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“Workplace Conflict in Non-Confrontational Cultures: Is
Avoiding the Best Way to Deal with Conflicts?”

by

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A dissertation presented to the

FACULTY OF LAW
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Declaration

I with this declare that:

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"As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."

(John F. Kennedy)

Abstract

Workplace conflicts are as frequent as any conflict that we usually get involved in our daily lives. From being in a sensitive situation, involving work colleagues, putting our job and the whole work environment at stake, this kind of conflict needs some precaution when dealing with it.

We can say that workplace conflicts in non-confrontational cultures are even more sensitive. As the non-confrontational culture have this need or inner desire to avoid disputes, it possesses the image of being a peaceful, conflict-free environment. Japan and Ireland are both known for having a non-confrontational workplace environment and for this reason, the study will explore the approach taken by the company's team leaders, manager or HR team members when dealing with conflict.

The study intends to show that it is not due to things not being seen or said that there is no presence of conflict in those organisations. Therefore, the study aims to clarify that companies/organisations belonging to non-confrontational cultures are also impacted by conflicts, whether it is a good or a bad way.

For this purpose, the study makes use of qualitative research methods, which aims to analyse people's behaviour towards conflicts in the workplace. Moreover, the methods used for data collection are interview, case study and review of the past literature on the subject.

From the data collection results, we could observe that sometimes having a non-confrontational workplace environment it is not advantageous giving that the conflict situation will never get resolved and the decision-making process takes longer.

However, it became clear that companies are changing trying to adapt, and different practices are being put into place to try to improve communication and relationships within the teams and organisations.

Keywords: workplace conflict, culture, non-confrontational culture, behaviour, conflict-avoidance.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Conflicts happen when two or more parties have diverging opinions or interests. Also, when there are any disagreements, whether related to positions, principles, feelings or even needs. Once we live in a society and deal with people with different backgrounds, life experience and perspective, we are subject to engage in a conflict.

In the workplace would not be different. As Kaye (1994)¹ stated ‘no organisation is so excellent, no team so unified, no business so successful that it is immune to internal conflict’.

As we know, people usually tend to think of conflicts negatively, particularly in a work environment companies avoid even the word ‘conflict’ itself as it seems that the company is confessing failure, mismanagement or relationship ruptures within the organisation. Moreover, that is why so many companies are trying to avoid conflicts and even give awards for its non-occurrence.

On the other hand, although we can say that conflicts can affect productivity, from the past decades, it is becoming increasingly evident how conflicts are turning into opportunities to brainstorm, to improve processes and enhance relationships.

The dissertation will discuss workplace conflict in non-confrontational cultures.

Non-confrontational cultures are the ones in which there is not the habit of confronting the opponent. That is not only about the culture of the location but also about organisational cultures. For instance, a company can have a non-confrontational organisational culture even being in a country or place that does not present this type of habit as the United States, for example.

¹ Kaye, K. (1994) *Workplace Wars and How to End Them: Turning Personal Conflicts into Productive Teamwork*. New York: AMACOM

Now, whether led by fear of retaliation or by the local culture of over-respect, people belonging to these non-confrontational cultures tend to avoid conflicts at all costs and usually pretend that nothing is happening.

The problem here is that it creates a false impression of a peaceful conflict-free company while the conflict is still present and most likely causing harm to the team or the organisation.

Keeping this in mind and knowing that conflicts are not always bad for the companies, the research questions are:

- **How does a non-confrontational culture affect a workplace environment and its conflict resolution process?**
- **Does having a non-confrontational workplace culture means being a conflict-free company?**
- **What is the best way to deal with workplace conflicts when the company has a non-confrontational culture?**

The intention behind these questions is to understand how the companies are currently dealing with the conflicts and find out what the best way is to do it.

Chapter Two addresses the dissertation aims and the objectives as well as the methods used to achieve it. It is common knowledge that non-confrontational cultures are well known for avoiding conflict situations. In that sense, it does not mean they not only suffer the impact of them, but also there is a certain level of struggle in dealing with it. For this reason, the research will aim to clarify how these cultures impact on the workplace environment and find out if there is the best way to handle conflicts by questioning people involved with conflicts in non-confrontational work environment as in Japanese and Irish companies.

In Chapter Three, we have the review and analysis of existing researches and literature related to the subject, which not only provided the basis for the study but also helped to improve the understanding.

Moreover, the literature review provides essential information for the research, including the

definition of culture, the non-confrontational culture background and its effect on the work environment. Besides, it tries to explore the way both countries Ireland and Japan current deal with workplace conflicts.

Chapter Four describes the methodology and methods used in the research. As the aim is to assess people's behaviour's facing conflict, the research is done in a qualitative way, which allows an in-depth analysis of people's experiences. For the purpose of the collection of data, the researcher conducted a few interviews, and a case study was proposed to assess the interviewee's approaches in a conflict situation.

Chapter Five presents the results of the interviews and the case study. Furthermore, it gives the interviewee's perceptions of conflict and how, in practice, they handle conflicts in their workplace — likewise, an HR Specialist's considerations and thoughts about the other interviewee's answers.

The disclosure of data analysis and findings are in Chapter Six. As we know, the collected data is an essential part of the research, to that end this chapter will assess the answers obtained from the interviews, as well as its interpretation in order to make it easier to understand. From the collected data we were able to certify that Irish and Japanese workplaces are non-confrontational and that they are indeed impacted by conflicts.

Chapter Seven opens a discussion about the findings. Something that becomes clear from the collected data is that when the conflict is related to a task, even being non-confrontational, the likelihood of confrontation gets higher. In other words, people are more likely to complain about it. On the contrary, when the conflict is related to interpersonal relationship the non-confrontational culture becomes evident, and people end up avoiding the confrontation.

The conclusion appears in Chapter Eight. It does not matter how; conflicts will always impact the workplace. In Japan, the non-confrontational culture in the workplace has been clearly causing issues not only of interpersonal conflicts but also individual issues as mental illness. For this reason, it is noticeable the effort companies are putting into managing this situation. Implementing practices and

encouraging people to talk, not to avoid the conflicts to happen but to make people understand that this is also part of the process inside the companies. The non-confrontational Irish workplace is predominantly down to a fear of retaliation. That is to say; people do not complain because they are too afraid of the consequences. Nevertheless, changings are taking place, and on the result of the interview, we can see that the companies are trying to encourage more open discussions to try to resolve conflicts.

The study will plunge into the workplace environment of companies belonging to two completely different cultures, but both known for having non-confrontational workplaces, Japan and Ireland. Although the reasons could differ, the issues are similar. As mentioned earlier, the aiming is to identify the approach taken currently and evaluate to see if it is possible to define the best way to deal with conflicts in non-confrontational cultures.

The main limitation of the research concerns the data collected. As it was hard to manage schedules and availabilities, the number of people interviewed is small, which limited the amount of data collected.

Another limitation is regarding Irish workplace behaviour. There are not many studies and literature about it, which limited the research to the HR specialist perspective and a few articles on websites and magazines.

Above all, it may seem irrational to carry out research about conflicts in non-confrontational cultures. However, for people who have already, or are going through this experience and understand that the difficulty is real is it essential to make them aware that there are options and that if handled properly, the conflicts can bring many improvements to the organisation.

Chapter 2 – Aims and Objectives

The business world is becoming increasingly globalised. That is to say that compared to 10, 20 years ago it is common nowadays to see multinational companies spread all over the world with their basis in different countries having to deal with many people with different cultures and values, different habits and points of view.

Based on this context, the research will focus on workplace conflicts with an emphasis in companies originated from non-confrontational cultures, like Japan and Ireland.

When the subject is non-confrontational cultures, the first thing that comes to mind is the lack of conflicts or conflicts being avoided at all costs. For this reason, the research aims to clarify that even companies belonging to non-confrontational cultures are also impacted by workplace conflicts, particularly interpersonal conflicts. People from non-confrontational culture usually avoid conflicts pretending nothing is happening, but while the cause of the conflict is still present, there will be impacts. The research will also try to figure out if there is any better way to deal with conflict.

Therefore, the research has as objectives:

- Assess the way companies from non-confrontational cultures deal with workplace conflict by exploring approaches taken by companies from two different countries, Ireland and Japan, on the resolution of those conflicts.
- Identify and evaluate how the non-confrontational culture influences on the approaches taken by the companies;
- Explore and assess whether these approaches are effective.

To that end, we hold interviews in which contained a case study for the respondent's evaluation.

The review of literature has among other things the purpose of providing the theoretical grounds of the research as well as to help to create arguments for either lead to the creation of the hypothesis or answer the research questions. (Allen, 2017, p. 876)²

As stated by Fisher et al. (p. 93)³, ‘the literature review helps you to build upon the work that has already been done in the field you are researching’.

That is to say, the literature review is critical analysis of previous works on the subject that allows the research to understand the topic and its importance. As well as to help developing the researcher’s own ideas, the literature review also allows the researcher to become aware of contrasting ideas.

3.1 Culture and Organizational Culture

In order to understand the Organization Culture is essential to understand the concept of culture.

Culture, in general, is a set of characteristics, behaviour, beliefs, and values which belong to a society.

In other words, it is ‘the enduring norms, values, customs, historical narratives and behavioural patterns common to a particular group of people. (Mayer, 2012, p. 93)⁴

As Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952)⁵ described ‘Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements

² Allen, M. (2017). *The sage encyclopaedia of communication research methods* (Vols. 1-4). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc doi: 10.4135/978148338141.

³ Fisher, C, Buglear J, Lowry, D., Mutch, A and Tansley, C. (2010) *Researching and Writing a Dissertation: An Essential Guide for Business Students*. 3rd edn. Harlow: Financial Times/Prentice Hall.

⁴ Mayer, B. (2012) *The Dynamics of Conflict: A Guide to Engagement and Intervention*. 2nd edn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁵ Kroeber, A. L., Kluckhohn (1952) *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. 1st edn. New York: Vintage Books.

of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values’.

In addition, according to Willcoxson and Millett (2000)⁶, culture is ‘based in history, developing over time as groups establish patterns of behaviour and belief that seem effective in helping them to interpret and interact with the world in which they find themselves’. In other words, usually, it is what dictates what people do and how they behave.

For instance, Pub Culture is an excellent example of Irish Culture. Going to the pub, drinking Guinness, listening to traditional Irish music and catching up with friends, that is one of the most enjoyable activities for the Irish people, and they are worldwide known for it.

On the Japanese side, an example of the Japanese culture is the ‘*hanami*’⁷. When the cherry blossoms bloom, the Japanese gather with friends, family or partners in parks to do a picnic and watch the flowers.

That is to say, every place, every group, every society we are part of has its own culture.

Beyond the local culture, every organisation/company has its own organisational culture. As also stated by Willcoxson and Millett (2000)⁶, organisational culture is ‘a set of values and beliefs articulated by leaders to guide the organisation, translated by managers and employees into appropriate behaviours and reinforced through rewards and sanctions’. That is, it makes up a set of rules and standards that must be followed by all the individuals who make part of the organisation, and it is what defines the pattern of their behaviour.

⁶ Willcoxson, L. & Millett, B., (2000) *The Management of Organizational Culture*. Australian Journal of Management & Organisational Behaviour, 3(2), pp. 91-99

⁷ *Hanami*: flower viewing

NunezRamirez *et al.* (2016)⁸ described as ‘a crucial dimension that can either be an asset or a hindrance in sharpening behaviour in organizations and in achieving long-term organizational success.’ Provided that the company or organisation has a culture that encourages things such teamwork, continuous learning and inspires confidence we can say that ‘organisational culture is one of the basic conditions that form the base for effective functioning and success of the company’. (Fuller, 2015)⁹ Lewis, French and Steane (1997)¹⁰ agreed by stating that culture ‘can have a significant impact on the effectiveness and competitive advantage of an organisation’. And they add that culture is the essence of an organization, which makes one organization different from another and it is what provides competitive advantage.

As a part of the organisational culture, we have the culture of conflict, which is defined by the way the conflicts occur and the way companies handle it.

3.2 Conflicts and Culture of Conflicts

Conflicts have always been part of our lives, whether at home, school or work. As each of us has different life experiences, values, personality and background it is easy to understand that conflicts are ‘natural, inevitable, necessary and normal’. (Mayer, 2012)⁴

⁸ NunezRamires, M. A., WendlandtAmezag, T. R and Alvarez Medina, M. T (2016) ‘The Relationship Between Organizational Culture and Knowledge management in Tequila Companies from Mexico’. *International Journal of Advance Corporate Learning*. 9(1). pp. 44-50.

⁹ Fuller, C. P. (2015) *Organizational Culture: Leadership Strategies, Outcomes and Effectiveness*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc (Business Issues, Competition and Entrepreneurship). Available at: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1020592&site=ehost-live> (Accessed: 4 August 2019).

