CHAPTER 5 - A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE? FRONT-LINE MANAGERS AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF CONFLICT

Carol Jones and Richard Saundry

Introduction and background

Although there has been a progressive devolution of the responsibility for people management from human resource professionals to line managers, the handling of individual employment disputes has remained a jointly regulated activity (Hall and Torrington, 1998a; Kersley *et al.*, 2006; Hales, 2005; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003). 'Regulation' has taken the form of increasingly detailed policy and procedures with limits on the degree of autonomy that line managers have and the decisions that they can take (Kersley *et al.*, 2006; Hales, 2005). Historically line managers are perceived to have favoured 'informal' approaches and the 'flexibility' to be able to make decisions that reflect contextual and cultural factors at work unit level (Rollinson, 1992; Rollinson, 2000; Dunn and Wilkinson, 2002; Franklin and Pagan, 2006). Line managers thus tend to have developed different styles for handing discipline and grievance that reflect their own preferences, beliefs and objectives (Hook et al., 1996; Earnshaw et al., 2000). The potential for this to result in procedural irregularities that may trigger litigation and the consequent financial and reputational damage to the organization, has been a powerful driver of formalization in the way that workplace conflict is handled and managed (Earnshaw et al., 2000; Harris et al., 2002). Further, there is a related concern to ensure consistency in the treatment of employees across the organization as inconsistency has been found to be damaging to employee morale, trust and commitment (Cole, 2008; Hall and Torrington, 1998b).

In this context, HR professionals, in their role as procedural and legal 'experts' have tended to emphasize process compliance as a prime objective in conflict handling. It could be argued that formalization, and the related drive for standardization, has enabled HR departments to control managerial actions at local level to some extent, but it does not necessarily either prevent arbitrary behaviour on the part of managers, nor does it ensure that the process of being disciplined is

experienced as 'objective' and non-judgemental (Cooke, 2006). There are also to be tensions around HR professionals 'policing' the actions of line managers (Renwick, 2003) and the extent that HR interventions are regarded as both time consuming and as bureaucratic encumbrances (Guest and King, 2004).

There have also been on-going concerns about the general lack of training line managers receive (Cunningham and Hyman, 1999; Hunter and Renwick, 2009; Harris et al, 2002: 222-4). As Rollinson (2000:748) has commented, 'having procedures is one thing, and knowing how to apply them can be another'. That being said, there is also a general acceptance of the need for formal procedures and an understanding of the role they play in underpinning managerial authority as they set out standards both of expected behaviour and of the procedure an employee would experience if they transgressed (Goodman et al., 1998:544). Managers can, therefore, also welcome tight procedures since they provide a justification for managerial action (Cooke, 2006:698) and to some degree protect them if a case if brought (Cole, 2008; Harris et al., 2002). The role the HR function plays in clarifying rules, procedures and legislation has also tended to be welcomed by line managers (Cunningham and Hyman, 1999).

Since 2007 there has, however, in the UK, been a shift in emphasis at policy level towards promoting the early resolution of disputes through informal processes of discussion and negotiation. Organizations have been encouraged to avoid unnecessary procedural formality and to give managers the scope and discretion to deal flexibly with difficult issues. However, whether managers in the UK have the confidence or the competence to take up this challenge is a moot point. The view of the HR profession was that 'managers are neither willing nor capable of taking this on effectively' (CIPD, 2008:8) and this also shaped government perceptions with the conclusion that, 'many more problems could be prevented from escalating into disputes if line managers were better able to manage conflict' (BIS, 2011:17). In a survey of its members in 2007, the CIPD found that 30% of HR practitioners agreed that there line managers were good at resolving disputes informally, 3% agreed they were excellent, over half said they were average and nearly one-fifth said they were poor (CIPD, 2007a:12).

