



# Collision Course

Non-compliance can lead to challenging conversations, resulting in conflict, frustration and damaged relationships. However, as **Ben Rawal** explains, improving awareness of your own communication, emotions, and others' perspectives, can help to avoid difficulties.



**W**e all experience disagreements with others at times, and often our approach to resolving these issues can lead to heightened conflict. This is particularly pertinent when individuals or teams fail to comply with organisational policies and procedures, or regulatory/legislative requirements.

However, understanding some of the main causes of conflict, together with essential tips for managing and resolving problem areas (see Box 1), can prove vital in maintaining positive relationships across teams.

### Communication and beliefs

Communication may often (unintentionally) result in conflict, particularly when individuals fail to comply despite information being provided.

Organisations may have an abundance of policies, procedures and training material, supported by verbal communications that are articulated across teams. Although the information within such communications is often clear and consistent, the *understanding* and *interpretation* of information frequently varies across individuals.

As a consequence, when information is not understood correctly, individual actions and behaviours may be different to what was intended.

Most of us experience such challenges on a daily basis, when reading documents or during conversations – we decide the meaning of information or messages, and act accordingly.

From a compliance perspective, this can have dangerous consequences: we believe that individuals understand the message that we're communicating, but instead, they have an alternative understanding.

It is perhaps not difficult to see why communication is both a key enabler and a significant risk to compliance within organisations. A further driver of conflict relates to our values, beliefs and cognitive biases.

One of the reasons why individuals interpret information differently is

due to differences in their beliefs and values. This process of interpretation is largely 'unconscious' in that it happens without us recognising that we are using stored beliefs to decide how we should act.

This highlights the danger of expecting large numbers of individuals to comply with organisational / regulatory requirements – our internal beliefs hold a powerful influence over how we behave.

But why does this lead to conflict? Although we hold differing beliefs, surely being presented with factual information will convince us that our perspective is misplaced? Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. Instead, we tend to ignore information that is contrary to our beliefs, or find reasons why such information is irrelevant, a phenomenon known as 'confirmation bias'.

As a consequence, we sometimes find ourselves involved in arguments or heated discussions where neither party is prepared to back down on their beliefs and will vehemently defend their position!

From a compliance perspective, I regularly work with teams that highlight *omissions* in policies and procedures as a reason why they have acted in a particular way: "It doesn't state that we can't act in this way..." Policy writers on the other hand are quick to point out that a document cannot cover everything. This is a classic example of individuals using their own beliefs to make decisions and form a different understanding of requirements to the one intended.

### Emotional control

When conflict arises, we often display signs of emotion, which can exacerbate matters. Our frustrations can in turn trigger irritation in others, both of which sometimes lead to anger or even rage.

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'in the moment'. Within such situations, our brains cannot think logically, and we are prone to behaving in an irrational manner. Attempting to reason with someone who has lost this level of self-control is usually pointless until such feelings have dissipated.

## Our internal beliefs hold a powerful influence over how we behave

When a state of calm has eventually been achieved, some of us feel guilt or shame about how we have behaved. For some individuals, this can be a matter of minutes, whereas for others it can take days before they are prepared to consider whether their actions were as reasonable as they believed at the time. This entire sequence of activities is wasteful in terms of time and cost, is stressful, and can damage relationships beyond repair.

Our emotions affect all of us in different ways, and some individuals are more effective at remaining calm when faced with pressure, stress or conflict with others. Similarly, some of us can regain self-control faster than others.

There are many factors influencing our ability to remain consistently calm, including our personality, emotional awareness and intelligence, and capacity to cope with a combination of multiple 'negative' events. Although some of these factors are beyond our control, acknowledging that we might feel frustrated or annoyed during particular conversations can help to retain better emotional control.

### Feedback

Giving feedback to others, both positive and negative, is something that most of us do in a personal and professional capacity every day. Sometimes this feedback is welcomed, but often individuals can respond in a defensive or aggressive manner, as is often the case when individuals or teams are informed that they have failed to comply with a company or legal requirement.

The way that we provide feedback

to others is important – our verbal, non-verbal and, where relevant, written communication can all be interpreted in different ways. However, one of the key elements relates to whether we are *perceived* as being overly critical with what we are saying.

Appearing critical can evoke a range of behaviours from the other party, including sulkiness, dismissiveness and resistance. Furthermore, if the receiver feels that they are being punished for their non-compliance, they are more likely to adapt their future behaviour to avoid being caught – this is one of the main reasons why using punishment or threats as way of encouraging others to comply is generally unsuccessful in the long term.

When helping individuals provide feedback to others, I highlight the importance of using questions, rather than statements, to determine options for improving compliance. This approach forces those giving feedback to listen, and immediately appears less judgmental and critical of others.

In addition, there is a responsibility on those *giving* feedback to ensure that it is directed at the individual's actions, rather than their person (which can affect the *receiver's* motivation and

desire to change their own behaviours).

If you are the *receiver* of feedback, it is important to ask your own questions, and obtain an understanding of what has happened, rather than react in a non-productive way. It is possible that a mis-interpretation of the information or your own belief systems have led to non-compliance. If this is the case, then explore these misunderstandings with those providing feedback, and be open to considering alternative ways of working.

### Pay careful attention

It is perhaps not difficult to understand why and how conflict can arise, either when seeking to achieve compliance or during instances of non-compliance.

However, by paying careful attention to our communication, beliefs, how we manage our emotions, and how we give and receive feedback, the likelihood of conflict can be vastly reduced. ●

#### Box 1: Top tips

- Accept that **information can be interpreted in different ways**, resulting in unintended actions or behaviours. There is a responsibility on both the individual providing the information and the individual acting on it to check that they have a common understanding.
- When individuals have a different perspective to your own, **explore your own beliefs and those of the other party**. Often, beliefs are not based on fact but can have a powerful influence on behaviour.
- Remember to **respond to your feelings, irritation or frustration before it's too late** and you display signs of anger or rage. Removing yourself from the discussion / situation can be a useful approach to preventing a loss of emotional control.
- **Emotional planning and preparation** is useful when you anticipate that a difficult discussion might arise. Acknowledge to yourself that you may feel agitated, but that you will not allow this to escalate into anger or rage.
- When giving feedback to others, try to **focus on asking (non-critical) questions**. This may uncover new information that presents the non-compliance in a 'new light'. **Listening to the views of others** will also demonstrate that you're prepared to take their perspective on board.
- Good feedback highlights the things that the individual has **done (or not done)**, rather than who they **are**. Personalising feedback is a common mistake that many of us make from time-to-time, which can enflame the situation.
- When given feedback, **ask questions and obtain a clear understanding of the differences** between your perspective, and those of the individual providing feedback.