¹⁰ Lewis, D. S., French E, Steane, P. (1997) ‘A Culture of Conflict’, *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 18(6), pp. 275-281.

As described by Okla¹¹ (2018), ‘conflict is commonly defined as an open confrontation between two opposing groups or individuals. Most often, incompatibility of views, opinion or access to shared resources are the underlining reasons behind conflicts.’ For this reason, the word conflict itself always had a negative connotation, causing it to be consistently associated with violence, fight and arguments, and is often seen as a ‘behaviour intended to obstruct the achievement of another person’s goals.’ (Lewis, French and Steane, 1997, p. 276)¹⁰

However, in contrast to this bad assumption, not all conflicts are destructive, like wars or adversarial relationships where one side always must be victorious. Mayer (2009, p.19)¹² described the conflict as:

‘...essential to everyone’s growth and survival. It is the vehicle all of us use to face our most significant challenges. Conflict is our stimulus to attack problems and gives us the energy to overcome our powerful inclinations toward passivity’.

Likewise, Cloke and Goldsmith (2011, p. 2)¹³ define it as ‘a time-honoured way for people to get more of what they need or want, and a method of introducing necessary improvements, so it is important that disagreements not completely disappear’ and Kaye (1994, p. 2)¹ mention that ‘conflict means the opportunity to learn. It forces creativity, and it is also an opportunity for personal growth’. Mullins (1993, cited in Lewis, French and Steane, 1997) also acknowledges that sometimes ‘conflicts can be a positive force that stimulates interest and creativity, identifies and assists in resolving problems and promotes group cohesion.’

¹¹ Okla, E. S. (2018) *Introduction to Bargaining and Conflict Resolution*. Available at: https://www.edouniversity.edu.ng/oerrepository/articles/introduction_to_bargaining_and_conflict_resolution_20182019.pdf (Downloaded: 29 July 2019).

¹² Mayer, B. (2009) *Staying with conflict: A Strategic Approach to Ongoing Disputes*. 1st edn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

¹³ Cloke, K. and Goldsmith, J. (2011), *Resolving Conflicts at Work: Ten Strategies for Everyone on the Job*. 3rd edn. Santa Monica: Jossey-Bass

Given these points, it is possible to say that although sometimes conflicts can be damaging causing social rupture it is an essential social “interaction”, by the fact that it is an opportunity to grow and raise new ideas as well as to encourage changes in the company.

Just as the organisational culture mentioned earlier, every organisation has its culture of conflict although ‘largely unspoken and undiscussed’ (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2011)¹³.

Cloke and Goldsmith (2011)¹³ also suggests that every society, organisation, workplace, group creates a set of unspoken rules that they called “culture of conflict”. The culture of conflict as they mentioned is a set of words, ideas and behaviours that influences how people think and react to conflicts usually based on our previous experiences and current expectations, where ‘they shape our capacity to ask questions, alter how we see our opponent and ourselves, and tell us what is acceptable and what is not’.

Furthermore, the culture of conflict also includes the pattern of occurrence and the way the company sees and deals with conflicts. To put it in another way, whether the conflict is usually related to ‘incompatibility in goals or behaviours’ or to managerial issues as wages or working conditions (Lipsky, 2016)¹⁴, whether the company used to avoid and suppress the conflicts or deal with effectively in order to resolve it, this is all part of the culture of conflict.

3.3 Non-Confrontational Cultures and the Way they Influence Conflicts

Non-confrontational, also known as conflict-avoidance cultures, mean cultures that do not have the habit of confrontation. This type of culture seems to be typically found in oriental countries, especially in Asia where its culture usually focusses on the well-being of the group, not the individual.

¹⁴ Lipsky, D. B. (2016) *Managing and Resolving Workplace Conflict*. [N.p.]: Emerald Group Publishing Limited (Advances in Industrial and Labor Relations). Available at: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1335848&site=ehost-live> (Accessed: 10 August 2019).

According to Tjosvold and Yat-Sen (2002, p. 142)¹⁵ ‘because of their relationship-oriented values, avoiding conflict is thought to be prevalent and appropriate in collectivist societies like China’.

Hierarchical in its nature, the collectivist culture prize ‘duty, interdependence and obedience’ and often the nonverbal communication within the group is more meaningful than what is said explicitly as stated by Chew (2004, p. 62)¹⁶ ‘the meaning of a message is embedded in the implicitly shared social and cultural knowledge of the group’.

According to Kashima (1995, cited in Hartung, Fouad and Hardin, 2010),¹⁷ the characteristics of collectivism are social integrity, regard for in-group norms, primacy of in-group goals over personal goals, needs and aspirations. In other words, they will not do anything regarding a conflict as they do not want to be responsible for a situation that they assume it will be uncomfortable for the group.

The Chinese ‘*he*’¹⁸ and the Japanese ‘*wa*’¹⁹ as an example of collectivist cultures praise for the Harmony. The culture of harmony comes from the feudal era and is about basing the decisions in the consensus, emphasising the cooperation between each other and the loyalty, as well as putting the well-being of the group over your own feelings.

Cultures like the Japanese and Chinese are widely known for its pursuit for harmony. For people from these cultures, a happy environment would be characterized by the presence of harmony and the lack of conflict.

¹⁵ Tjosvold, D. and Sun, H. F. (2002) ‘Understanding Conflict Avoidance: Relationship, Motivations, Actions, and Consequences’, *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 13(2), p. 142. doi: 10.1108/eb022872.

¹⁶ Chew, P. (2004) ‘The Pervasiveness of Culture in Conflict’, *Journal of Legal Education*, 54(1), 60-71. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42893837> (Accessed: 29 July 2019)

¹⁷ Hartung, P., Fouad, N., Leong, F., & Hardin, E. (2010) Individualism-Collectivism. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 18(1), pp. 34-45. doi: 10.1177/1069072709340526

¹⁸ *He*: Chinese character which means harmony.

¹⁹ *Wa*: Japanese character which means harmony

On the other hand, Anedo (no date, p. 24)²⁰ explains the concept of harmony as being ‘concerned with the need to maintain a mutually respectful relationship and a common concern for humanity and morality, but not with the need to avoid disagreement and confrontation for arriving at uniform views.’

In the harmony to which he refers, there is the process of peacefully resolving conflicts and he further adds that ignoring conflict can make it worse

Having said that, it seems reasonable to assume that people belonging to non-confrontational cultures will not engage in conflicts due to the respect they have to each other and for the need of maintaining the harmony within the group regardless of the environment in which they find themselves.

3.4 Workplace Conflict Resolution in Japan

The *wa* culture mentioned earlier is the base for the Japanese culture and for them ‘rising above one’s personal feelings for the good of society as a whole is its own virtue’ (Eubank, 2018)²¹

Eubank (2018)²¹ also explains that the ‘*wa*¹⁹ stresses interdependence over independence, cooperation over dissent, and patience over resistance’. Not only the harmony but also the deep respect they have for the older and more experienced people make them have a more passive posture towards conflicts.

Despite that, Japan is known to have participated in some wars and conflicts within Asia.

²⁰ Anedo, O. *A Cultural Analysis of Harmony and Conflict: Towards an Integrated Model of Conflict Styles*. Available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9bdc/77c257b79f1953f346ce797815f1bf751e15.pdf> (Accessed: 03 August 2019)

²¹ Eubank, S. (2018) ‘Global Narratives Connect Our World’. Interview with Sachiko Eubank. Interviewed by Karthika Gupta for *Culturally Ours* website, 12 April.

So how can we call it non-confrontational if the country has participated in major conflicts? The answer given by Murayama et al. (2015)²² in their study is that they found the Japanese are more inclined to engage in conflict when it is related to tasks. By contrast, when the conflict is related to relationships, they are more prone to avoid it. That is the reason why this conflict-avoidant culture is so noticeable in workplaces.

Sullivan *et al.* (1981)²³ in their cross-cultural conflict resolution approaches study found out that the Japanese actually practice the conflict-avoidance before the conflict occurs. That is to say that, they will try to build and develop trust in order to prevent the conflicts from happening and not just avoid it.

Also, in their studies, Sullivan *et al.* (1981)²³ investigate the way Japanese American joint ventures, resolve conflicts and one of their findings is that American and Japanese businesspeople differ on the methods preferred for resolving conflicts within the organisation. Still according to Sullivan *et al.* (1981)²³, on one hand, the Americans have the tendency of using direct and confrontive legal tactics if other methods fail and for that reason is not unusual that for engaging in a business with the Americans, the company will need contracts that provide for arbitration between them. On the other hand, Japanese businessman does not commonly use business contracts to enforce their business relations. They will prefer building up the relationship on trust and honesty and use conferral as a response to the conflict, even when it comes to a conflict in the workplace.

²² Murayama, A., Ryan, C. S., Shimizu, H., Kurebayashi, K., and Miura, A. (2015). Cultural Differences in Perceptions of Intragroup Conflict and Preferred Conflict-Management Behaviour: A Scenario Experiment. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 46(1), pp. 88-100. doi:10.1177/0022022114551051

²³ Sullivan, J., Peterson, R., Kameda, N., and Shimada, J. (1981) 'The Relationship between Conflict Resolution Approaches and Trust--A Cross Cultural Study'. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 24(4), 803-815. doi: 10.2307/256178

In another study made by Ting-Toomey 1985 (cited in Chew, 2004, p. 62)¹⁶, where she compared the reaction of North Americans and Japanese in relation to conflicts, the findings were quite similar as she has written:

‘In viewing the same conflict episode, for example, in an organisational setting concerning the rejection of a sales proposal by a North American supervisor in the [low-context culture]²⁴ context, a North American subordinate will probably view the conflict episode very differently than a Japanese subordinate who has submitted the proposal. The North American subordinate will probably enter the conflict situation with heated discussion and issue-oriented arguments. He or she will probably produce facts, figures and graphs to illustrate his or her case. By contrast, the Japanese subordinate will probably be dumbfounded by the direct, outright rejection and will then analyse the conflict episode as a personal attack or a sign of mistrust. In fact, he or she will probably resign as soon as possible’.

Even though the country has suffered Western influences, in special from the United States, on the post war, Japan is still rooted in its tradition and its harmony.

Meres (1998)²⁵ argues that

‘there is no question that conflict exists in interpersonal relationships in japan; how conflict outwardly manifest itself is what needs to be examined. The specific characteristic of Japanese conflict suggests a repertoire of non-confrontational behaviours ranging from outright avoidance to silent submission.’

²⁴ By low context culture the author meant cultures where the meaning of communication in general are more literal and direct. That is, they mean exactly what was said.

²⁵ Meres, R. (1998) *‘Japanese nonconfrontational conflict strategies and their accompanying nonverbal behaviours’*. Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. University of Montana. Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/5388> (Accessed: 05 July 2019).

Intriguing as it may sound, people from non-confrontational cultures usually cannot dissociate the people from the conflict, and at the end, that is what most of the time makes them step back from it.

3.5 Workplace Conflict Resolution in Ireland

There are not many studies specifically about Irish behaviour in the workplace. Therefore, most of the information in this section is based on people's perceptions and point of view.

The Republic of Ireland was established in 1922 and previously the country was part of the United Kingdom. Although many culture features of the country were inherited from Great Britain, it does not mean that they share the same methods of conflict resolution used in other western countries. It is important to note that, as Ireland has a recent past of political and social conflicts, which leads us to believe that the country has a particular concern in trying to resolve conflicts.

However, when it comes to workplace conflict, the Irish personality outcrops, and it is where the non-confrontational culture stands out.

It is common knowledge that Irish people do not feel comfortable in conflict situations. It is common knowledge that Irish people do not feel comfortable in conflict situations. As well as they do not like to offend others, they apologise for everything and do not take well compliments.

As Miles (2016)²⁶ described Irish people, 'we are not natural complainers (moaners, yes but complainers no!)'. In other words, Irish people like to moan about everything but never get to officially complain about it.

Although the Hofstede (1980)²⁷ has presented in his cross-cultural study about values in the workplace that Ireland is an individualist country in which the emphasis is on the individual goals and

²⁶ Miles, Mary (2016) Conflict avoidance – an Irish trait?. Available at: <https://blog.milesmediation.ie/2016/03/15/my-first-blog-post/> (Accessed: 18 August 2019)

²⁷ Hofstede, G. (1980) *Culture's consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

achievement, Laffiteau (2014)²⁸ studies indicates that Irish people's attitudes in relation their relationships are more collectivists.

That means that, as the Japanese people, they place group goals and interest over their own, and they are more inclined to look for a harmonious relationship. No wonder Irish culture also values relationships and networking with people.