The lack of confidence felt by front-line managers has several dimensions. A significant factor is the perception that managers are risk averse in relation to managing conflict and prefer the security of tight procedural compliance. According to a CIPD survey in 2008, 'managers shy away from tackling disputes in case they do or say something that might be held against them during formal proceedings' (2008:18). Research has found that managers are indeed concerned about the legal implications of their actions (Edwards, 2000; Harris et al., 2002; Latreille, 2011; Jones and Saundry, 2012). This concern is also fuelled by HR professionals' own caution about informality, as a recent report by the CIPD makes clear: 'many HR managers lack confidence in developing informal approaches to managing conflict and continue to be nervous about departing from grievance procedures' (2015: 3).

Managers are not normally recruited on the basis of their people management skills (Townsend, 2013). This is an important point in assessing the responses of line managers regarding early resolution and more informal approaches. The written policy and procedure represents 'a form of codified HR knowledge for line managers' (Hunter and Renwick; 2009:407) and as such is largely prescriptive and compliance oriented. Training for managers has tended to focus on the application of this procedure (CIPD, 2007a) and therefore runs the danger of the wary and conservative approach that seems to characterize many organizational responses to conflict and dispute management.

Early resolution or intervention utilizing more informal solutions relies on 'tacit' knowledge of people management, allowing for and dependent upon managerial discretion. However, to be effective, it is also needs to be underpinned, by specific experiential learning in handling conflict - something many managers do not have the opportunity to acquire (Teague and Roche, 2012) or to practice. Indeed, the CIPD have recently noted that 'conflict management' and 'managing difficult conversations' are the two most challenging parts of a line manager's role (CIPD, 2013:7). In addition, Renwick and Gennard (2001) argue that HR professionals themselves need a wide range of skills and expertise to enable them to handle discipline and grievance issues thoroughly. Although there is more recent evidence to suggest that some employers are taking this need for training more seriously, it is also

recognized that the costs and constraints on managers' time continue to be factors that can impede progress (CIPD, 2015).

In stressing the importance of consistency and the risks of procedural irregularity, it could be argued that HR professionals have, to a degree, created a dependency relationship for line managers. Indeed, by 2007 two-fifths of HR professionals' time was spent on operational activities, of which the most time-consuming and common was supporting line managers (CIPD 2007b: 19). However, HR has increasingly moved to a 'business partner' model (Caldwell, 2003; Pritchard, 2010) so there is less likely to be on site HR support and advice is often now delivered via phone or the internet, focusing on what are perceived to be routine or operational matters. Although this more 'arms-length' approach may force line managers to be more self-reliant, if it is not underpinned by the appropriate training it is unlikely to engender confidence in relation to handling conflict informally (Whittaker and Marchington, 2003; Keegan et al., 2011).

Early studies of devolution highlight that it was often difficult for line managers to balance the time needed to deal effectively with people management with their often extensive operational responsibilities (McGovern et al., 1997). More recently, the role of line managers has expanded to become heavily focused on performance management (Hales, 2005; 2006/7) and the management of 'poor performance' in particular (Dunn and Wilkinson, 2002; Newsome et al., 2013). It is common for organizations to have policies related to absence and capability that are intended to support managing performance and which often have a connection to disciplinary action or more complex cases involving accusations of bullying and harassment (Saundry and Wibberley, 2014). This is likely to increase the pressure on line managers and further exacerbate the concern that if these activities are not monitored or stressed as objectives, they might not be taken as seriously as more immediate 'business' related priorities (Hales, 2005). Further, senior managers are not necessarily sending a clear message about the significance of effective dispute resolution as they tend to expect managers to focus on short-term operational targets (Teague and Roche 2012; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010) and do not recognize the time and skill needed to deal with performance issues and the conflict this can

generate (Hyde et al., 2013). In this context, line managers can see people management as a 'discretionary' activity when it does not form part of the way in which their performance is assessed or where its importance is not reinforced by HR and/ or senior managers (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2007).

