



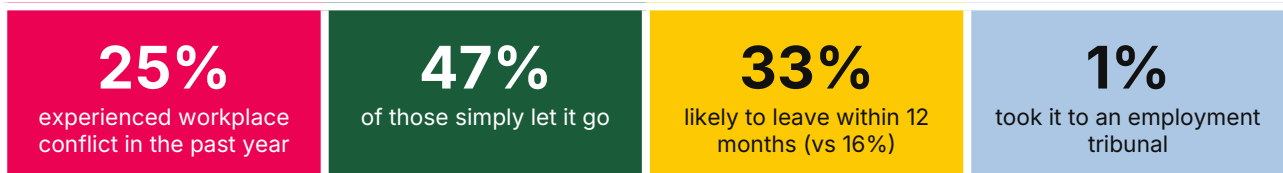
COACHME ARTICLE

One in Four

Conflict, culture & what it takes to build respectful cross-cultural teams

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A quarter of UK employees experienced some form of workplace conflict in the past year. That is the headline finding of the CIPD *Good Work Index 2024*, & it represents an estimated eight million people (CIPD, 2024a; 2024b). Behind the number sit very human experiences: of those affected, 48% were undermined or humiliated, 35% were shouted at or caught in a heated argument, 34% experienced verbal abuse or insult & 20% faced discriminatory behaviour (CIPD, 2024b).



Source: CIPD (2024b). Figures from the UK Working Lives survey, 5,496 UK adults, January–February 2024.

The costs are real. People who experienced conflict were far more likely to feel exhausted (42% vs 18%) & under excessive pressure (37% vs 15%). They were less satisfied with their jobs (54% vs 77%) & twice as likely to be planning to leave (CIPD, 2024b). They also reported lower trust in senior leaders & less confidence that managers enable employee voice.

Perhaps the most telling figure is this: 47% of those who experienced conflict simply let it go. Only 29% raised it with a manager or HR, & just 17% spoke to the other person involved (CIPD, 2024b). Conflict that is not surfaced is not resolved. It goes underground, where it shapes relationships, erodes trust & quietly drains performance.

Conflict is not the enemy. Unaddressed conflict is.

Healthy disagreement is essential to good decisions, innovation & learning. Teams that can challenge each other openly tend to outperform those that cannot, provided the challenge happens in a climate of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). The problem is not difference of opinion. The problem is when tension escalates into incivility, & incivility hardens into bullying & harassment: repeated, negative behaviour that people find hard to defend themselves against (Einarsen *et al.*, 2020).

Eradicating bullying & harassment comes down to three things: *culture*, *policy* & *training*. Every organisation needs the people expertise to drive change in all three. Before we look at each, there is a layer that many organisations miss entirely: national & cultural difference.

Why culture changes everything in cross-cultural teams

Many of the teams we coach are spread across the Gulf, Europe, Asia, Africa & the Americas, or bring many nationalities together in one office. In these teams, the *same* behaviour can be read in completely different ways. Direct feedback that feels honest & respectful to one colleague can feel humiliating to another. Silence that one person reads as agreement may be another person's way of signalling strong disagreement without causing offence.

Individualist & collectivist societies

One of the most useful lenses here is the distinction between individualist & collectivist societies (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010; Triandis, 1995). In more *individualist* cultures, such as the UK, USA, Australia & much of Northern Europe, identity is rooted in the individual, people are expected to speak up for themselves, & addressing conflict directly is often seen as a sign of integrity. In more *collectivist* cultures, common across the Gulf, much of Asia, Africa & Latin America, identity is rooted in the group, relationships & harmony are prized, & openly confronting a colleague can damage the standing of everyone involved.

Face-negotiation theory explains why this matters so much in conflict (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). People in individualist cultures tend to focus on protecting their *own* face, & so favour direct, solution-oriented styles. People in collectivist cultures tend to attend more to *mutual* & *other* face, & so are more likely to favour avoiding, obliging, or working through a trusted third party. Hall's (1976) distinction between low-context & high-context communication adds another layer: in high-context cultures, much of the meaning sits in the relationship, tone & what is *not* said.

	More individualist tendencies	More collectivist tendencies
Identity	"I": personal goals & achievements	"We": group belonging & loyalty
Approach to conflict	Address it directly, name the issue	Preserve harmony, protect face, address it indirectly
Feedback	Explicit, often given one-to-one or in the open	Implicit, softened, or given privately or through others
What silence may mean	Agreement, or nothing to add	Disagreement, discomfort, or respect for hierarchy
Preferred route to resolution	Speak to the person, then to the manager or HR	A trusted intermediary, senior figure, or informal channel

Adapted from Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov (2010), Ting-Toomey & Kurogi (1998) & Meyer (2014).