Miles' (2016)²⁶ statement describes quite well the way Irish people deal with conflicts, ' "Sure it'll be grand" is an Irishism that we all like to roll out from time to time. And I'm as guilty as the next person in hoping that a problem will just go away if I avoid it for long enough'.

In a more legal way of dealing with conflicts, Ireland has shown a significant concern in resolving conflicts on the past decades. We have seen efforts in promoting mediation in the workplace, through the Mediation Act 2017, the establishment of the Workplace Relation Commission in 2015, which provides assistance and guidance to the employees and the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, among other. (Citizen information, 2019)²⁹

These are all protective measures to assure the employee's healthy work life. That is even if the person does not want a direct confront, there is a way to help to resolve the issue.

²⁸ Laffiteau, C. (2014) *An Analysis of Cultural Perspectives in Ireland*. [online]. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/9275043/An_Analysis_of_Cultural_Perspectives_in_Ireland?auto=download (Accessed: 22 August 2019)

²⁹ Citizens Information (2019) *Workplace Relations Commission*. Available at: http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/enforcement_and_redress/labour_relations_commission.html (Accessed: 14 August 2019)

Chapter 4 – Research Methodology and Methods

The research will be done through a qualitative method, which is a method for analysing personal experiences in more detail (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011, p. 9)³⁰. In other words, is a research that produces descriptive data, that is ‘people’s own written or spoken words and observable behaviour’ (Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault, 2016, pp. 4)³¹ and ‘it takes into account that there are multiple – constructed realities which cannot be explained fully through analysing numerical data’ (McManus, et al., 2017)³².

Although Lacity and Jonson (1994)³³ stated in their studies that ‘researchers may hesitate to adopt qualitative approaches because they are unfamiliar with methods used to analyse qualitative data’, to prove the grounds of this study the qualitative research is the method that suits better.

Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011)³⁰ also argue that qualitative research allows the researcher to identify the issues by the perspective of the study participants, understand the meaning and interpretations given by them about behaviours and events happened.

³⁰ Hennink, M., Hutter, I. and Bailey, A. (2011) *Qualitative Research Methods*. London: SAGE Publications.

³¹ Taylor, S. J., Bogdan, R. and DeVault, M. (2016) *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource*. 4th edn. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

³² McManus, P. et al. (2017) *An Investigation in the Methodological Approaches used in Doctoral Business Research in Ireland, ECRM 2017: 16th European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies*. Available at: <https://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1168&context=buschmarcon> (Accessed: 10 August 2019)

³³ Lacity, M. C. and Janson, M. A. (1994) ‘Understanding Qualitative Data: A Framework of Text Analysis Methods’, *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 11(2), pp. 137–155. doi: 10.1080/07421222.1994.1151804

Regarding qualitative research, Mack, N. et al. (2005)³⁴ explained:

‘The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex descriptions of how people experience a given research issue. It provides information about the “human” side of an issue – that is, often contradictory behaviours, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals. Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent’.

The research philosophy is interpretivism. Saunders, Lewis and Tornhill (2012)³⁵ linked qualitative research with interpretivism as they understand that qualitative ‘researchers need to make sense of the subjective and socially constructed meanings expressed about the phenomenon being studied’.

According to Pham (2018)³⁶, ‘interpretivists adopt a relativist ontology in which a single phenomenon may have multiple interpretations rather than a truth that can be determined by a process of measurement’.

That is to say, the research is focused on the meaning, and it is understood by the interpretivism that one thing can have multiple meanings.

One of the issues that the interpretivism can present is that there is a risk of the result being affected by bias. As Pham (2018)³⁶ also stated, ‘research outcomes are unquestionably affected by the

³⁴ Mack, N. et al (2005) *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector’s Field Guide*. North Carolina: Family Health International. Available at: <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/Qualitative%20Research%20Methods%20-%20A%20Data%20Collector's%20Field%20Guide.pdf> (Accessed: 16 August 2019)

³⁵ Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2012). *Research Methods for Business Students*. 6th edn. Essex: Pitman Publishing.

³⁶ Pham, L. T. M (2018) *Qualitative Approach to Research: A review of advantages and disadvantages of three paradigmas: positivism, interpretivism and critical inquiry*. The University of Adelaide. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324486854_A_Review_of_key_paradigms_positivism_interpretivism_and_critical_inquiry (Accessed: 23 August 2019)

researcher's own interpretation, own belief system, ways of thinking or cultural preference which causes to many bias'.

In order to minimise this effect, the collected data will be analysed in conjunction with an HR specialist.

As a qualitative research, the study uses an inductive approach, where the general process happens in the order: collecting data, analysing the data to look for patterns and finally developing a theory.

O'Reilly (2009)³⁷ describes the inductive approach as the ones 'where the researcher begins with as open a mind and as few preconceptions as possible, allowing theory to emerge from the data.'

Moreover, Bernard (2321)³⁸ added stating that inductive research 'involves the search for pattern from observation and the development of explanations – theories – for those patterns through series of hypotheses.'

Regarding the analysis of the data, the research used a narrative approach.

Allen (2017)² described narrative analysis as a 'genre of analytic frames whereby researches interpret stories that are told within the context of research and/or are shared in everyday life'.

In addition, Chase (2011, cited in Saunders, Lewis and Tornhill, 2012)³⁵ explains,

'Through storytelling the narrator will also provide his or her interpretation of these events, allowing the narrative researcher to analyse the meaning which the narrator places on events.

Where there is more than one participant providing a personal account of a given context, the narrative researcher will also be able to compare and to triangulate or contrast these narratives.'

³⁷ O'Reilly, K. (2009) *Key concepts in ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd. (Accessed 29 August 2019). doi: 10.4135/9781446268308.

³⁸ Bernard, H. R. (2011) *Research Methods in Anthropology*. 5th edn. California: AltaMira Press.

Methods

Methods are the establish procedure used to accomplish or reach something.

In the research, methods are the strategies and techniques used for collecting data in order to provide evidence that will help to understand the subject of the research.

The research is making use of semi-structured interview and case study.

Interview

Research interview is a meaningful conversation between two or more people with the purpose of collecting data for the research or as stated by Given (2008, p. 470)³⁹ a ‘practice where knowledge is produced through the interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee or a group of interviewees’. In other words, it is essentially asking a relevant question and actively listen to the answers in order to explore and analyse it further (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016)³⁵.

Seven professionals participated in the interview, in which three are employees in Japanese companies, three in Irish companies and one is an HR specialist — all of them working in a managerial position as supervisor, team leader or department manager. The purpose is to get information from people who are usually involved in some way with conflicts in the workplace in both Japanese and Irish companies.

As the research seeks a qualitative result, the interview was done using a semi-structured strategy, where ‘you have some predetermined topics and questions, but you also leave some space for following up interesting topics when they arise’ (Rugg and Pettre, 2007)⁴⁰. That is, a set of questions was created, and the and other questions were added when necessary as the interview progressed.

³⁹ Given, L.M. (2008) *The sage encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods*, vol. 0, SAGE Publications, Inc., Thousand Oaks, CA, [Accessed 17 August 2019], doi: 10.4135/9781412963909.

⁴⁰ Rugg, G. and Pettre, M. (2007) *A Gentle Guide to Research Methods*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

The conducting of the interview happened through the phone and e-mails.

Although we know that interviews by email could be risky in the sense that we might not get honest and complete answers, that is a method that enables the researcher to conduct interviews with participants from diverse geographical locations (Fontes and O'Mahony, 2008)⁴¹ and that was the reason why we used the email interview. As some of the interviewees were in Japan and Brazil, the time zone was a practical issue.

The interview with the HR specialist was conducted by phone, and it was recorded under consent and later transcribed. The purpose of having a conversation with an HR specialist is not only to understand the point of view of someone who is always dealing with conflict but also to assist in analysing the collected data.

In both cases, the interviewees received previously an explanation regarding the study subject and the *Information Sheet for Participants*⁴², which contained the study's overall information and some clauses such as confidentiality and anonymity.

According to Given (2008, p. 471)³⁹ 'qualitative interview is a practice that has the potential to probe deeply into the private lives of the respondents with the intention of placing their accounts in the public arena' and for that reason 'confidentiality, informed consent and a consideration of participating in the study should be taken as ethical rules of thumb'. Therefore, the consents were obtained verbally or through an instant message app.

Case Study

The second method used was a case study.

⁴¹ Fontes, T.O. and O'Mahony, M. (2008) In-depth Interviewing by Instant Messaging. Social Research Update. 53. Available at: <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU53.pdf> (Accessed: 17 August 2019)

⁴² See Appendix A

A case study is basically a collection of data through observation.

Although some authors do not characterise it as a method itself, the case study allows the researcher to investigate a topic in far more detail (McLeod, 2008)⁴³. Moreover, it is an opportunity to analyse and see in practice if the theory involved is working (Breslin and Buchanan, 2008)⁴⁴.

As stated by Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000 (cited in Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2006, p. 74)⁴⁵ ‘case study is drawn from people’s experiences and practices and so it is seen to be strong in reality’ and also ‘because case studies build on actual practice and experiences, they can be linked to action and their insights contribute to changing practice’.

To Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012)³⁵, a case study ‘has the capacity of generate insights from intensive and in-depth research into the study of a phenomenon in its real-life context, leading to rich, empirical descriptions and the development of theory.’

In this context, the method is often used in law and business studies where it is of utmost importance for them to get the practice to better understand the concept. Furthermore, ‘because the data contained in case studies are close to people’s experiences, they can be more persuasive and more accessible’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, cited in Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2006, p. 74)⁴⁵.

For this research, the case study was proposed during the interview in order to investigate the actions and reactions of the interviewees given the conflict situation.

⁴³ McLeod, S. (2008) Case Study Method. Available at: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/case-study.html> (Accessed: 13 July 2019).

⁴⁴ Breslin, M. and Buchanan, R. (2008) ‘On the Case Study Method of Research and Teaching in Design’, *Design Issues*, 24(1), pp. 36–40. Available at: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bsh&AN=27982555&site=ehost-live> (Accessed: 01 August 2019)

⁴⁵ Blaxter, L., Hughes C. and Tight, M. (2006) *How to Research*. 3rd edn. Berkshire: Open University Press.

The presentation of the data is an essential part of the dissertation as it is where all the collected data and results are disclosed.

Interviews

Perception of Conflict

Perception is defined as the way people see, understand, identify and interpret something.

As a part of the research, interviewees were asked about their perception of conflict in the workplace.

There were a few different answers. In general, their perception is that at a first moment, conflict sounds negative but providing they do not involve aggression or violence can be positive when it creates opportunities for improvements inside the company.

Although one of the interviewees that work for a Japanese company commented that is important to keep a non-conflicting attitude for the sake of the group harmony, another one said that sometimes being too non-confrontational is not good as it makes the process more bureaucratic and the decision-making process takes longer. The second interviewee later explains that because the company tries to keep the harmony, every decision, including the ones that demand a quick response, needs to go through the headquarters in Japan which makes the whole process longer and too formal.

One of the interviewees working for an Irish company agreed by adding that the decision maker's reaction is also too smooth.

In this instance, the HR Specialist points out that 'if you have somebody who is from a very different work culture, they are more like to step below and more likely to hide it for a peaceful life. The problem is you end up with all these employees that actually don't say anything because they are too afraid. They rather just have this peaceful life'.

When the subject is the physical perception, how do they acknowledge the conflict in their workplace, if someone usually reports it or the situation has become noticeable, most answers said the conflict was prominent. Whether appearing in the person's actions and reactions, whether in a change of behaviour or during a simple conversation. Interviewee 4⁴⁶ also mentioned that it becomes noticeable when 'people start to avoid each other, schedule team meetings separately, instead of following the guidelines they take action that diverges from the other affecting the department as a whole'.

Three of the interviewees indicated that the conflicts in their workplace are usually reported to the team leader, the manager or HR. Moreover, it is most likely done when the conflict is in relation to a task. When the conflict is interpersonal the non-confrontational culture becomes more evident, and unless the manager or team leader is someone more conscious, it may not be easy to identify.

The HR Specialist position is that even if the conflict situation is noticeable, they cannot intervene. If someone comes to seek advice, they usually try to open a discussion with the parties, but generally, the intervention only occurs when the conflict escalates to significant issues.

Culture Influencing Behaviour

Whether culture influences the way people behave facing conflicts, the interviewees were unanimous. They all answered, yes. Especially the Japanese Companies' employees, they all mentioned the non-confrontational culture as being sort of a problem in the workplace. People suppressing their personality, their feelings and the way they think, especially when dealing with superiors, it is a common thing in their environment.

⁴⁶ See Appendix F.

Although some Japanese companies are trying to change this reality, it is stated by Interviewee 5⁴⁷ that this has become a real issue in the Japanese companies' environment where many people could be suffering from some mental disorders and using alcohol as an escape.

