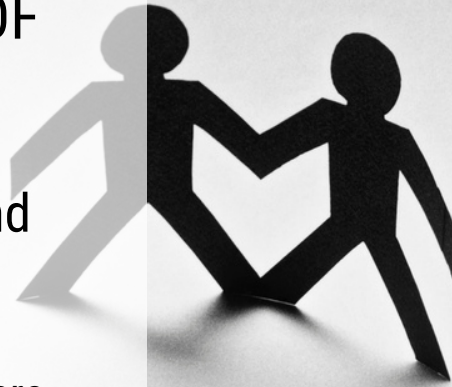


THE FOUR R'S PROGRAM

FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF WORKPLACE CONFLICT

Supporting Healthy Conflict and
Repairing Unhealthy Conflict:

A Practical Framework for HR Leaders



ABSTRACT

The direct and indirect costs of not having an effective, evidence-based Plan-Do-Check-Act program to mitigate and resolve workplace conflict are significant.

This brief introduces the Four R program as an approach to what employers can do to facilitate workplace conflict management. The Four R program was developed and influenced by the authors' professional training, research, and experience that covers organizational psychology, labour and employment law, occupational health and safety, diversity and inclusion, and psychological health and safety.

This brief guides HR professionals and leaders on preventing unhealthy workplace conflict and supporting employees and leaders in navigating healthy and unhealthy conflict to meaningful resolutions and repairs. The four Rs are presented to frame what HR professionals and employers can do to facilitate and manage workplace conflict.

The Four R program has been designed to work within an organization's psychological health and safety (management) program and safe and respectful workplace initiatives to support and promote a positive employee experience.

Note: The authors plan to launch the training for the Four R Program for the Management of Workplace Conflict Certificate for HR and OHS professionals, union representatives, and leaders in the fall of 2024. For more information on this training, please drop a note to info@howatthr.com.

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INTRODUCTION

Celebrate diversity, practice acceptance and may we all choose peaceful options to conflict.

— Donzella Michele Malone

As workplaces strive to become more psychologically safe, interest in effective workplace conflict management (WCM) has increased. Particularly in the last decade, the damaging effects of harassment, incivility, and other sources of interpersonal conflict in organizations have been a prominent subject in the literature. Historically, WCM has been assigned to human resources departments, if only by default. However, as the understanding of psychological health and safety programming within occupational health and safety legislation expands, there is an increasing need for human resources professionals (HRPs) to engage with occupational health and safety (OHS) specialists to ensure appropriate and adequate conflict resolution resources are applied.

At the outset, it is crucial to recognize that workplace conflicts are not always caused by harassment or incivility. Instead, conflict can arise from more subtle personal interactions and circumstances that generate unpleasant emotional responses between coworkers. In her often-cited study into the benefits and detriments of intragroup conflict, Jehn broadly defined conflict as "... perceptions by the parties involved that they hold discrepant views or have interpersonal incompatibilities." [1] While incompatibilities take a variety of forms, it has been argued that there are three main categories of conflicts in workplaces: 1) task conflict, which involves a dispute among coworkers concerning the objectives and processes of a particular task; 2) process conflict, which arises in the context of logistics, including the delegation of responsibilities within tasks; and 3) relationship conflict, which is interpersonal and may involve divergent values. [2]



When unpleasant emotions[i] become distracting, hurtful, or overwhelmingly painful, they create an emotional rupture. A perceived threat from or violation of a worker's trust in a peer, leader, or employer can significantly alter the brain's wiring, which can help explain why trust recovery is complex.[3] The violation of trust causes a sense of emotional insecurity that one or more parties perceive as unfair, frustrating, aggressive, or immoral. In addition to health concerns, conflict increases work disruptions, absenteeism, and turnover and decreases productivity.[4] The Four R Program for the Management of Workplace Conflict offers HR professionals a usable framework to establish a management program to move employees through conflict in a psychologically safe manner that decreases employees' fear, stress, and risk of mental harm.[5]