These are *tendencies*, not destinies. Every individual is shaped by personality, profession, generation, organisational culture & their own life story, so we should never stereotype a colleague by nationality. Meyer (2014) also shows that cultures differ separately on how they give negative feedback & how they handle open disagreement. So a culture can be direct in one & avoidant in the other. What these frameworks offer is curiosity: a prompt to ask, rather than assume.

Seen through this lens, the CIPD finding that almost half of people *let it go* takes on new meaning. In a cross-cultural team, "*letting it go*" may be a deliberate act of preserving harmony. It may also be a sign that a person does not feel safe to raise a concern, or that the only routes available feel culturally alien to them. Either way, an organisation that relies solely on individuals to speak up directly will miss a great deal.

Lever 1: Culture

Culture is “*the way we do things around here*”, & it is set far more by what leaders *do* than by what they say. A respectful culture is one where people can raise concerns early without fear, where difference is valued, & where leaders model curiosity rather than judgement (Edmondson, 1999).

- Make *ways of working together* explicit. In our team coaching, one of the first things we do is co-create an alliance: how we will disagree, give feedback & raise concerns. Teams then revisit it regularly (Hawkins, 2021).
- Ask each team member how they prefer to receive feedback & how they would like conflict to be raised with them. *Treat others the way they wish to be treated*, not the way you would wish to be.
- Notice the roles people step into under pressure. Karpman’s (1968) drama triangle (persecutor, rescuer, victim) is a useful lens for spotting the harmoniser who closes conversations down too quickly.
- Value multiple conflict styles. Avoiding & accommodating are not weaknesses. They are strategies that are sometimes wise, & sometimes costly (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

Lever 2: Policy

Policy sets the standard & the safety net. In the UK, employers have had a proactive legal duty since October 2024 to take reasonable steps to *prevent* sexual harassment of their workers (Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023). Prevention, not just response, is now the expectation. For cross-cultural organisations, a strong policy also needs to work for people who will never walk into HR & file a formal complaint.

- Define bullying, harassment & discrimination clearly, with real examples that make sense across cultures, & publish them in the languages your people use.
- Offer several routes to raise a concern: line manager, HR, a trusted senior figure, trained peer contacts, anonymous reporting & informal resolution. Indirect & third-party routes matter in collectivist contexts.
- Include early, informal resolution & mediation alongside formal procedures, so concerns can be addressed while relationships are still intact.
- Protect people from retaliation, & make sure people can see that policy is applied consistently, whatever someone’s seniority.

Lever 3: Training

The CIPD’s first recommendation is to prioritise line management training, so that managers can build positive relationships & address conflict early (CIPD, 2024b). Managers are where most conflict is first seen, & where it is most often mishandled or ignored. Training that genuinely changes behaviour goes well beyond a compliance module.

- *Leader as Coach* skills: deep listening, powerful questions, & holding a difficult conversation with care & clarity.
- Cross-cultural competence: understanding individualist & collectivist tendencies, face & context, so that managers can *flex* their approach rather than apply one style to everyone.
- Team coaching for intact teams & boards, so conflict is worked with *systemically*, as a pattern in the team, rather than blamed on one individual (Hawkins, 2021).

- Psychometrics & conflict-style profiles that give teams a shared, non-judgemental language for difference.
- SUPERvision for HR professionals, coaches & leaders who hold other people's conflict. It is a space to reflect, process what they carry & keep their own practice ethical & well-resourced.

The people professional's role

HR & L&D professionals sit at the centre of all three levers. Your impact depends on your skills, your confidence & your credibility: the skill to read a situation across cultures, the confidence to challenge senior leaders when culture & policy do not match, & the credibility that comes from being seen to act fairly & consistently. These capabilities can be developed, & coaching & SUPERvision are among the most powerful ways to develop them.

Pause & consider

- When conflict arises in your team or organisation, what usually happens next: is it raised, resolved, or *let go*?
- Which cultures are represented in your team, & how might each person prefer to give & receive feedback?
- How many routes does someone have to raise a concern, & would each of them feel safe & culturally comfortable for *everyone*?
- Where are your managers most confident with conflict, & where do they need support?

How we can help

BECKETT McINROY & CoachME work with organisations across the Middle East, Europe, Asia & beyond on values & culture change, Leader as Coach development, team & board coaching, psychometrics & SUPERvision. If you want to build a culture where conflict is raised early & handled well, across every culture in your organisation, we would love to talk. Visit beckett-mcinroy.com or email simon@beckett-mcinroy.com.

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