From one of the Irish companies' employees – Interviewee 3⁴⁸ the primary concern when dealing with conflict when it involves cultural differences is to know how to separate what is a cultural feeling from a real conflict situation.

The HR Specialist, when asked about Irish people being non-confrontational, emphasised the fact that inside the Irish organisational culture, there is a fear of retaliation that makes people being afraid of complaining or saying anything. As stated 'generally, in Working Irish culture the problem is that you will find that people won't raise their heads above the parapet for the simple reason that there is a fear of reprisal or if I say this, this person can make my life miserable'.

Conflict Resolution Process

In relation to the process of conflict resolution in their companies, while most respondents said they had no written procedure to deal with conflict, one stated that in addition to having a system, the company shows particular concern in training the team leaders in order to make them capable of properly handle a conflict situation within the team. Regarding this topic, the HR specialist explained that most companies do have a written procedure, but employees do not acknowledge them because in most cases, they never had to use it. In Irish companies, the procedures are most likely to be under the disciplinary, grievance or bullying and harassment policies in which every company is obliged to have by law.

⁴⁷ See Appendix G.

⁴⁸ See Appendix E.

After the conflict situation is acknowledged in most of the researched companies, there is the HR intervention, whether to recommend a coaching session or to try to resolve the issue opening a discussion with the parties.

Interviewee 6⁴⁹ mentioned a practice put into place in the company called “HO REN SOU”⁵⁰ which is a practice that is used to share the conflict situation and through the give-and-take, make the decision quicker in order to minimise the damage caused by the conflict. Interviewee 6⁴⁹ also emphasises that this is not a protocol but a practice that the company encourages as for them it is a fundamental practice.

One thing questioned by the HR Specialist is whether there is a formal report to HR or not, as usually when this happens means that the conflict has got to the point that is not easily manageable. That is, often what happens is the people come to HR to seek advice as ‘they don’t want to cause a problem, they just want to find some help to handle a situation they are uncomfortable with’.

After the conflict is acknowledged and the first actions taken the approach took by all the companies was to discuss the issue, whether with the HR involved or not, they all pointed the importance of an open discussion. One of the companies also holds reflection meetings frequently, where the employee can openly discuss the mistaken points and think together in a solution to prevent the re-occurrence of the same.

In most of the cases, they resolved the conflict, and the best part is that it encouraged people to communicate more openly. Therefore, from their perspective, these approaches have been showing some effectiveness.

⁴⁹ See Appendix H.

⁵⁰ HO REN SOU: Each individual syllable represents a letter in Japanese, in which ‘報’ = HO stands for a Japanese word meaning *report*, ‘連’ = REN stands for a Japanese word that means *inform* and ‘相’ = SOU that stands for a Japanese word that means *consult*.

The HR Specialist, in this case, agreed that a discussion is a very effective way of dealing with conflict. HR may just interfere when the situation is serious and of difficult resolution.

Best Way of Dealing with Conflicts

There were a few different answers in assessing the best way to deal with conflicts. Two of the interviewees said that being respectful and active listening to the parties in order to clarify the disagreement.

Moreover, having and continuing to have a good conversation was cited by two of the interviewees as an excellent way to build up the relationship.

Interviewee 3⁴⁸ mentioned that it is crucial to understand different cultural behaviours and be open-minded. Also suggests coaching techniques to help on the resolution of the conflicts.

Meanwhile, one of the Japanese company's employee insists that when you're the person involved the best way to deal with a conflict is to resolve it yourself directly without involving a third party or HR.

The HR specialist's point of view is that you should go and try to talk to the person causing the issue or that is the issue. If it is too serious, the offended person should go to speak to the manager or HR, but it is advisable that the person do that as soon as possible 'because it gives you a much more comfortable environment when it's out and in the open.

Case Study

The proposed case study was:

'Anna and Patrick are co-workers in a multinational company in Japan. They are on the same employment line, and they depend on each other to complete their tasks. They always finish by the deadline, but their manager knows that they are capable of working more efficiently. Because of the

difference in personality and point of view they just do not particularly like each other and communication between them is poor. They only talk when absolutely necessary, and the tension between them is noticeable by everyone. You are the manager in charge, and you know that if they talk through their issues and try to solve their conflicts the company will grow considerably in productivity and quality of work. What would you do in this situation? Would you interfere?’

The purpose of the case study was to find out in practice what would do in a conflict situation in their workplace. Within the interviewee’s organisational culture, what would or would not have been done and also what would have been appropriate.

From the interviewee's answers, 83% said that the approach taken in this situation would be talking to each of the parties separately to try to understand the issue and their reasons and to emphasise the importance of mutual respect and teamwork.

One of the interviewee’s strategies for after the discussion is to promote more activities and tasks in which they will have to work together in order to develop their team spirit.

Another interviewee pointed out that in case the company feels that none of the parties is willing to cooperate to resolve the issue, there should be a third-party intervention from HR or an internal mediator.

By contrast, one of the Japanese company’s interviewee’s point of view is that no one should intervene as this will cause unnecessary exposure, aggravating the situation. The company should let the involved talk through and resolve the conflict by themselves.

From the HR Specialist perspective, there should be no intervention. In conflicts situation, they usually wait until one of the parties come and seek for advice. From this point, they will decide the best approach. Often there will be a discussion with the parties involved and in case of interpersonal conflict and no improvement was noticed after the discussion, the company’s put into place the code of conduct for both parties to participate.

HR Specialist Additional Considerations

Irish people, in general, have this non-confrontational personality. They apologise for everything and do not accept compliments. As the HR Specialist stated, 'we just want to get our heads down and get on with that'. In the workplace, what most likely led them to be non-confrontational is the fear of reprisal.

Conflicts in the workplace are inevitable. Every company will always have its moaners and people who are there to cause problems. In this instance, the best way to deal with it is having a good conversation on the outset, so you get rid of a situation where you're not comfortable as quickly as possible.

Data analysis has as objective asses and discusses the answers received from the interviews and case study in order to interpret the result and find patterns and controversies to help to clarify the aiming proposed in the study.

As mentioned in chapter 4, the research is done in a qualitative method and analysed using narrative analysis in which is a method that synthesises the data by relating events and actions. In other words, it means linking the theory with practical experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995)⁵¹.

In practice, it is to identify, categorise the patterns according to the reading of transcripts and later discuss the findings. (Cassell and Symon, 2011, p. 638)⁵²

The perception of conflict has to do with how people see, identify and understand conflicts. Moreover, we can say that it is the personal awareness on the subject.

In this instance, most of the interviewee's mentioned that the first impression on conflicts is always negative. LeBaron (2003, p. 3)⁵³ agrees by quoting, 'for many, the associations are negative. Few people welcome conflict as an intriguing opportunity for learning and changing.'

Significantly, non-confrontational workplace culture places conflict avoidance as its most striking feature, having this bad assumption on conflicts its greatest excuse.

As we know Ireland and Japan, both countries have non-confrontational workplaces. The Japanese culture of conflict avoidance is down to the harmony culture and the over respect that they have for

⁵¹ Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995) 'Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(5), pp. 5-23, doi: 10.1080/0951839950080103

⁵² Cassell, C. and Symon, G. (2011) 'Assessing "good" qualitative research in the work psychology field: A narrative analysis', *Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology*, 84(4), pp. 633–650. doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8325.2011.02009.x.

⁵³ LeBaron, M. (2003) *Bridging Cultural Conflicts: A New Approach for a Changing World*. 1st edn. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

its hierarchical structure. The harmony culture is the one in which all the effort goes in maintaining the well-being of the group. In other words, the group is always over the individual. For this reason, it was not alarming when one of the interviewees stated that it is essential to keep a non-conflicting posture in the workplace.

Surprisingly, the other two interviewee's working from Japanese companies demonstrated being aware of the non-confrontational culture, but at the same time, they commented that sometimes this could disrupt internal processes, turning the decision-making process bureaucratic and slow. That is, although we have the culture rooted, we can see an urge for things to change.

One of the interviewees that work for an Irish company agreed and added that sometimes the decision-maker also reacts too smoothly when the situation requires a more energetic approach.

The HR Specialist response on to why Irish companies have a non-confrontational culture is that; it's not because they want to maintain the harmony of the group, but because they value peace in their own work lives. That is, they are usually afraid of being retaliated if they say or complain about something. So, they rather keep their heads down and let it go then confronting and face the consequences.

As Danielsson et al. (2015)⁵⁴ briefly described, organisational culture is the characteristics of an organisation. That is to say, it is what dictates people's action and reaction in the company, as well as what is appropriate or not.

With this in mind, as noted earlier, we can say that culture does indeed influence people's behaviour, and that was the answers received from the interviewees in which they were unanimous.

A perception that is confirmed by Mayer (2012, p. 92)⁴ when he stated:

⁵⁴ Danielsson, C., Bodin, L., Wulff, C., & Theorell, T. (2015) 'The relation between office type and workplace conflict: A gender and noise perspective'. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 42, pp. 161-171. Available at: <https://www.deepdyve.com/lp/elsevier/the-relation-between-office-type-and-workplace-conflict-a-gender-and-UfsTG0ju5f?articleList=%2Fsearch%3Fquery%3Dconflict%2Bbehaviour%2Bworkplace> (Accessed: 15 August 2019)

‘Even though culture is the medium within which conflicts play out, to most of us it is as invisible as the air we breathe. As a result, it is often easy for us to overlook the critical role cultural norms and practices play in creating conflict, affecting its course, and influencing the way we try to deal with it. Conversely, when we do focus on culture it is easy to view as the overarching determinant of what will occur’.

The Japanese company’s employers, despite its awareness, reckon that non-confrontational is to a degree a problem in the workplace environment. Moreover, that is due to the fact that people assume they should suppress their personality, the way they think or feel in order to maintain harmony. Also, it is the cause of why there are many issues such as depression or alcoholism taking place in Japanese companies nowadays.

One of the Irish company’s employee also demonstrated a particular concern regarding multicultural workplaces, in which there is the influence of the local culture, the organisational culture and the employee’s personal culture. She emphasises the necessity of leaders to understand and know how to separate a cultural feeling from a real conflict situation.

According to Mayer (2012, p.3)⁴ ‘how we view conflicts affects our attitude toward it and our approach to dealing with it’ and, in this case, it is a fact that when there is a conflict in companies with non-confrontational culture, those involved will hardly come forward to confront and seek for a solution.

At this point, it is clear that people experiencing non-confrontational culture in the workplace tend to not only practice conflict avoidance but also, they prefer to pretend that nothing is happening.

In this context, another point raised in the interview was how did they acknowledge the conflicts in their workplace. Most interviewees said that the conflict usually is prominent, and it is usually noted on the involved people action and reaction.

In their studies, Robbins and Judge (2013)⁵⁵ argue that the behaviour stages of people involved in conflicts include 'the statements, actions, and reactions made by the conflicting parties, usually as overt attempts to implement their own intention'.

As a clear example of this, one of the interviewees quoted in explaining how conflicts are usually noticed in the company: 'people start to avoid each other, schedule team meetings separately, instead of following the guidelines they take action that diverges from the other affecting the department as a whole'. In other words, they do not say a word but it is evident in their attitudes that something is happening.

In addition, another interviewee added that when the conflict is concerning tasks, it is more likely that the employees will take the initiative to resolve it. Meanwhile, if the conflict is interpersonal the non-confrontational culture stands out, and it goes to the managers and leaders to be more perceptive to the point to be able to identify and decide whether they will intervene or not.

Even though some of the interviewees affirmed having reported to HR when they noticed a conflict situation, the specialist pointed out that usually, the HR can not intervene unless the circumstances are serious and what actually happens is that there is not a formal report but a consultation or discussion.

Conflicts in the workplace are very common, seeing that we are dealing with different people, with different values, goals and perspectives. Carneloup⁵⁶ (2019) suggests that for that reason, its occurrence is predictable and 'if we develop procedures for identifying, defining and managing conflict, then we can constructively manage conflict and take advantage of its opportunities'.

⁵⁵ Robbins, S. P. and Judge, T. A. (2013) *Organizational Behavior*. 15th edn. Harlow: Pearson

⁵⁶ Carneloup, F. (2019) *Conflict Resolution: Getting Along in the Workplace*. Kindle e-book [online]. (Accessed: 12 August 2019).

To this end, question 2⁵⁷ regarding written procedures to deal with conflicts was asked to the interviewees to verify if there is no intervention protocol put into place.

Through the collected data, we can see that most of the companies do not have written a procedure to deal with conflicts.

Although the HR specialist insists that every Irish company should have a procedure to deal with conflicts as a part of the disciplinary, grievance or bullying and harassment policies which are required by the Irish law, it is not clear if it is in fact included. The argument the specialist uses to reinforce this statement is that most people do not acknowledge that for the simple reason that they usually do not read if they do not need it.