The Four R program is aligned with the National Standard on Workplace Psychological Health and Safety principles, CSA-Z1003.[6] The Standard encourages all workplace mental health initiatives to leverage the Plan-Do-Check-Act approach of systematic, continual improvement. While research suggests that many employers are currently investing in workplace mental health strategies, there remains an opportunity to review and analyze programming effectiveness and implement improvements (i.e., check).[7]

Note: Once the reader has reviewed this brief in full, we recommend they review Appendix A, which provides a visual overview of the Four R Program in Action. When considering how to resolve emotional ruptures, it is beneficial to remember that all parties involved have a personal frame of reference, and the process used to repair will be influenced by the organization's culture (i.e., expectations for how to deal with conflict in the workplace).



[i]We have chosen to use the term unpleasant emotions rather than negative emotions to denote the feelings people experience while in conflict. This choice reflects that emotions are natural and feeling strong, unpleasant emotions is a part of life that should not be ascribed as being specifically 'negative.' Too many people avoid conflict because they believe negative emotions (e.g., anger, frustration) are a sign of weakness.

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY LENS FOR CONFLICT

Experiencing unpleasant emotions (a rupture) without an outlet to manage them can negatively affect employees' physical and mental health. A credible OHS program to improve workers' psychological health and safety (PHS) should define, monitor, and measure key performance indicators (KPIs; e.g., training, follow-up checks, turnover, disability claims, absenteeism, near-misses) to determine if it meets its intended goals.

Psychological health and safety initiatives that promote mental health (such as safe and respectful workplace policies and programs) serve to protect workers from mental harm, injury, and illness. Effective KPI examples to monitor these initiatives include measurement of the percentage of employees who have completed training and surveys that assess employees' conflict experiences and their confidence in the organization's capacity to manage workplace conflicts successfully.

A PHS initiative that provides for training, policies, and information exchange is ineffective if it does not positively influence the behaviours and habits that promote mental health and protect employees from mental harm. In a brief titled *Shaping Human Behaviour: Taming the Complexity of Simple*,^[8] we described habit development as one of employers' biggest challenges to implementing a psychological safety initiative or program like conflict resolution.

The Four R program presented in this brief is designed to prepare the workplace for healthy conflict,^[ii] prevent unnecessary conflict (where possible), and resolve all forms of workplace conflict when a rupture occurs. Its application is not limited to the unhealthy conflicts that often arise from safe and respectful workplace policy violations but, instead, offers a response for simple to more complex conflicts by following a Plan-Do-Check-Act approach.

IMPACT OF CONFLICT

Workplace conflict typically generates unpleasant emotions (such as anger, anxiety, fear, guilt, shame, and embarrassment)^[10] among the parties and bystanders. Although bystanders are only indirectly involved in conflicts, research suggests that secondary exposure can negatively affect their well-being and quality of work.^[11] Conversely, constructive responses to unpleasant emotions can generate positive outcomes at the personal and organizational levels.

If not correctly addressed, workplace conflict will likely negatively impact the attitudes, thoughts, and behaviours of some or all parties directly involved. Personality clashes and warring egos (49%), followed by stress (34%) and heavy workloads (33%),^[12] are triggers that fuel workplace conflict.

^[ii]We have chosen to identify conflict as being either healthy or unhealthy. Healthy conflict is when employees can disagree and discuss alternatives without fear, shame, or retaliation.^[9] Unhealthy conflict is unproductive to the organization and is more likely to lead to emotional rupture and escalate to more serious conflict.