The aim of this chapter is to examine in detail how a sample of line managers experience handling conflict situations and to explore both the contextual factors that might make this challenging as well as those that facilitate the successful management of conflict, particularly in relation to the early and informal resolution that is now at the heart of public policy. The rest of the chapter is organized as follows. First, we will outline the methodology on which the research is based and then we will explore the context in which managers have operated and the factors which might contribute to the claim that they lack confidence in handling conflict. We will then move on to assess the situations in which managers are able to act with confidence and the support that might be necessary for this to occur.

Research Design

Five organizational case-studies undertaken between 2009 and 2011 (see Table 5.1) were conceived as stand-alone projects, however, the methods used and the similarity of the key research questions in each case allow for cross comparison. The organizations in the sample were selected for two reasons. In organizations A, C and D more innovative approaches to conflict management were being utilized, including in-house mediation. Organizations B and E were in sectors of particular interest as they had been overlooked in terms of previous research. Across the sample there was a representation of organizations in different sectors and with varying patterns of employee representation. They varied in size but they all employed more than 1000 staff and would be considered large organizations. In order to preserve anonymity and confidentiality only broad details are given of the sample.

Insert Table 5.1 here

The data collection within each organization concentrated on three main elements:

1. Policy documents dealing with individual employment disputes and relevant collective agreements were examined;

2. In-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including HR practitioners, operational managers and employee representatives;

3. Where it was available, statistical data regarding employment, workforce demographics and pattern of individual employment disputes was reviewed.

Across the five organizations a total of 131 interviews were conducted, comprising 53 HR practitioners, ranging from advisor to director level, 61 line and operational managers and 17 employee representatives.

Findings

Understanding the 'crisis' of confidence

Across the sample, procedures used for handling individual employment disputes had traditionally been lengthy and detailed. This often included additional levels of appeal, precise guidance on how the investigations should be conducted and expectations of the roles that HR and operational managers would be expected to play. In public sector organizations, the approach was adversarial and semi-judicial, with issues explored through the examination and cross-examination of witnesses. However, respondents generally agreed that complex procedures were not conducive to the early and effective resolution of conflict. Instead, they encouraged zero-sum approaches to conflict which benefitted neither party:

'There are plenty of people in management and trade unions who'll say "well according to section five paragraph three of the procedure you've haven't followed this. You haven't shown the letters in time so we'll scrap the whole process." And that's what becomes a win/lose type of approach and I don't think it's ever paid dividends for anyone that I've had experience of representing.' (*Trade union representative – Organization C*)

Importantly, operational and line managers were particularly critical of the application of procedure which they argued tended to develop an unstoppable momentum and made 'off the record' discussion and informal resolution extremely difficult:

'Our [disciplinary procedure] is almost too formal. You have to follow the format once you get to that and there's nothing that enables me to nip it in the bud…Once it starts it's like a ball that rolls and there are things you have to do and letters you have to send and there isn't anything to take it offline with a chat in a room….' (Operational manager – Organization D)

Therefore, in line with previous research (see for example Dunn and Wilkinson, 2002), operational and line managers within the sample expressed a preference for more flexible approaches that reflected the contexts within which they worked and the needs of the organization. One might have expected managers to embrace the opportunity to take control over conflict management provided by the devolution of HR matters and also the policy emphasis on informal resolution. However, according to HR practitioners, most line and operational managers had not taken this chance and found discussing issues of conduct or capability with team members extremely challenging:

'……They find it really difficult to feedback about poor behaviour. I mean it's a really big thing and they really get themselves worked up about it and I think it is because they work so closely and they know each colleague on a very personal level.' (HR Manager – Organization C)

As the quote above suggests, managers found such 'difficult conversations' particularly problematic when they had close personal relationships with their subordinates. For example, in Organization E, staff worked together in small teams in residential units for young adults. HR practitioners in this case complained that because teams were 'very close knit' there was insufficient 'distance' between managers and staff who were sometimes 'too friendly'. Consequently, the lines of authority between manager and employee became blurred and managers were reluctant to address conflict.