Despite this, one of the interviewee's (from an Irish company) answer regarding writing procedures was that the company not only have a procedure but also, they have a system in which the employee can put up a complain online without having to contact anyone else. Moreover, the company provides regular training for the team leaders and managers in order to enable them to deal with conflicts in the best way possible.

The next step taken after becoming aware of the conflict, to most interviewees it is discussing the issue. Although this does not sound characteristic of a company with non-confrontational culture, all the interviewee has underlined the importance of having open discussions. The HR specialist assented to the answers stressing that HR intervention only happens when the situation has escalated to a severe degree, and that discussions are a very effective way to handle conflicts.

Couple with that, one of the interviewees from the Japanese companies revealed that not just in conflict situations but generally they use a Japanese practice named HO-REN-SOU⁵⁰. Which its ideal is, through the Report-Inform-Consult, to enhance the communication within the team and make the

⁵⁷ See Appendix B.

decision-making process quicker in order to minimise the damage caused by a conflict or even to prevent it from happening.

In spite of the fact that sometimes the practice can be seen as time-consuming (Ashta, 2015)⁵⁸, the interviewee assures that it has been a good way of encouraging discussions in the company.

The action appointed by one of the Interviewees from the Irish company is having one-to-one discussion sessions until everyone is happy with the conclusion. That is the manager/team-leader talks separately with each of the parties. Moreover, the interviewee's point of view is that this way the team-leader is able to better understand the situation and act as a mediator, preventing people from coming into direct conflict. As endorsed by Walker (2019)⁵⁹, this type of meetings helps to create trust between employees and assists in addressing issues before they become a problem.

That serves at a clear demonstration of the HR specialist's statement: 'they don't want to cause a problem; they just want to find some help to handle a situation they are uncomfortable with'.

All the interviewees stated that on all occasions the conflicts were resolved and moreover mentioned the outcome as positive. Whether as process or relationship improvement or even the non-reoccurrence, one of the interviewees has underlined the importance of resolving conflicts.

As mentioned earlier, every company has its organisational culture and its conflict culture that dictates the pattern of people's behaviour in the company towards a particular situation.

From all the answers we can confirm that the non-confrontational cultures have a significant effect on the organisational culture and that its most striking feature is conflict avoidance.

However, none of the interviewees pointed conflict avoidance as the best way to deal with conflict.

⁵⁸ Ashta, A. (2015) *The Japanese Concept of Ho-Ren-So* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/japanese-concept-ho-ren-so-ashok-ashta/> (Accessed: 20 August 2019)

⁵⁹ Walker, T. (2019) '10 ways to manage workplace conflict.' *Medical Economics*, 96(6), pp. 52-53. Available at: <https://www.deepdyve.com/lp/ubm-advanstar/10-ways-to-manage-workplace-conflict-Jlh94SN2HG?articleList=%2Fsearch%3Fquery%3Dworkplace%2Bconflicts> (Accessed: 20 August 2019)

Close but not quite, one of the interviewee's suggested that when you are involved in a conflict, the best way to handle it is dealing with it yourself and not involving others.

Most of the interviewees described being respectful and attentive, knowing to active listen to the others as the best way of dealing with conflicts. Another two interviewees added that maintaining open conversations also helps to build up relationships. In the practical way of handling conflict one suggested coaching techniques.

Although Japan and Ireland are two distinct countries, with different language and lifestyle, regarding conflicts in non-confrontational workplaces, they did not show many divergences.

It is a fact that the amount of collected data is small and for that reason we cannot generalise but overall from the received responses we could not notice any disparities.

The discussion is where the meaning and relevance of the collected data are coming together and is also where the strengths, weakness and limitations of the study should be discussed. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012, p. 640)³⁵

Non-Confrontational Culture as an Issue

Non-confrontational culture is known for promoting conflict avoidance. When avoiding a conflict usually people will ignore the problem, change the subject or pretend that nothing is happening. Whether for fear of retaliation or keeping the group harmony, it became clear that this kind of attitude is not advantageous neither to the employees or to the company.

Some of the interviewees mentioned the non-confrontational culture as an issue. That is, mostly because of its collectivist nature. Thinking on the others before thinking about yourself it is an altruistic attitude that sometimes it is not beneficial to the work environment.

One of the issues reported was regarding the delay in decision making. That happens because, generally, collectivists base their decisions on a consensus. In other words, it is vital for them that everyone is aware and approves every measure to be taken, consequently causing the delay in decision making.

It is possible to see that by doing so they are trying to integrate the organisation and make everyone feel like a part of it but at the same time, the lack of autonomy, in cases that demands a quick response, ends up being a hindrance. Consequently, making the company lose some business opportunities and sometimes loose in productivity as well.

One way of resolving it, in my opinion, would be to give more autonomy and set some approval limits according to the position and responsibilities. Of course, more complex decisions that affect the whole

organisation should go through the whole process, but smaller but still strategic decisions should be restricted to line managers or team leaders, for example.

Another issue pointed is caused by the non-confrontational culture itself, in which people repress themselves so hard not to externalise a problem that they end up causing harm to themselves.

In the Japanese culture, in which the hierarchical structure is strong by its nature or even in the Irish workplace, in which the fear commands people's actions and reactions, it is possible to observe that personal problems linked to mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety crisis, alcoholism and even suicide rate has increased significantly.

In this instance, my point of view is that implementing practices as the HO-REN-SOU⁵⁰ which encourages people to communicate not only in conflict situations but in a daily basis, once they get used to it, makes them more comfortable to talk when something happens. Especially in countries as Japan, where non-confrontational culture is rooted and is the inheritance of the country.

That is to say; companies have to be more attentive to what is happening internally so as not to avoid but depending on the situation to prevent the conflicts.

Conflict-Free Organization

In fact, having a workplace free of conflict, a friendly environment, no complains, and no arguments are the best scenario. However, considering all the benefits as acknowledged by Mullins (1993, cited in Lewis, French and Steane, 1997, p. 277)¹⁰, 'conflict can be a positive force that stimulates interest and creativity identify and assists in resolving problems and promotes group cohesion', it might not be such a good idea.

Some people may consider a conflict-free workplace a boring and conformist place. Seeing that most of the changes and improvements that happen in the company come from the conflicts, I would say they are not entirely wrong.

As much as the HR specialist has said that sometimes it happens that a company does not receive complaints not because they are non-confrontational but because there is no actual reason to complain, I do not think conflict-free organisations are real.

Divergent opinions and point of view will always impact the workplace environment, whereas this is made up of people with different culture, different experiences and backgrounds.

Local Culture x Organizational Culture

When the company deals with multiculturalism like in multinational companies, for instance, the subject conflict becomes more sensitive.

Whether the organisational culture should be shaped to match the local culture⁶⁰ is still a grey area. Robbins and Judge (2013)⁵⁵ in their study found that ‘some researchers propose that managers need to make a concerted effort to adapt their organisation to match the culture of the country in which they operate’. The argument is that people working for these organisations are supposed to feel more comfortable and safer in an environment that they are used to, which consequently makes them work more productively.

By contrast, in the same study, Robbins and Judge (2013)⁵⁵ also have researchers stating that because of the vast number of variations and values and norms, matching a culture will make the company ‘lose the potential value of having a unifying organisational culture’.

I think it will all depend on the size and purpose of the company and also where is the board of the company from. For example, a Japanese company located in Brazil in which all the senior executives are Japanese sent from the company’s headquarters in Japan. The company will comply with all the requirements required by the country’s laws, but as internal processes they usually follow the company’s headquarters’ procedures.

⁶⁰ Local culture: the national culture, the culture of the place the company is located.

Although this reality has been changing, as one of the interviewees explained with the HO-REN-SOU practice, that is what usually happens in most of the Japanese companies outside Japan.

Which, in this case, the organisational culture is stronger than the local culture.

One of the interviewees who is currently a team leader in a multicultural consulting company underlines the difficulty of working with people from different countries and different cultures. The challenge pointed by her is to try to understand those differences and know how to separate what characteristics belong to the person culture from what is part of the actual conflict.

For being aware of this multiculturalism issue, the same company have the concern of training the leader, so they are prepared to deal with those difficulties and to be empathetic and understand their differences.

In the case of regular companies, the issue is when even the local culture is affecting the organisational culture, in this case, a non-confrontational culture.

It is hard to say what is right and what is wrong or even what suits better as each organisation has its own culture and its own way of dealing with conflicts.

[Conflict Avoidance as a Way of Dealing with Conflicts in the Workplace](#)

It is clear from the collected data on the interviews and past studies that conflict avoidance is not the best way of dealing with conflicts in the workplace.

Even though we know that the non-confrontational culture in some cases is rooted, and sometimes the action of avoiding conflicts is not intentional, it is a conspicuous fact that the harmony may be costing too much to the workplace

Conflicts are natural and inevitable once we are daily dealing with differences.

Conscious or not, ignoring and pretending nothing is happening does not necessarily make the conflict disappear. Consequently, conflicts do not resolve themselves and the most significant issue

in these situations is that the causes of the conflict are still present. Moreover, it is very likely that the company is losing productivity by the fact that the staffs are not happy.

The ideal of harmony is absolutely superb, but as mentioned earlier, the companies need to understand that with conflict comes creativity (Coleman, Deutsch and Marcus, 2014)⁶¹, comes opportunity and improvement. As Myatt (2012)⁶² quoted ‘Divergent positions addressed properly can stimulate innovation and learning in ways like minds can’t even imagine’.

Enhance communication, create a work environment where people feel safe and comfortable to talk and give their opinions, and encourage feedback and constructive criticism. These are essential points that could help to decrease the conflict-avoidance and to create a friendly and healthier workplace.

Taking actions to prevent and not to avoid conflicts is, in my opinion, is the key to real harmony.

Encouraging or Discouraging Conflict

It is clear that conflicts whether in the family or in the workplace are inevitable.

It is also clear that apart from being a sign of social rupture, conflicts especially in a workplace are the opportunity to improvements and changes.

Now, considering a non-confrontational workplace, which is apparently conflict-free, would it be a good idea to encourage conflicts in order to promote this changes and improvements?

Robins (1988, cited in Lewis, French and Steane, 1997, p. 277)¹⁰ encourages the idea by saying that encouraging conflicts the organisations will be avoiding ‘static, apathetic and non-responsive behaviour’. However, he emphasizes that the conflicts only should be stimulated in static situation.

⁶¹ Coleman, P. T., Deutsch, M. and Marcus, E. C. (2014) *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁶² Myatt, M. (2012) ‘5 Keys of Dealing with Workplace Conflict’, *Forbes*, 22 February [online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikemyatt/2012/02/22/5-keys-to-dealing-with-workplace-conflict/#2f2979101e95> (Accessed: 25 August 2019).

Lewis, French and Steane (1997)¹⁰ later explains that:

‘Conflict that leads to the identification and consideration of a variety of decision solutions is beneficial and should be encouraged and managed, while conflicts that leads to dissatisfaction, ill feelings and reduced co-operation is debilitating and should be discouraged and resolved.’

The first is usually related to an issue or task and the later affective, interpersonal conflict.

The challenge in this case is to know how to identify the type of conflict that you are dealing with.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

The word conflict has always carried a negative meaning. Not to mention that conflicts have long been associated with violence and aggression, which has led people to tend to avoid them, and not many could see them as an opportunity for change and learning. (LeBaron, 2003)⁵³.

In the workplace, almost as a prejudice, companies are used to seeing conflicts as a sign of failure or mismanagement. For this reason, it is not hard to find organisational cultures that place rewards on conflict suppression, and avoidance or that sees conflict resolution as pointless and allowing bullying and repressing the truth-tellers (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2011)¹³.

That also could be considered as one of the limitations of the research. Due to this bad assumption, companies do not like to talk about conflicts as it is seen as a weakness.

However, the world is changing, and it is clear that not only the companies will need to change but also put some effort into adapting and turning the work environment more friendly.

That is, not being a conflict-free workplace but understand and recognise that conflicts are an opportunity to enhance creativity, improve the relationship within the team and learn from each other (Walker, 2019, p. 53)⁵⁹.

The greatest challenge is according to Cloke and Goldsmith (2011, p. 8)¹³ ‘to release ourselves from pointless, unproductive cultural patterns and build an organizational culture that value openness, honesty, dialogue, negotiation, conflict resolution and the ability to learn from our conflicts and our opponents.’

From the research result, it was quite clear that non-confrontational culture in a workplace can sometimes be an issue. Moreover, that avoiding conflicts is not the best way to deal with it.

In some cases such as the Irish workplace in which the conflict-avoidance is due to the fear of retaliation, one of the solutions is to create an internal conflict handling committee, made up of staff

from different departments and levels so that a person in a conflict situation feels more comfortable opening up and discussing the issue.