One study reported that 27% of employees had experienced workplace conflict that resulted in personal attacks; 25% said it resulted in sickness or absence; and 9% reported it as a leading cause of project failure.[13] An employee's conflict with their direct leader poses a significant risk of increased use of sick leave.[14] Research suggests that workplace conflict can be a cause of project failure.[15]

Misunderstandings, incompatibility, incivility, and unresolved conflict[16] are common drivers of negative workplace consequences such as psychological injury, reduced organizational commitment, and productivity losses. A Myers-Briggs report suggests poor communication is the number one cause of conflict.[17] Other causes of workplace interpersonal conflict include[18]:

- interdependence/task-based conflict (e.g., a worker cannot get their work done because someone else has not completed their task),
- leadership conflict (e.g., a worker struggles with a leader's communication style and approach),
- work style conflict (e.g., a worker enjoys working remotely because they find interacting with people in an office stressful and dislike being in an office),
- personality-based conflict (e.g., a worker struggles with a peer's work style),
- discrimination and respectful workplace policies breaches (e.g., a wrong done to a worker breaches their human rights or right to feel safe in the workplace), and
- creative idea conflict (e.g., a worker has a different idea than a peer during brainstorming).

The consequences of interpersonal disputes can be personally and organizationally harmful, particularly if the parties do not see a clear path to resolution. Regarding individuals, it is notable that some forms of workplace conflict cause emotional ruptures that exceed hurt feelings and take the form of serious psychological injuries, beginning with increased worry, anxiety, and fear and advancing to conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder.[19]

Events that can put a worker at risk of mental harm (up to and including general anxiety, acute stress disorder, and PTSD) include bullying, harassment, power imbalance, abusive leadership, cutthroat competition, moral injuries (i.e., events that go against ethical and moral beliefs), isolation from support, rejection of accommodations or family leave, and expectations to work in physically unsafe[20] conditions.

MANAGING CONFLICT

The reality for most employers is that conflict is widespread and will continue to be so. Humans do not always agree, and there will always be conflict. Donahue's definition of conflict assists in understanding its expansive scope: "... a situation in which interdependent people express (manifest or latent) differences in satisfying their individual needs and interests, and they experience interference from each other in accomplishing these goals." [21]

One line of research reported that 85% of workers will experience workplace conflict. [22] Further, a recent U.S. study estimated that the average employee spends 2.8 hours per week dealing with work-related conflict, translating to approximately \$359 billion in paid hours annually. [23] This same study estimated that annually, 417 million days are lost due to workplace conflict, and people who experience conflict in the workplace lose an average of 55 work days per year, according to the TELUS Mental Health Index study of Canadian workers. [24]

Unresolved workplace conflict poses several individual and organizational risks. Research in the Canadian construction industry suggests that workplace interpersonal conflicts increase personal safety risks and job stress, [25] and studies conducted in various countries support the conclusion that these conflicts can cause or worsen mental illnesses, job dissatisfaction, reduced prospects of promotion, and increased risk of dismissal. [26]

The impact of workplace conflict on individuals is influenced by its frequency, duration, intensity, and the willingness of the parties involved to find a resolution. Concerning these elements, HR professionals should recognize that workers who experience conflict may have increased adverse effects if they do not have access to or do not believe in the effectiveness of a resolution process. If employees feel unsafe bringing a conflict forward, it increases mistrust [27] and presenteeism (i.e., coming to work feeling engaged and unwell) [28] and decreases discretionary effort (i.e., voluntary motivation to go above and beyond minimal standards and expectations) of all parties involved. It increases workers' risk of leaving and decreases morale, engagement, and productivity.

Diagnosing the source of a conflict is challenging in some cases. The antecedent that triggers a conflict may not be the parties' main focus or the primary problem. Furthermore, (over)reaction by one or more parties can expand a conflict's scope and nature. Specifically, it has been asserted that the communications of parties to a conflict can exacerbate and alter the conflict. [29]

How employers deal with conflict positively or negatively affects entire workforces, including direct participants and bystanders.[30] HR professionals are encouraged to take a trauma-informed approach[31] (i.e., be aware of physical and emotional responses to conflict) to facilitate workplace conflict resolution and restoration. A trauma-informed approach requires an understanding that some conflicts can create trauma that affects individuals' reactions to conflict and, further, can have long-term impacts on relationships and interactions.[32]

As a support tool for employers, the Four R Program for the Management of Workplace Conflict prescribes a systematic approach to conflict. It considers factors that can reduce the frequency and severity of unhealthy workplace conflicts while assisting individuals adversely affected by conflict. A parallel example is an emergency preparedness program, which guides employers in crisis response planning.[33] Just as the occurrence of a crisis is the wrong time to prepare for it, the same can be said about workplace conflict.