The evidence also highlighted concerns of line and operational managers that raising issues of conduct and capability with individual staff could have wider implications for team performance. For example, taking action against team members could have a negative impact on morale and in some cases trigger retaliatory grievances from the staff concerned. Moreover, managers voiced worries that any escalation of the issue into formal process and procedure could involve them in unwanted and time consuming 'bureaucracy'. Therefore, as has been noted by other researchers (Cole, 2008), managers may decide to let '*staff get away with certain behaviours*' because it was not '*worth all the time and hassle' (Operational Manager - Organization C).*

The lack of confidence discussed above was also compounded by uncertainty among line and operational managers over whether attempts to manage conflict would be supported by senior management. For instance, in one not-for-profit organization a team had three managers in the previous eighteen months and each of them was moved when employees complained about attempts to address problems:

> '...*we've moved the manager out, where I think, really, we should have turned round and looked at it and said, 'It's not the manager's problem, it's actually the team's problem and we need to disband the team rather than changing the manager all the time'. (HR practitioner - Organization E)*

In such situations, managers were unlikely to address problems with capability or conduct knowing that if they were challenged, their judgement would not be backed. This lack of support extended to a dearth of investment in training and perhaps more importantly a refusal to acknowledge the importance of providing managers with the time and space to manage conflict. Instead, line and operational managers commonly complained that their superiors were only interested in fulfilling short-term operational goals. For example, in Organization D, a very large private sector employer, a departmental manager argued that he did not have time to resolve underlying conflict within his team because he was under constant pressure from senior managers to maintain levels of stock:

'I think the pressure on the department managers at the moment is so heavy because we're trying to achieve so much. If one dealt with a couple of issues, just take 5 minutes out of your day, stop filling shelves so hard and deal with your long term absence, you would either get this person back into work or they'd leave, and we'd have somebody else in the store.'

In short, for many line and operational managers the safest and simplest course of action was simply to 'sweep' issues 'under the carpet' - if there was no formal action, managers would not become enmeshed in complex and bureaucratic process and there was no possibility of a procedural breach. However, avoidance was becoming more difficult as managers were also subject to demands to manage performance in a more assertive manner, which could create tensions and challenges, particularly when there appeared to be a disjuncture with previous practice:

'Managers have a job to do and quite often people don't like the feedback. They will come in and say that my manager is bullying me, or harassing me, when, actually, there's no evidence to suggest they are…they're feeding back about how they've done something, and they don't like what's being said to them.' (Operational Manager – Organization D)

In the face of such challenges, HR practitioners argued that line and operational managers were in fact more comfortable with prescriptive approaches to handling workplace conflict. Two main reasons

were given for this: first, procedures provided a set of rules that they could follow and second, procedures helped to legitimize and personalize decision making, shielding managers from criticism from either other managers or the individuals involved in the dispute. An HR practitioner from Organization D explained that managers in her organization demanded clearly defined rules or standards which if breached led to predetermined outcomes. If their actions were questioned, they could then respond that they had *'just followed things in line with procedure, in line with policy'*.

In addition, HR respondents claimed that this lack of confidence meant that rather than taking greater responsibility for addressing and managing difficult issues, managers were still dependent on HR advice and intervention. Indeed, interviews with managers seemed to support this as the following comments illustrate:

'It's so important that you've somebody that you can knock on their door and they don't mind you asking questions - maybe three or four times the same thing. You know you've got to feel able to talk to your HR and you've got to feel that they support you. (Operational Manager – Organization B).