As reinforced by Cloke and Goldsmith (2011)¹³:

‘It is possible for us to reduce the level of conflict avoidance in our workplace simply by listening empathetically and responsively to our opponent, honestly and non-aggressively communicating our differences and collaboratively discussing our issues with other in a spirit of trying to find better solutions. In doing so, it is possible to share our cultural traditions, expectations, and assumptions, with our opponents, and reach across our cultural differences to find ways we can each communicate more effectively’.

Overall, conflicts even in a non-confrontational environment are mostly caused by issues with the communication, either for the misinterpretation or the lack of it.

Just as the interviewees pointed out, we can say that the best way to deal with conflicts is to encourage open communication. As hard as it may seem, especially considering that non-confrontational culture makes people withdraw from any confrontation, through the interview’s answer, we could see that it is possible. Companies promoting evaluation meetings and implementing practices in which communication is the main activity.

I have always been inside this non-confrontational environment, and I know that it is a real struggle when a conflict situation happens. It is not that you are told not to say anything or give an opinion. It is that, not only you feel uncomfortable doing so but also, you do not want to be the cause of the harmony rupture.

That is where comes the importance of this research, to make the companies aware of the effects and consequences of the conflict-avoidance and that there is a way of dealing with it in order to turn it into something favourable and advantageous for the company.

Reflection

This dissertation was quite a rough patch.

The first challenge was the language. Having to write an academic paper in a language that you're not native in, in my humble opinion doubles the struggle. Dealing with words and technical terms that you are not familiar with makes things more complicated, and it takes more time to finish a sentence, for example.

The second challenge was the support of the supervisor. I guess I had too high expectations about it. Although I know there is a guideline that they need to follow, and there are certain things they are not allowed to do, or they do not need to, I was expecting a closer relationship. More cheering and encouragement or even closer monitoring by the supervisor that did not happen. But I understand that in the end, that is not their responsibility.

Regarding the process of collecting data, as I choose to do interviews as a qualitative research method, I found a little hard to find people available and willing to participate. The easiest way was asking acquaintances if they could participate or they know someone who could spare some time doing it. I tried to contact people through email and LinkedIn, explaining who I was and what the contact was about, but I got no replies.

In relation to the analysis of the data, I think my lack of knowledge in this subject may have impaired the final result of my analysis. I've been researching and reading about it, but it does not seem enough as I don't feel confident enough to put it in practice. I think including some practical exercises during the Research Methods lecture may be of some help for future students.

The time was also not as friendly. We might think that two, three months is enough to finish it but actually for the amount the research required for this paper even six months would not be enough.

Also dealing with the time pressure, people around seeking attention, the lack of time for leisure and the temptation to do anything else was, in my opinion, apart from the research itself the significant challenge.

As opportunities for further research I would suggest more studies about the Irish behaviour in workplace conflict because, despite all the available tools for workplace conflict resolution in Ireland as the WRC and mediation, I have not found studies directly related to Ireland.

Finally, I would like to say that the dissertation was an excellent opportunity to improve my language skills, both written and spoken. Also test time managing skills, which, in my case, it has been proven that it needs to be significantly enhanced. And lastly, it was an excellent opportunity to delve into a subject of my interest that can be useful in my professional future as well as help people or companies struggling with the same issue.

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Appendix A – Information Sheet for Participants

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

PROJECT TITLE: Workplace conflicts in non-confrontational cultures: Is avoiding the best way to deal with it?

You are being asked to take part in a research study on workplace conflict in non-confrontational cultures where the research aims to clarify that even being part of non-confrontational cultures the companies are also impacted by conflicts and try to find out a better way to deal with it, in special with interpersonal conflicts.

RESEARCHER: This research is being conducted by Katia Natsumi Nozuma and supervised by Matthew Holmes. Our contact details are included at the end of this document.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN: In this study, you will be asked to answer some questions in relation to your experience in dealing with conflicts in the workplace, your point of view and your insights, and, if permissible, describe the procedures for the resolution of conflicts taking by the company that you work/worked.

TIME COMMITMENT: The study typically takes up to 20-30 minutes.

RIGHTS: Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may decide to stop being a part of the research study at any time without explanation required from you. You have the right to ask that any

data you have supplied to that point be withdrawn/destroyed and you have the right to omit or refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of you. If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, you should ask the researcher before the study begins.

CONFIDENTIALITY/ANONYMITY: The data I collect will not contain any personal information about you except your role in the company and the answers provided. The data will only be used as a source of information for the research and the audio if recorded, and transcripts will be stored securely on password-protected computers until

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION: I or/and Matthew Holmes will be glad to answer your questions about this study at any time. You may contact my supervisor at Matthew.Holmes@independentcolleges.ie

Appendix B – Interview Main Questions

Position: _____

Type of business: _____

1. Japanese & Irish workplaces are both known as being non-confrontational. Keeping this in mind, how do you see conflicts in your workplace?
2. In your company, is there any protocol to deal with conflicts? (Any written procedures to be followed)
3. What happens when a conflict occurs?

4. Considering your experience with conflicts; how did you acknowledge them? (Did anyone report? Did anyone ask? Was the situation noticeable?)
5. As the person in charge, after you heard about it, what was the approach taken to address and to solve the conflict? (Did you make use of mediation or any help from a third party?)
6. What was the outcome?
7. In your opinion, was the resolution effective? Explain
8. Would you do anything differently?
9. Considering the non-confrontational background, do you think culture affects the way people behave facing a conflict? E.g. making people avoid conflicts and hide the way they feel.
10. Case study: Anna and Patrick are co-workers in a multinational company in Japan. They are on the same employment line, and they depend on each other to complete their tasks. They always finish by the deadline, but their manager knows that they are capable of working more efficiently. Because of the difference in personality and point of view they just don't particularly like each other and communication between them is poor. They just talk when absolutely necessary and the tension between them is noticeable by everyone. You are the manager in charge, and you know that if they talk through their issues and try to solve their conflicts the company will grow considerably in productivity and quality of work. What would you do in this situation? Would you interfere?

11. What do you think is the best way to deal with a conflict in the workplace?

Appendix C – Interviewee 1’s Transcript (Irish Company)

Your position: Team leader/manager

Company’s type of business: Technology, operation/call centre

Question 1 – Japanese & Irish workplaces are both known as being non-confrontational. Keeping this in mind, how do you see conflicts in your workplace? (Is it something negative or do you see it as an opportunity to bring improvements?)

Conflicts may have a positive impact when, for instance, they result in an improvement in the company’s processes. On the other hand, sometimes conflicts can get a negative impact. For example, if two employees argue seriously, it might create a heavy atmosphere within the department or team, which may impact their results and performance.

Question 2 - In your company is there any protocol to deal with conflicts? (Any written procedures to be followed)

No, there is not a protocol to deal with conflicts in my company.

Question 3 - What happens when a conflict occurs?

It is immediately reported to the line manager, who will escalate it to a higher level if needed. Depending on the nature of the conflict, it may be escalated either to HR, to training and development, or to operations.

Example:

- 1- two agents had a conflict (argued) related to personal issues. It was reported to the team leader, who had to escalate it to HR as the argument would not cease even after the TL had tried to calm them down by talking to them.

2- TL's got some complaints regarding people heating seafood up in the microwave in the kitchen, which smelled strongly, and some felt nauseous because of it. It was escalated to operations. The operations manager requested a meeting where she kindly asked all the employees to be conscious about it and to avoid heating seafood. As a result, some employees took it in a positive way. However, some felt offended and were unhappy about it.

Question 4 - Considering your experience with conflicts; how did you acknowledge them? (Did anyone report? Did anyone ask? Was the situation noticeable?)

Example:

Situation: I was the TL giving the agent feedback in a one-to-one session. And he thought that the feedback was unfair. He started speaking louder and louder.

I explained to him that it was not a personal situation, but a professional one. I stated that I was there to help him improve and that I was simply doing my job. I asked him to keep the professional attitude he always had. He was a little nervous and I told him we would quit the session by then and continue the next day, giving us both time to think about it.

The next day he was much calmer and recognised that my feedback was fair and accepted my suggestions. There was no need to escalate this conflict further.

Question 5 – As the person in charge, after you heard about it, what was the approach taken to address and to solve the conflict? (Did you make use of mediation or any help from a third party?)

Please, consider the example above.

I rarely made use of mediation to solve any conflict within my team. Examples:

1 - I had witnessed a discriminatory situation (in regards to race) within another team. I reported it to the team leader, and he took it to HR. The latter approached from then on.

2 - The workload was very low in January and the company requested some days of layoff. Many employees complained about it. I conducted a meeting together with my team and asked the operations assistant manager to help me explain on the reasons.

Question 6 - What was the outcome?

1 - The agents continued working in the same team. They used to respect each other, but they never got along really well.

2 - Even though the agents were unhappy with the situation, they understood the company's reasons and stopped complaining.

Question 7 - In your opinion was the resolution effective? Explain

I think so. These were two very specific situations and in the first case, the situation had never repeated. And in the second, the agents cope with the company as there was transparency from the organisation's side.

Question 8 - Would you do anything different?

Considering the cases above, I would not do anything different.

Question 9 - Considering the non-confrontational background, do you think culture influences the way people behave facing a conflict? E.g. making people avoid conflicts and hide the way they feel.

Yes, I do. The way people deal with situations within their families and society have a direct impact on the way they deal with conflicts in a professional environment. For example, the history of France is full of revolutions, cultural changes, influential people, etc. and they are considered the people who most go on strikes when they are unhappy with an aspect of their jobs/employments.

Question 10 – Case Study: First of all, I would try to understand the reason why they don't like each other. Depending on the reason, I would talk to them separately, approaching the importance of collaborating effectively to the team success and, therefore, to their personal success.

If I noticed that both of them were willing to improve, then I would have talked to them together and highlight the benefits of collaborating more.

If I did not notice that both of them were willing to improve, then I would probably ask from help of a third party.

Question 11 - What do you think is the best way to deal with a conflict in the workplace?

Having a respectful conversation to get to a common sense.

Appendix D – Interviewee 2’s Transcript (Irish Company)

Your position: Supervisor / Team Leader

Company’s type of business: Restaurant / food

Question 1 – Japanese & Irish workplaces are both known as being non-confrontational. Keeping this in mind, how do you see conflicts in your workplace? (Is it something negative or do you see it as an opportunity to bring improvements?)

Depends on how seriously the conflicts are, because when we are working with people it will be normal some conflicts. I think what is not acceptable is some kind of aggression.

Question 2 - In your company is there any protocol to deal with conflicts? (Any written procedures to be followed)

No, there is not any kind type.

Question 3 - What happens when a conflict occurs?

It is immediately reported to the unit manager and together we will try to find a solution to the problem.

Question 4 - Considering you experience with conflicts; how did you acknowledge them? (Did anyone report? Did anyone ask? Was the situation noticeable?)

Example: I was working as a TL and I had a staff who was depressed and demotivated. So, the customers started to complain about the staff. After this the unit manager spoke with the staff and he/she thought the feedback was unfair. The situation was noticeable as other employees realized they had an argument.

Question 5 – As the person in charge, after you heard about it, what was the approach taken to address and to solve the conflict? (Did you make use of mediation or any help from a third party?)

After this I had a meeting with the manager and the staff. The staff explained the reasons and apologized. We set a goal: Try to improve the customer service for 1 month, changing small things e.g. smile more and be friendly.

Question 6 - What was the outcome?

The outcome was the staff improved the customer service.

Question 7 - In your opinion was the resolution effective? Explain

Yes, it was. Because I figured out what the reasons were, but it was hard as the staff was introspective.

Question 8 - Would you do anything different?

No.

Question 9 - Considering the non-confrontational background, do you think culture influences the way people behave facing a conflict? E.g. making people avoid conflicts and hide the way they feel.

Yes. I do. For example: many cultures prompt submissive behaviour and people from these cultures may tend to avoid conflicts and hide the way they feel, while people from more liberal cultures may feel more comfortable to complain.

Question 10 – Case Study: As a manager I would try to find out all the reasons that why they do not like each other. After this I would talk to them separately and explain how important both are to the company and how import work as a team is.

Question 11 - What do you think is the best way to deal with a conflict in the workplace?

Being respectful and patient.

Appendix E – Interviewee 3’s Transcript (Irish Company)

Your position: Team Leader

Company’s type of business: Consulting

Question 1 – Japanese & Irish workplaces are both known as being non-confrontational. Keeping this in mind, how do you see conflicts in your workplace? (Is it something negative or do you see it as an opportunity to bring improvements?)