THE FOUR R MODEL IN RELATION TO THE PDCA MODEL

Building a psychologically healthy and safe workplace requires leaders to promote the value of implementing an evidence-based workplace mental illness prevention and support program using a Plan-Do-Check-Act framework[34] that accounts for employee experience and the work environment.

The PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle (see Figure 1) is an iterative strategy to improve processes and implement change. In the case of the Four R program, an organization plans to reduce the risk of healthy and unhealthy conflict by establishing behavioural expectations and norms and providing training to workers (See R1). The 'Do' phase involves identifying ruptures and managing related conflict (see R2-4). The 'Check' involves ensuring the conflict resolution phase continues to be successful, reviewing the program to ensure it is functioning as intended, and when concerns or shortcomings in the program performance are found, the organization acts (the 'Act' phase) to correct them.



Figure 1 - The Four R Model in relation to the PDCA Model

THE FOUR R PROGRAM: AN OVERVIEW

The Four R program puts all forms of conflict into two categories: 1) healthy conflict and 2) unhealthy conflict. Healthy conflict occurs when people working together have different points of view that they can safely discuss in a (generally) respectful manner.[35] A healthy conflict begins with differences of opinion, values, or perception that result in a response (e.g., avoidance of conflict, overt disagreement, or debate among parties with opposing opinions). On this point, it is recognized that healthy conflict and disagreement can be constructive when dealt with collaboratively. However, when healthy conflict is avoided or not dealt with collaboratively, it can move to unhealthy conflict.

A conflict can be defined as unhealthy when the actions of one person cause mental harm to a coworker or an entire organization. Conflict-inducing behaviour includes disrespect, avoidance, name-calling, gossip, psychological bullying, and workplace violence, and results in emotional rupture. The Four R program guides employers in preventing unhealthy conflict that hurts others and creating opportunities to facilitate emotional repairs and renew relationships following conflict.

Emotions critically influence how people cope during conflict and, by extension, the extent to which the parties can calmly listen to and process each other's points of view to discover a resolution.[36] Again, healthy conflict can transform into unhealthy conflict when not dealt with correctly.

Whether a conflict is categorized as healthy or unhealthy, it will likely generate unpleasant emotions that can influence perceptions of risk and judgment.[37] For example, a worker who becomes emotionally overwhelmed may react negatively and even appear insensitive when dealing with others. Research suggests that stress and recalling unpleasant emotions can influence a person's emotional state and decision-making capacity.[38]



One challenge for employers that want to implement a conflict resolution management program is mitigating workers' implicit bias in viewing conflict as "good" or "bad." What responses would you expect if you asked 10 employees in your organization: "Is workplace conflict a good thing or bad?" The results of one study suggest that 76% of employees view conflict as negative, such that they prefer to avoid it.[39] Why is this the case? Our collective eight decades of experience dealing with human and workplace-related conflict from the perspectives of organizational psychology, law, and health and safety supports the conclusion that most employees perceive conflict as something to be avoided or lack the confidence to cope with and resolve it. However, ample evidence suggests conflict avoidance is much more problematic and harmful to an organization's sustainability than attempted resolution.[40]

The Four R program supports the resolution of workplace conflict by using an intersectional lens to ensure that marginalized groups are not exposed to injustice during a process that is supposed to resolve conflict.[41] Intersectionality within the work context requires considering how different interconnections between race, class, and gender could potentially discriminate or put a group at some disadvantage.[42] Achieving meaningful and trusted conflict resolution (i.e., repairs) is difficult without considering how job title, generation, function, ethnicity, and communication needs (i.e., neurodivergent, deaf, blind) could influence the parties involved. The Four R program promotes that it is critical during every healthy or unhealthy conflict to consider differences and what may be needed by all parties involved to engage in the repair process safely. This helps ensure that every individual's experience is treated as valuable with empathy and fairness.[43]

WHY CONSIDER THE FOUR R PROGRAM?

