunts many an HR professional is that the very policies designed to resolve workplace issues make them a lot worse. It is like walking up to an individual exhibiting signs of stress and distress, pouring a bucket of cortisol over their heads, and then yelling at them for not being more rational. This is not a great way to resolve a problem at work.

This crisis has shown us that people can be trusted to get on with their jobs, are loyal to their employers and show flexibility, resilience and dedication, if they are trusted and given the freedom to flourish. Companies should simplify their rules and processes so that they align to three simple principles:

- Do the right thing.
- Follow our values.
- Operate within the law.

Organizations must develop and agree on behavioural frameworks which are aligned to their core values. These frameworks should clarify the aligned and the misaligned behaviours that they expect (or don't expect) from their managers and employees. Employees, managers and others should then be equipped with the skills, the support and the resources that they need to hold themselves and each other to account.

Managers and leaders should be trained in the vital skills they need to excel in the new normal – positive psychology, nudge theory, principled negotiation and nonviolent communication, to name a few.

Finally, HR, unions and leaders should collaborate to reframe their divisive GBH policies. The entire process should be repurposed, with emphasis on early resolution between the parties, supported by processes, such as restorative conversations, coaching and mentoring.

Whatever the new normal holds, this has got to be better for the wellbeing of our employees, customers and businesses.

1. <https://qualitysafety.bmj.com/content/28/9/750.full>

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