Even though I’m working on a multicultural environment, I’ve seen conflicts been handle in a very positive way. My perception and main concern is the fact that those kind of environment are harder to manage because different people in general react differently depends of the situation. By working on this company, I’d opportunity to manage people from around the world and as a manager, we have to adapt very fast in order to avoid that a misunderstood situation become real conflicts. Nordic people per example tend to be straight to the point when they need something, and it can be “read” as a very rude behaviour for some not Nordic colleagues. The question is, are the Leaders being trained to deal with different cultures? My manager is Irish, and I have a very good relationship with him even though sometimes I feel he reacts too smooth in situations where require a little more “energy” in my opinion. Anyway, the point is we should be focused if, in fact, Leaders are solving problems and not how they are solving it. I believe this change of mind set can be beneficial for everyone.

Question 2 - In your company is there any protocol to deal with conflicts? (Any written procedures to be followed)

Yes, they do. I've personally learned a lot in terms of how the company want you to react in a conflict or how can you avoid unconscious BIAS impacting your decisions. I understand the company is trying to standardise some behaviours in order to avoid judicial problems, but sometimes it is hard to not let your own personality handle the situation mainly on multicultural environments. Training have to be very intense in this area.

Question 3 - What happens when a conflict occurs?

We do have to follow HR procedures and create a very detail report that have to be sign by everybody involved. After that, many 1:1's have to be deliver in order to make sure all parts are happy with the way the situation was solved.

Question 4 - Considering you experience with conflicts; how did you acknowledge them? (Did anyone report? Did anyone ask? Was the situation noticeable?)

Conflicts can be reported to a line manager or in my company, they also can be raised straight to HR (by a web site) who opens an investigation.

Question 5 – As the person in charge, after you heard about it, what was the approach taken to address and to solve the conflict? (Did you make use of mediation or any help from a third party?)

In general, TL's use to let their line manager know about all conflicts they are handle even though not always they participate in this process. TL's have to solve the issues but HR acts as a mediator when needed.

Question 6 - What was the outcome?

As mentioned above, all the conflicts need to be solved in a way that everyone agrees with what had been done to solve the issue. The outcome is registered in a report and all parts sign it. The report is so sent to HR.

Question 7 - In your opinion was the resolution effective? Explain

All the resolutions need to be effective even though some people spend more time to create the plan to solve the problem. In general, the plan comes from the person who raised the concern together with the TL acting as a coach and HR as a mediator.

Question 8 - Would you do anything different?

I do think it's a very effective way to solve issues. I've seen very positive results.

Question 9 - Considering the non-confrontational background, do you think culture influences the way people behave facing a conflict? E.g. making people avoid conflicts and hide the way they feel.

Absolutely! As mentioned above it's my main concern to separate what is a cultural feeling from a real conflict. I have the luck to work in a company who does value and invest in their Leaders but to be honest I think most companies in Ireland don't do this.

Question 10 – Case Study: I would have a very good and open conversation with each of them separately in order to really understand what the matter is. After that I'll probably use coaching sessions in order to let each of them understand more about their own unconscious BIAS and finally, I can start to promote activities where they have to work more and more together in order to create a real team spirit. I believe by follow those steps I could grab very good results.

Question 11 - What do you think is the best way to deal with a conflict in the workplace?

Techniques of Coaching helps a lot. But understand about different cultures behaviours also open your mind.

[Appendix F – Interviewee 4's Transcript \(Japanese Company in Brasil\)](#)

Your position: Sales Planning Supervisor

Company's type of business: Multinational manufacturer of electronics

Question 1 – Japanese & Irish workplaces are both known as being non-confrontational. Keeping this in mind, how do you see conflicts in your workplace? (Is it something negative or do you see it as an opportunity to bring improvements?)

A diretoria é composta em sua grande maioria por japoneses expatriados. No dia a dia de vendas, temos enfrentados problemas que são reflexos do próprio cenário econômico que o país está passando. Sendo um brasileiro nativo que acompanha a crise, entendemos a queda de vendas e sabemos que devemos responder de forma rápida ajustando as estratégias de vendas para que possamos contornar a situação e seguir crescendo. Porém, empresas japonesas tem um perfil mais conservador e momentos que necessitam mudanças rápidas, a empresa orienta que é necessário passar por uma bateria de aprovações internas e pela própria Matriz para realizar qualquer mudança. E todo esse processo é moroso e formal demais, e por vezes perdemos o “*time*” da oportunidade.

Translation: The company’s board is mostly made up of Japanese expats. In daily sales, we are facing issues that are a reflection of the economic scenario that the country is going through. Being a native Brazilian who follows the crisis, we understand the drop in sales and know that we must react quickly by adjusting sales strategies so we can get around the situation and keep growing. However, Japanese companies have a more conservative profile and even in times that demands quick response, the company’s approach is that every change needs to go through a series of internal approvals, including from the Headquarters in Japan. This whole process is too slow and formal, and sometimes we lose the timing of the opportunity.

Question 2 - In your company is there any protocol to deal with conflicts? (Any written procedures to be followed)

Não há nenhum procedimento escrito a ser seguido, porém quando há conflitos, as pessoas procuram o RH que por vezes recomenda ao empregado agendar consultas com o coach profissional que vem regularmente à empresa para aconselhamento profissional.

Translation: There are no written procedures. However, when a conflict occurs, we are advised to contact the HR and then, if necessary, they book a session with the professional coaching specially hired to deal with conflicts.

Question 3 - What happens when a conflict occurs?

Recentemente houve uma situação que um gestor brasileiro estava em conflito com seu diretor expatriado. Algumas vezes o RH entra em circuito e recomenda as pessoas envolvidas agendar encontros com coach profissional. Em casos que não são solucionados, o RH juntamente com a diretoria, oferece a oportunidade de transferência de departamento.

Translation: Recently, we had a situation in which the Brazilian manager had an issue with a Japanese expatriate director. Sometimes the HR intervenes, and the involved people are usually advised to book an appointment with the coach. In cases that are not likely to be solved, HR, along with the board, offers the employee a transfer within departments.

Question 4 - Considering your experience with conflicts; how did you acknowledge them? (Did anyone report? Did anyone ask? Was the situation noticeable?)

Conflitos dos outros muitas vezes fico sabendo por pessoas próximas. Estes algumas vezes, são evidentes no ambiente de trabalho. As pessoas passam a se evitar, agendam reuniões com equipes separadamente, tomam ação que afetam o departamento como um todo, pois acaba tomando ações divergentes ao invés de seguir uma diretriz.

Translation: We usually hear from people close to the involved. Sometimes, the situation is evident in the workplace. People start to avoid each other, schedule team meetings separately, instead of following the guidelines, they take action that diverges from the other, affecting the department as a whole.

Question 5 – As the person in charge, after you heard about it, what was the approach taken to address and to solve the conflict? (Did you make use of mediation or any help from a third party?)

Eu particularmente, procuro conselhos de gerentes brasileiros para encontrar a melhor forma de solucionar o conflito. Mas de modo geral, procuro resolver esclarecendo os conflitos diretamente com as pessoas envolvidas.

Translation: I particularly seek advice from the Brazilian managers to try to find the best way to resolve the conflict. But generally, I try to resolve by clarifying the conflicts directly with the people involved.

Question 6 - What was the outcome?

De modo geral, positivo. Eu acredito que quando você apresenta seu ponto de vista de forma racional, aprende a escutar o outro e mostra que o objetivo é trazer melhoria para empresa, é possível contornar o conflito e resolver a questão.

Translation: Overall, positive. I believe that when you give your point of view rationally, you learn how to listen to each other and show that the goal is to bring improvement to the company by doing that you will be able to get around the conflict and resolve the issue.

Question 7 - In your opinion was the resolution effective? Explain

Sim. Conflitos são construtivos se tratados baseados em respeito. As pessoas têm experiências de vida e valores diferentes um do outro. Pontos de vistas de pessoas diferentes, podem contribuir em criatividade e solução de problemas para a empresa.

Translation: Yes, if treated respectfully conflicts can be constructive. People have different life experiences and values. Therefore, different points of view can contribute to creativity and problem-solving in the company.

Question 8 - Would you do anything differently?

Não.

Translation: No.

Question 9 - Considering the non-confrontational background, do you think culture influences the way people behave facing a conflict? E.g. making people avoid conflicts and hide the way they feel.

A cultura influencia na forma das pessoas se comportarem diante de um conflito. Não todos, mas em sua grande maioria os expatriados da empresa costumam evitar situações conflitantes e escondem o que eles realmente sentem. Presenciei situações no qual comentava abertamente em japonês com outro expatriado, porém para o brasileiro não se queixa abertamente.

Translation: Culture influences the way people behave facing a conflict. Not all, but the vast majority of the company's expats often avoid conflicting situations and hide the way they really feel. I have witnessed cases in which someone was talking openly in Japanese with another expatriate, but the same person never complained to the Brazilian staffs.

Question 10 – Case Study: Como gerente não faria nada nesta situação, pois se interferisse iria expor essa relação de pouca afinidade para outras pessoas, gerando um problema ainda maior.

E acredito que seja uma situação que os envolvidos, eles mesmos poderiam tomar ação para resolver suas diferenças. Mas não é um caso para o gerente se envolver.

Translation: As a manager, I would do nothing in this situation because interfering would expose this low-affinity relationship with others, creating an even bigger problem. And I believe that that is a situation in which those involved could take some action to resolve their differences. But it is not a case for the manager to get involved.

Question 11 - What do you think is the best way to deal with a conflict in the workplace?

Se você é a pessoa que está enfrentando alguma situação de conflito, a melhor forma é tratar diretamente com a pessoa, sem envolver terceiros; Ser preciso e objetivo em seus argumentos, saber escutar e direcionar a conversa para chegar a uma solução do conflito.

Translation: If you are the person facing a conflict situation, the best thing to do is to deal directly with the person, without involving third parties. Be accurate and objective in your arguments and know how to listen and direct the conversation to solve the conflict.

Appendix G – Interviewee 5’s Transcript (Japanese Company in Japan)

Your position: Supervisor

Company’s type of business: Hospitality

Question 1 – Japanese & Irish workplaces are both known as being non-confrontational. Keeping this in mind, how do you see conflicts in your workplace? (Is it something negative or do you see it as an opportunity to bring improvements?)

非対立的な態度はいいと思います。しかし、それは同僚(横の繋がり)だったらすごく平和でいいと思いますが、上司や目上の方(縦の繋がり)だったら、非対立というより逆らえないので、対立的な態度を取れない場合があるので、それはよくないと思います。

Translation: When the relationship is between colleagues or people on the same hierarchical level, I think it is good to keep a non-conflicting attitude. It may not be possible to maintain this attitude when the relationship involves a boss or a superior, and in my opinion, that is not good. Overall, I think it is better to have a non-conflicting attitude.

Question 2 - In your company, is there any protocol to deal with conflicts? (Any written procedures to be followed)

対立が起こった時の対応仕方に関するマニュアルはないです。

Translation: We don’t have any written procedures to deal with conflicts.

Question 3 - What happens when a conflict occurs?

私が居た会社はあまり競い合うこと起こりませんでした。ちょっとした意見合わない時はお互い納得するまで話し合われてました。もしくは第三者も入れての話し合いが行われます。

Translation: In the company that I used to work for I did not witness many conflicts. Sometimes when we had come conflicted opinions, we discussed until we understand each other or we included a third party in the discussion.

Question 4 - Considering your experience with conflicts; how did you acknowledge them? (Did anyone report? Did anyone ask? Was the situation noticeable?)

私は職場で争うようなことをしませんでした。話し合うことで問題を解決したり、皆で一步譲ったりしたので、対立するようなできことはありませんでした。

Translation: We did not have many conflict situations while I was in the company. Once we had a disagreement, we discussed it within the team, and everyone stepped back, so it did not escalate to an actual conflict.

Question 5 – As the person in charge, after you heard about it, what was the approach taken to address and to solve the conflict? (Did you make use of mediation or any help from a third party?)

皆で納得するまで話し合いました。もしくは誰かが一步譲ったりしました。

Translation: We usually discussed until we understand each other or on some occasions, someone stepped back.

Question 6 - What was the outcome?

時によって時間かかったりしましたが、解決につながりました。

Translation: In some occasions, it took some time, but it led to the solution.

Question 7 - In your opinion, was the resolution effective? Explain

はい、私が居た職場は皆の意見を受け入れるので、話し合い中に発言したことは聞き受け入れられます。

Translation: Yes, because it was an environment where they accept everyone's opinion and listen to what is being said.

Question 8 - Would you do anything differently?

いいえ。

Translation: No.

Question 9 - Considering the non-confrontational background, do you think culture influences the way people behave facing a conflict? E.g. making people avoid conflicts and hide the way they feel.

