



Social conflict is no-one's idea of a good time. Unfortunately, it still happens on occasion. Even with the best intentions, our work lives can be stressful, deadlines creep up from the ether, and bad days turn into suboptimal communication strategies. Whilst more severe cases of workplace conflict may need a mediator or supervisor to step in, most of the time it's a conversation between colleagues that needs to be had. An uncomfortable, courageous conversation.

One of the workshops that took place as part of the Research Culture celebration here at Cambridge focussed exclusively on these difficult but necessary conversations. **How can we make sure that discussions born of conflict, end with resolution rather than escalation?**

Well now we're getting ahead of ourselves because we've skipped the first vital step: setting up these conversations to begin with. So, you had an awkward encounter with a colleague where things got a bit heated. You said some things you regret. They said some things you hope they regret. The first true act of courage in this situation is simply to acknowledge the tension. It can feel like the easier path to sweep misgivings under the rug and hope it won't affect your working relationship, but the truth is that it probably will if left unchecked. Be brave, be proactive, and schedule a meeting to discuss what happened. **Be open about the purpose of the meeting, arrange a time and place that feel comfortable for both of you, and take some time to mentally prepare.**

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With the scene now set, our workshop began with two actors playing out how this meeting might go, and it almost immediately went off the rails. The issue perceived by us in the audience was the 'apology' that kicked off the session. I think most of us are familiar with apologies that feel more like placations and misdirects. The "I'm sorry *you* felt that way" and the "here's all the reasons it wasn't actually my fault". In the discussion that followed, we identified a few ways to

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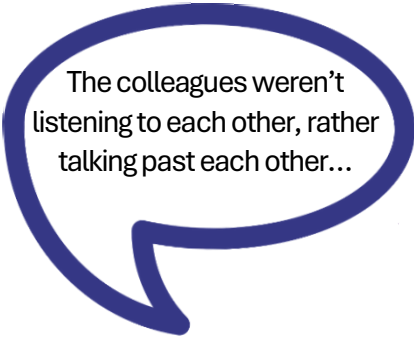
improve for the next run, with the main solution being to apologise openly. To acknowledge wrongdoing, show genuine remorse, and assert how things will change in the future. With that in mind, the conversation between the two actors reset, and we began anew.

This time the colleague who called the meeting apologised fully, and this opened discussion between the two regarding the current realities of work and deadlines. There was a brief moment of camaraderie... before the blame game started. Suddenly what had been a productive conversation devolved back into excuses and accusations: “You know this needs to get sorted” – “It’s not *my* fault that you can’t keep on top of your team” – “If *you* just worked more efficiently, we’d be able to meet the deadline”. The scene was paused for the workshop attendees to weigh in once more. The problem identified this time was a focus on defence rather than mutual understanding. **The colleagues weren’t listening to each other, but rather talking past each other in an attempt to maintain that the current set of issues weren’t caused by their own mistakes.** Both sides convinced that the other was at fault, and so intent on proving that point, that they forgot the focus of the meeting was to find a joint solution to the problem and move forwards. The actors took these points on board, the script was updated, and the meeting started for a third time.

Sincere apology, acknowledgement and thanks for the apology, and now open discussion from both parties on the roadblocks which had caused this issue in the first place and how they could

work together to overcome them. **The focus shifted to actively listening about the problems at hand and tackling them as a team without the focus of laying blame.** Perhaps one colleague could take on more responsibility, perhaps the deadlines were more flexible than initially thought. Concrete plans were put in place to give both people a better chance at completing the work needed, without the additional stress. Emotions felt validated, reality had been

checked, and these two imaginary colleagues could move forward with their day minus the unspoken tension.



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Human beings will almost always have conflict with each other. Working in the wonderful world of academia does not exempt us from the stress and anxiety that can cause poor communication and an inevitable clash with a colleague. If anything, we may be even more susceptible to it. Like it or not, conflict is a natural part of our working lives, but how we cope with that conflict can shape our relationships and our research culture. **Apologise unflinchingly, dare to actively listen, and fearlessly find concrete solutions that work for you and your team. It takes courage to have honest conversations, but let’s be brave.**