'...the majority of cases that I deal with… I'm dealing with a manager who's never dealt with something like this before. So it's not something that they've come across and therefore they spend a lot more time with us, I guess, trying to make sure that they get the right guidance, advice and support through the process.' (HR Manager - Organization B)

But closer scrutiny of the data suggests that this lack of confidence and dependence on HR, was a function, at least in part, of the failure of organizations to place sufficient weight on the importance of conflict management and also the emphasis placed by HR practitioners on procedural and legal compliance. Although HR practitioners in the sample stressed the importance of early and informal resolution, their main preoccupation was to minimize risk, either of reputational damage, or litigation.

In this respect, the fear of legal challenge or internal criticism was used to ensure that operational managers were compliant and consistent in applying procedure:

> *'So we've said, "sex discrimination, race, disability"…and they're petrified about talking to people about things that might not be comfortable…rather than say, 'look, let me explain it to you', they'll say, 'put it in writing, let HR deal with it.' Unfortunately, we've moved away from just knowing people, knowing our teams, knowing how to manage them as people and we're now trying to get back to that a bit more….[But] there's a big fear factor around the [managers] that they may have to go to court, they may have to be up in the dock' (HR Practitioner – Organization D)*

This fear created an incentive for line and operational managers to retreat behind a protection blanket of rigid procedural adherence. The potential threat of litigation was a powerful restriction on the confidence of managers to pursue informal solutions. For example, one operational manager from Organization B argued that there was some *'concern'* among his colleagues that mistakes could lead to employees taking a claim to an employment tribunal and winning a *'pot full of money'*. As has been argued elsewhere (Saundry and Dix, 2014) that litigation in the UK is relatively rare and compensation levels tend to be relatively modest. However, within the case study organizations, there was a clear perception that deviating from procedure or pursing more creative informal resolutions was fraught with danger:

> *'every manager in this organization will know of a grievance that went horribly wrong and that ended up in an employment tribunal…there's a lot of fear if they dabble in some sort of informal approach they might get it wrong and then the complaint will turn against them'. (Mediator, Organization C)*

The lack of trust and confidence that many HR practitioners had in the managers that they advised had also led them to formalize informal aspects of conflict handling. For examples, managers were

routinely encouraged to document conversations with staff and to follow up discussions about performance or capability in writing or by issuing what one organization had termed 'improvement notes'. While the intention was to help managers by providing them with a clear process to follow and to ensure consistency and fairness, there was a danger that this simply encouraged managers to deal with conflict in a routinized manner, defined by the organization's HR function.

The nature of the relationship between HR and line and operational managers was also shaped by the growing distance between HR and the line. Changes to the location, size and focus of the HR function in many organizations had seen practitioners withdraw from direct involvement in day-to-day conflict management. Centralization (and often rationalization) of HR resources, meant that much HR advice was provided remotely or 'flown-in', whereby HR practitioners would visit a site only if there was a problem. Furthermore there was a growing reliance on advice through telephone or email. HR practitioners in these organizations argued that these changes would force line and operational managers to take responsibility for conflict handling:

> *'If you're involved in everything how are you developing the skills of the line managers? How are they becoming accountable for their staff? HR aren't... we can support and facilitate but you're the one who's working with that individual all day in and day out. (HR practitioner, Organization B)*

In some respects, HR practitioners appeared to treat managers as children who would only learn if they were left to fend for themselves. In reality, however, the increasing remoteness of HR support advice undermined high trust relationships between HR and managers and consequently hampered informal resolution. The informal day-to-day contact between line managers and HR practitioners that built trust was, therefore, difficult to find. In addition line managers were more dependent on written guidance, which while designed to provide a degree of consistency again reduced the room for creative resolution.