On a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), how prepared is your organization to encourage or support healthy conflict while working to prevent unhealthy conflict and repair all forms of conflict? When employers are asked this question, there is significant confusion between using tactics and establishing a comprehensive conflict management program.

Tactics are models like mediation that can be used to solve conflict.

A management program takes a systematic approach to driving behaviours to achieve a desired outcome, such as preventing unhealthy conflict or creating a culture where healthy and unhealthy conflict are dealt with in an inclusive and psychologically safe and healthy framework. The program evaluates if its processes and outcomes support continuous improvement in response to workplace conflict.

Workplace conflict does not have to be a negative experience for employers or employees. Workplace conflict can renew relationships, underscore accountability, and facilitate learning when addressed constructively. In this regard, it has been demonstrated that employees equipped to approach conflict constructively perceive strong relationships with coworkers, and organizations that endorse constructive approaches to conflict often experience significant organizational gains.[44] Workplace conflict management programs are not something you pick up and use when needed. They are ingrained in the workforce to shape employees' behaviours so they can work collaboratively to achieve common goals, knowing it will be impossible if the organization does not learn to deal with opinion differences and conflict. Any conflict resolution program depends on the employer's commitment to a psychologically safe culture and driving out fear and silence so that employees feel safe speaking up and sharing issues without fear of retaliation[45] during periods of conflict or concerns.

The habits of leaders and employees pose potential change management challenges for leaders in the early days of creating a psychologically safe culture. For example, imagine employees who lived in fear under an oppressive leader for years. When a new senior leader who wants to create a positive culture and encourage open communication is assigned, the employees must amend their habits to listen to and express viewpoints. The Four R program helps employers prevent, identify, decide, and implement appropriate workplace resolution activities to prepare the parties to facilitate repairs within a psychologically healthy and safe context.

The Four R program does not dictate the use of specific tactics like mediation, conciliation, restorative justice, restoration, restitution, or reconciliation. It promotes ensuring that all parties involved in repairing workplace conflict and renewing relationships understand why and how any method chosen could help them buy-in and participate willingly versus feeling coerced. When they feel psychologically safe, employees are empowered to share their side of the story, expectations, needs, and desired outcomes, so in the end, they believe the process was just and fair.

It is acknowledged that there will always be exceptions that do not accommodate an opportunity to repair relationships. These cases are often obvious, such as those involving sexual or severe physical assault. In cases like this, the employer's primary focus must be protecting the victim, coordinating their psychological support, determining the attacker's future employment, and involving police to facilitate legal justice. Nevertheless, the Four R program is predicated on the fact that many workplace conflicts can be resolved constructively and with positive outcomes for whole organizations. It has been designed to facilitate such a result.

We encourage readers to closely review the Four R program pieces and determine their organizations' maturity and readiness. Each "R" suggests questions and actions.

R1

READINESS TO PREVENT & REPAIR EMOTIONAL RUPTURES ORIGINATING FROM HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY CONFLICTS

The goal of Readiness is to anchor the point that not all conflict is bad, and that when healthy or unhealthy conflict occurs, the parties can be prepared to resolve it psychologically safely. This first R begins by mapping out considerations for facilitating healthy conflict by preventing and resolving unhealthy conflict. In this regard, it is necessary to proactively establish an open, honest, and trusted culture, starting with the leadership. While most organizations understand the importance of implementing policies that impose behavioural requirements, these policies are often ineffective in reducing behaviours that may lead to unhealthy conflicts.[46] Positive leadership, however, is a protective factor for moderating workplace behaviour.[47]

Typically, unpleasant emotions are triggered when a difference exists between what a person wants[iii] and what they have (or are offered). The initial experience of emotions happens instantaneously because of biological mechanisms in the brain that allow us to interpret external stimuli.[48] They do not require decision-making to feel in the moment. Unfortunately, many people have never been taught how to regulate their emotions or manage their behaviour when upset. The consequence is that many upset employees do not believe they have a free choice to react in a calm and measured way to any situation. [49]

Figure 2 demonstrates the interconnectivity of attitudes and beliefs with emotions, thoughts, and behaviours. The behaviours people demonstrate are influenced significantly by mood (emotions), attitudes, and beliefs (arising from experience), but instinctive responses can be controlled if critical thinking habits that support analysis before reaction are developed. Consider one example of what could happen when a person experiences a deregulated state (overworked, stressed, or distressed).