文化は大いに影響すると思います。私の出身の台湾でも、出向で行ったオーストラリアでも、日本の職場みたいな対応はあまりしないと思います。日本人は文化的な面の影響で、自分の性格、考えをコロスことが多いです。特に上司や目上の人に対する反論や文句を言えない人が多いので、見た目では平和で、非対立的でいいように見えますが、実はよくない連鎖を起こしていることが多いです。自分を抑えすぎると、お酒で逃げ場を作ったり、精神的ダメージがあったりするので、日本社会にはいろいろな問題や事件が起こっています。

Translation: I think culture has a significant influence. None of the places that I've been to is like working in Japan. Even Taiwan, my birthplace or Australia where I'd lived for one year. Japanese people are so affected by the culture that in many occasions, it is normal that they 'kill' their personality or their way of thinking. Many people just can't complain about bosses or even object, so it all looks peaceful, but the truth is that they don't have a good relationship. People keep suppressing themselves, causing them to use alcohol as an escape and making them mentally ill. And for those reasons, there are many incidents happening in Japanese companies nowadays.

Question 10 – Case Study: 徐々に二人を仲良くさせます。まずはそれぞれの話を聞いたり、二人の信頼を得てから進めます。

Translation: Gradually let them get along. First, listen to each story and gain their trust before proceeding.

Question 11 - What do you think is the best way to deal with a conflict in the workplace?

皆仲良くすること。お互い相手の立場から考えること。自分の意見を話したり、他人の話を聞いたり、ちゃんと話し合うこと。

Translation: Making everyone get along to each other, putting yourself on the other's shoes, give your opinion, listen to them and always discuss the issues.

Appendix H – Interviewee 6's Transcript (Japanese Company in Brasil)

Your position: Administrative Analyst, part of the commission that assists the company's guidelines implementation

Company's type of business: Steel Company

Question 1 – Japanese & Irish workplaces are both known as being non-confrontational. Keeping this in mind, how do you see conflicts in your workplace? (Is it something negative or do you see it as an opportunity to bring improvements?)

In the first impression, conflict is something negative. However, during the “conflict resolution process”, the company usually sees it as an opportunity to review the internal procedures and make necessary improvement in our workplace.

Question 2 - In your company, is there any protocol to deal with conflicts? (Any written procedures to be followed)

There are not any specific procedures or protocols for conflicts cases.

Question 3 - What happens when a conflict occurs?

We are practising for “HO REN SOU” method in our department. For Japanese people, this practice is fundamental to the business, that it is mean:

HO (Houkoku) – Reporting / REN (Renraku) Informing / SOU (Soudan) Consulting

This is not a protocol, but a practice to share the conflict and make a quick decision in order to minimise the damage caused by this conflict.

Extra question – At the implementation, did you have any resistance from the staff?

In the beginning, yes. First, because people usually don’t like changes and second because you are encouraging them to talk and we know they do not feel comfortable doing so.

Question 4 - Considering your experience with conflicts; how did you acknowledge them? (Did anyone report? Did anyone ask? Was the situation noticeable?)

Some conflicts as process (workflow) conflict, you can identify easily. In this case, commonly, the conflicts are reported by the responsible for the task. However, conflict between peoples is hard to recognise and deal with this question. In this case, a good perception could make a difference in how to approach and how to manage conflict.

Question 5 – As the person in charge, after you heard about it, what was the approach taken to address and to solve the conflict? (Did you make use of mediation or any help from a third party?)

When some conflict occurs, “Evaluation Meeting (反省会)” is made with all the involved persons. It is important to note all the mistakes points and discuss “how to avoid this conflict again”.

Question 6 - What was the outcome?

In some process, during evaluation meeting, items that should be improved are identified. After identifying, the procedures are revised and established a small change in the workflow, which creates an opportunity for improvement.

Question 7 - In your opinion, was the resolution effective? Explain

I think that it is effective to do an evaluation meeting because you encourage people to identify and what they did wrong or well. I consider this process important when the team share and discuss your experiences.

Question 8 - Would you do anything differently?

At this time, I would do not anything different

Question 9 - Considering the non-confrontational background, do you think culture influences the way people behave facing a conflict? E.g. making people avoid conflicts and hide the way they feel.

I agree that culture affects directly in your behaviour, especially when we considering Japanese people.

Question 10 – Case Study: First, I would talk about the importance of good communication to be more efficient in your tasks. I consider common to have It is common to have a different point of view in the team. Therefore, it provides a good ambient to share information about work tasks may improve both productivities. Talk openly and respect the personal differences could be essential to deal with conflicts in the workplace

Question 11 - What do you think is the best way to deal with a conflict in the workplace?

I think that the best way to deal with conflict is to clarify with all parties involved the disagreement is. A good conversation and talk about your experiences with conflicts I consider a good way to build a relationship with your team.

[Appendix I – HR Specialist Interview Transcript](#)

I find that Irish people are quite non-confrontational, as you are always saying sorry for everything and everything is ‘grand’. So, what do you think about that?

Yeah, Too afraid to. A lot of that is down to a fear of retaliation. In an office environment, they are non-confrontational, in a factory or manufactory environment, they are definitely more likely to open

up if something is bothering them but not open up necessarily in the right way. They are more likely to say or complaint to a manager if something isn't working right in their work life. But generally, in Working Irish culture the problem is that you will find that people won't raise their heads above the parapet for the simple reason that there is a fear of reprisal or if I say this, this person can make my life miserable. They give in a lot to say, 'oh no go ahead; you do that', we do apologies, we do not take compliments as well. We just want to get our heads down and get on with that. But in the workplace, in an office environment is definitely non-confrontational.

And do you think this retaliation actually happen? Is this fear real?

Yeah, it is a genuine fear. Weather is happening or not; there is a genuine fear there. It's the fear of what somebody senior can do to you. Now it is breaking down, but it is going to take a little bit longer to break down. You will find offices where you know that there will be absolutely no retaliation, and then you will find offices that you know the person who is being complained about will be an absolute nightmare.

So the first question that I asked them was about how do they see conflicts in the workplace.

Most of the answers that I got was that the first impression was negative because conflicts are usually associated with fights and violence. However, they were saying that conflicts are good because it creates opportunities for the company to seek improvements.

That is a really good point. Once you get beyond the initial conflict for somebody who is afraid, there is more likelihood to raise the issue and have a discussion about the issue to be able to say 'actually, you know get this now while people are talking about it and don't let it fester'. If it festers, it becomes a problem. If we get it to know we can actually resolve it quite quickly. And resolving it quite quickly is a good thing.

The second question that I asked was if there was any protocol in the company to deal with conflict. Like a manual or written procedure and 85% answered that no, there are no written

procedures to deal with conflicts. Do you think this is important? Is something that they should have?

Most of the companies will have 'stuff' to deal with conflict, but I guarantee you they have not read it and they don't actually realise that under the grievance and disciplinary procedure within the company. That's a bigger problem. Actually, they don't see that that is already in place, but actually, they are not aware because they never really had to look at it. But every company is obliged to have a disciplinary, grievance and bullying and harassment policies in place within 28 days when an employee is starting, and they are required by law. And the bullying and harassment one is normally called dignity and respect at work and I'm pretty much sure that everyone that was interviewed has this in the handbook and the handbook has that information.

The third question was about what happens when a conflict occurs, and most of the answers that I got was that they were reported to HR. So, as an HR person, do you think this is the best thing to do to start the resolution?

I don't know if they reported to the HR or not. I'm not actually very convinced why people think that they would actually report to HR. But I would say that that is not even reporting to the HR but saying that they are having a discussion with the HR. And yes I would've had a lot of discussion with people while they are just be asking for advice rather than you know, they don't want to cause a problem, they just want to find some help to handle a situation they are uncomfortable with.

When it comes to interpersonal conflict, would it be the same, you think?

Yeah, absolutely. People will look for advice. It's back to that cultural thing I don't want to create anyways, I don't want to make a difficult situation, and I need some advice to handle this. Along in the time, you will find that people will say 'I actually don't know what to say to them because they make me feel really uncomfortable', but all I can think is that they are acting like children. Sometimes somebody just needs to be told 'you know, be a bit of a grown-up and then actually go and have a cup of coffee with this person'.

I asked how did they acknowledge the conflict? Did anyone ask? Because sometimes you know what is going on, but the person won't say anything. Considering your experience, what usually happens? Do you intervene, or do you wait until someone says something?

First and foremost, as HR, you can't intervene. As a colleague, you can. As HR, unless it becomes a point where you have to intervene, where something serious happens and then it's taken out of the person control. But you generally wait for the person to come and talk to you about it so you'll end up to handle it themselves because sometimes people just don't want to not handle it themselves, they want to they do it themselves the way they want it handled. It is very difficult to step in when you know somebody is overreacting to. If somebody is oversensitive, it is not a problem, and we won't necessarily see it as a problem, and this happens quite a bit. If somebody is having a really hard time in their personal life or going through serious problems in their personal life and somebody cracks a joke in relation to (the issue). But they don't know what the other person is going through and then you get overreactions it is very hard, and you couldn't step in because them you bridging somebody's trust. Well, you would have a discussion to say to that person like ' I can see why you are reacting like this, and I understand that you're not enjoying this and you're taking that quite sensitively, but you know, don't overreact to it because this person doesn't mean it'. But I'll have a discussion with them to let them know'. Because if you don't have a discussion the joke will keep going, and they are harmless, and they are not intended. And the only time it becomes a big problem is when somebody makes it a big problem, but they don't have the nerve to stand up and say it.

That's a bigger issue when somebody is having a hard time personally because people don't like people to know that they are going through a hard time. And if they are having a hard time personally and then, they overreact to stuff that's happening. Or I suppose on the other side if you do have somebody that is being a complete arse about stuff and knows that somebody is going through a hard time and starts to make commentary.

And in this case, what should be the approach, would you go talk to the person?

Yeah, I would go straight in and have the discussion. I'm not afraid to have the discussion. When you do what I do the one thing you have to get your head around is that you are always going to be the unpopular person in the room and once you can get your head around that and ease the way for colleagues continue then yeah you're actually doing really well. The HR person will always end up as the baddy. But it is ensuring that the angle is directing at the right portion and not directed not focused somewhere else. Because if it's focused somewhere else it does become a problem and people get very emotional over things.

Do you think it's effective putting the two parties together to talk?

It will all depend on the situation. But yes, I think it is always good. I think a cup of coffee can cure enough a lot and in the very early outset but if it gets too far you can't do that. And sometimes it gets to a point where the working relationship is untenable, and you have that discussion with people' if you can't get along'. Now, on occasions, I've actually needed to put in what is called a code of conduct. So it is basically teaching people saying that: 'you can't do this person's job, they can't do your job. You don't have to like each other, you don't have to love each other, you don't have to live with each other, but you do have to respect that each person can do the job they are hired to do'. If you can't do that and you seemed to behave in a way that doesn't do that then you're going to lose your job.

About the outcome, most of the answers were that they always sit and talk until everyone is happy no matter how long it takes. In case you don't achieve this, what would you do?

M: That's when you the code of conduct is put into place. That's if they become agreeable to it and if not, they are going through a formal process on the grievance. So, I'd say Fred is upset with the way Bob spoke to him. Bob doesn't see anything wrong with it. HR actually thinks Bob is an 'idiot'; Bob keeps saying that he didn't say anything wrong. Fred is getting more and more upset and more and more wound up. Code of conduct is put in place after they had a chat. Bob thinks that's ridiculous and don't want to do it, then is being to the HR to have a discussion with Fred to say this is not serious

enough so we can step into mediation, but if you want to raise a grievance, we can actually do something active with that.

I asked if they think that this non-confrontational culture affects the way people behave facing a conflict and all of them said yes. Especially the Japanese side.

Yes, absolutely. If you have somebody who is young enough becoming a manager, they are more willing to acknowledge that it can be an ill feeling in the workplace. If you have somebody who is from a very different work culture, they are more like to step below and more likely to hide it for a peaceful life. The problem is you end up with all these staffs that actually don't say anything because they are too afraid. They rather just have this peaceful life.

Even in a friendly environment, I don't see people complaining.

You'll always have your moaners; they will always be the people there to cause problems, and there is also the handful of people that we call the organisational terrorist and if you can't understand who they are they will cause problems. But if you have a really good culture, a friendly culture and a friendly environment in a company sometimes you don't actually need, you will find that there will be no conflict because people are just comfortable with the way it is, this is how it is, and this is how we do it.

The last question is what you think is the best way to deal with conflict.

I think the best way to deal with conflict, if there is conflict and if somebody is uncomfortable with something you go and speak to the person that is causing it. If it's too serious you go to speak to the HR, or your manager about it or the manager with HR. And then you follow the process that is in place, and I guarantee you every company has a process puts in place but face it straight on and get it out and in the open because it gives you a much more comfortable environment when it's out and in the open