Overall, our findings suggested that line managers were under increasing pressure to manage performance in order to try and increase efficiency or reduce staff absence. However, there was little recognition of the time and skills required to resolve the conflict that this could give rise to. It was apparent from the interviews that training was insufficient to prepare line managers to handle conflict with confidence. Moreover, there was little evidence within the sample that organizations were willing to invest necessary resources by freeing up managers to give them the specific training in conflict management that might both improve their confidence and reduce their dependency on procedurally focused approaches and on HR. This was summed up by one operational manager working in a large public sector organization (Organization C) who described the problems facing managers working in a highly unionized organization:

'I think the difficulty in resolving issues when they're on a formal footing is that the union teams are very adept at how to handle a grievance or a disciplinary scenario. They know all the formal processes and they're operating with them on a daily basis, whereas for managers encountering those scenarios you might get, if you're lucky, a sort of half day training course on handling a grievance or a disciplinary and you might if you're lucky see ten screens of a Powerpoint presentation that give you the salient points.' (Operational Manager - Organization C).

Engendering confidence

Despite the 'crisis of confidence' discussed in the previous section, our findings also pointed to a number of contextual factors that both supported informal resolution and enhanced the ability of all stakeholders (including line managers) to adopt such an approach (Jones and Saundry, 2012; Saundry and Wibberley, 2014). The first of these was the development of high trust relationships between the parties, most particularly between HR professionals and union representatives and between HR professionals and line managers. High levels of trust gave these actors the confidence to enter into discussions outside formal process and procedure and to look for more nuanced resolutions to difficult

issues. In some cases, this was not simply reactive (i.e. in response to a specific case) but proactive, with union representatives and HR practitioners holding regular meetings to identify areas of conflict and develop joint approaches to resolve it:

> *'I have an off the record meeting with the site manager and HR once a month and the basis of that is that we don't want to be airing our dirty laundry in public really. Can we get it sorted before any meetings? That suits me because if it's getting stuff sorted I don't care what way it's done, really. But it's through these meetings that you build your relationships anyway.'*
> *(Trade Union Representative – Organization B)*

There is considerable evidence that such constructive employer-union relations facilitate informal resolutions and can reduce the use of disciplinary sanctions (Oxenbridge and Brown, 2004; Saundry *et al.*, 2008; 2011). However, in our sample, all parties had to be receptive to this and willing to take this approach. Not all union representatives (or indeed all HR officers or operations managers) had sufficient trust in other parties to feel secure in initiating or responding to 'off the record' discussions.

The second factor that could provide managerial confidence in pursuing informal approaches to conflict resolution was a positive employee relations climate. This was illustrated by the contrasting situations in two organizations. In Organization A, a 'grievance culture' had developed whereby trade unions responded to employer antipathy to their role by adopting an adversarial stance in representing their members. HR practitioners that union representatives did not feel that they had a great deal of voice and were often not treated with respect by senior operational managers. As a result, they would encourage their members to register formal complaints through the organization's grievance procedure.

Trade union representatives felt that any concessions or admissions made in informal discussions would be used against them and so used their detailed knowledge of procedure to as a way of exerting pressure on management:

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'I think it was always a case of we didn't trust management. We would never enter into any kind of informal discussion because we were mindful that at some point in the future that would be used against us so we were always very formal…' (Union Representative - Organization A)

Conversely in Organization B, a private sector services organization, the attitudes of both management and unions was underpinned by a commitment to partnership working. While there were positive relationships between HR practitioners and trade unions, senior operational managers also recognized the value of engaging with key union representatives and maintaining open channels of communication and discussion. A senior manager had made gaining the trust of local union representatives a priority in his first days in the role:

'When I came into the operational role the most important thing was to engage the union and for them to understand that actually I'm not this ogre of a manager who's just going to run all over you and make life hard for your staff and it's taken me a long time to get that trust and understanding. What I always do, which is key, is if you're making any changes just tell the union and when someone comes knocking on [their] door they'll say, we know about it, we haven't got a problem with it.' (Operational manager – Organization B)

The attitude and behaviour of front-line managers will shape employment relations, however developing good relationships with trade union representatives itself demands confidence, time and experience and is likely to be more difficult for junior managers, particularly where the wider organizational context and/or the approach of senior management is negative.

