

# Don't let conflict stifle your success

Conflict and aggression can be part of everyday life for call handlers. Carole Spiers looks at how best to deal with them



**I**N 2003, the Health and Safety Laboratory published *Psychosocial Risk Factors in Call Centres: An Evaluation of Work Design and Well-Being*. Among the findings were that working as a call handler is more stressful than other jobs, with a higher risk of mental health problems compared to other occupations.

Key 'stressors' include high workload, being unclear about the role and having conflicting role demands. To reduce the psychosocial risks, the report recommended improving the levels of autonomy for employees, giving call handlers more opportunity to manage their own work demands, allowing them to use the skills they have, and giving them more variety.

It is also worth adding that, in such an environment, managers need to take particular care that they don't add to the pressure already being experienced by employees, and that they receive proper training in order to do this.

Conflict between colleagues, and between managers and staff, is a well-documented cause of stress. Managers under pressure to meet their targets will not always think before they act or speak. Their attitude to those around them may well appear confrontational and could possibly be perceived as bullying.

**The manner in which** individuals communicate is often indicative of stress. Short, abrupt sentences, accompanied by aggressive body language, will often indicate conflict within teams, while stressed individuals will also appear to have lost their former sense of humour.

These behaviours can easily distort and exaggerate an otherwise minor incident. And, where team communication breaks down due to conflict between members, the effect on productivity and morale can be pronounced.

Conflict can also result from differing perceptions of a situation by the parties involved, leading one or other to conclude that a

solution is impossible.

If conflict is not addressed, there will be a negative effect on both the organisation and the individual. Symptoms include anger and aggression, anxiety, retaliation, depression and insomnia. In addition, psychosomatic disorders, low morale, and increased staff turnover may also occur.

**To manage conflict** effectively, one needs to understand the different types. If related to methods of working or conditions of work, conflict can usually be resolved through discus-

best managers have their skills tested.

In instances where conflict cannot be resolved within the team, it may be necessary

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sion and compromise. However, it may also be based on personalities, in which animosity develops between one or more team members.

Such conflict is more often than not based on an emotional reaction caused by frustration, anger or some unspecified reason. Often, because there is no concrete basis for the conflict, resolving it is far more difficult — particularly if neither party is interested in a solution.

Working as they do on the 'front line', managers need to develop the skills required to defuse such situations. Sadly, not everyone in a managerial role is born with the requisite skills; dealing with conflict is an area where even the

to use the services of a mediator or other third party to find a solution. As Charles Handy says in his book *Understanding Organisations* (1999): "Neglected, conflict is like weeds, it can stifle productive work".

However, when conflict is dealt with constructively, people can be stimulated to greater creativity that can lead to a wider choice of actions and more beneficial outcomes. ■

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