The third dimension necessary to develop confidence was the recognition of the importance of conflict management skills and consequent investment in skills development. This was most apparent in Organization C where a number of managers, HR practitioners and union representatives had received specific conflict resolution training. The benefit was articulated by an operational manager:

'The training gave issues a vocabulary and a set of techniques and it also professionalized it in that it took out the emotional response to it and turned it into an approach and a set of actions that gave you time to breathe and gave you time to get out of the two people involved some ways forward and in that sense it was absolutely marvellous.' (Operational manager - Organization C)

Another operational manager in the same organization was clear that the training raised their confidence in seek informal and early resolution. Importantly, they argued that having the 'technique' to be able to address problems 'as soon as they come up, to try and get the people to sit down and talk about issues' was the most effective 'defence' against criticism, retaliatory grievances and litigation. Significantly, this joint approach to training had also provided the basis for building more positive relationships between unions and management and countered what had previously been an adversarial environment.

Furthermore, respondents argued that one of the most effective methods to develop improved skills and confidence was coaching by HR practitioners or more experienced operations managers. Here, HR practitioners would talk managers through specific cases, reviewing meetings and decisions and accompanying with them where necessary, but with a view to the manager becoming more independent in the long run. However, these practices seemed to be more common where HR practitioners were 'on site' and therefore came into day-to-day contact with managers. This runs counter to the argument expressed by some HR practitioners in the previous section that only by removing day-to-day contact could managers be weaned off their dependence on HR.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, early and informal resolution was more likely to be found where senior management recognized the importance of effective conflict management and supported junior managers by providing them with time and space to address and resolve issues through discussion and negotiation and also by giving them the confidence that their judgement would be backed. Thus the leadership offered by senior managers could have a decisive effect on how their

managers responded to workplace conflict. An HR practitioner in Organization E explained this as follows:

> *'I just see the two managers just dealing with their services completely differently. In [region] they've got motivation, they've got support from [regional director] and they're just different managers; they are fundamentally different managers...they are allowed, dare I say, to fail. They are allowed to, you know, take those risks' (HR practitioner - Organization E)*

Conclusions

The perception that conflict is managed poorly has been ascribed to a lack of capability, confidence and willingness on the part of managers. The research presented here confirms that managers are cautious about departing from more procedural approaches and are concerned about litigation. However, it is also clear that certain contextual factors within organizations both shape this situation and contribute to the extent to which managers are more willing to risk pursuing informal routes to conflict resolution. Not least of these is the fact that managing conflict requires skills that managers have often not had the opportunity to acquire, either through training or experience.

The increasing tendency to have HR support located off site or reliant on telephone or intranet interactions can also remove the opportunity a manager might otherwise have had to informally discuss a case with HR colleagues with whom they had built up a professional relationship. This, coupled with their knowledge that, in unionized environments, the union representative is likely to be better trained and to have had more experience in handling dispute resolution, can also lead to a more cautious and procedurally driven approach on the part of managers.

Faced with competing demands on their time, it is unsurprising that many managers prefer the apparent certainty of a procedure that can be followed. However, the attitude of HR practitioners must bear some responsibility for this. Despite rhetorical support for the idea of informal resolution, there

remains an overriding emphasis on consistency and compliance. This is illustrated by the use of prescriptive approaches to what were previously informal processes, such as performance management. This is rationalized in terms of a lack of managerial competence but only serves to reinforce the concerns of line and operational managers about the consequences of procedural irregularity and encourage a simplistic and rigid approach to conflict.

It is apparent from the research evidence presented here that where organizations invest in specific and detailed conflict resolution training, managers, HR and the trade union representatives can benefit from this and the employee relations climate in an organization can be improved as a result. Both coaching and mediation training appear to be positive factors in developing both skills and confidence in this respect. It is also clear that high trust relationships, developed over time between managers, HR professionals and union representatives are most likely to support proactive and creative conflict resolution.

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