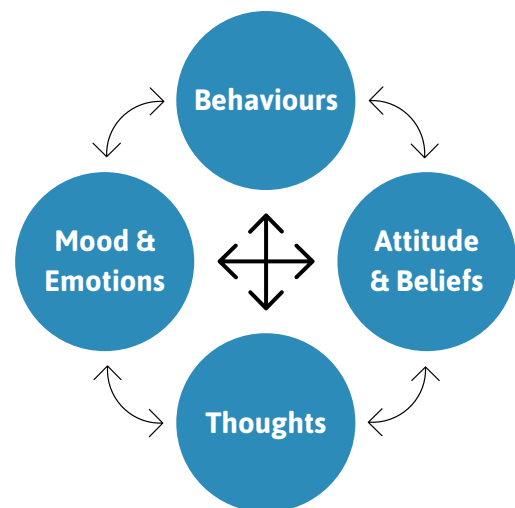


Figure 2 - Interaction of thoughts, attitudes, mood and behaviours

Mood, thoughts, and behaviours can become more automated, making anti-social behaviour the norm. This behaviour can impact others, who either respond negatively or avoid it, further weakening the overall psychological safety of the team and increasing the likelihood of conflict.

[iii] In this case, 'want' could be a material item, tangible or non-tangible benefit or the selection of their idea or path on a project.

However, if organizations set expectations that people take time to consider their actions to respond to situations and expect them to select socially positive choices, they can start to work towards habit building to avoid snapping or sniping at each other, making ruptured situations worse.

Another typical example of how easy it is for a person to go from a pleasant to an unpleasant emotion in the workplace, creating upset, unpleasant emotions, and conflict, is when Employee A presents a piece of work they are proud of and Employee B responds critically and challenges the quality or some other aspect of the work output. In this example, it is reasonable for any person passionate about their work to experience unpleasant emotions like rejection, frustration, or regret. This is a normal, healthy reaction. Unpleasant emotions are part of the human experience. Those who have been taught and practiced the management of negative emotions can view this experience as what was likely meant, an opportunity to receive valuable information and opportunities to learn and improve their work.

However, under pressure, employees who have never been taught how to regulate their emotions (by spending a few moments thinking and considering their actions) are at greater risk of being overtaken by their emotions and overreacting when challenged. Over time, constant dwelling on the thoughts may further distort the perceived reality (“They are not just commenting on my work; they are commenting on me as a person”), further negatively impacting their beliefs. This conflict often escalates not because of the first stimulus but because of how a person reacts. Many emotional ruptures seem complex for many because they fear how people will respond when challenged. This R strives to prepare employees with insights and tools to manage their emotions, remove any stigma that healthy conflict is bad, and create clear expectations for all employees to prevent unhealthy conflicts that can cause mental harm.



ESTABLISHING THE ORGANIZATIONAL BASELINE

Organizations must be aware of how their cultures, working environments, and other conditions influence people's perceptions of conflict and impact their conflict resolution programs. Before moving on to R2, R3, and R4, evaluating your organization's maturity and preparedness to manage workplace conflict through an inclusive and psychologically safe lens is imperative. The workplace culture, leadership, and composition (i.e., part-time versus full-time, union versus non-union, etc.) can influence employees' experiences. However, the Four R program is agnostic regarding these factors. It is grounded in the universal truths that: a) emotional ruptures happen in all organizations, and b) these ruptures can negatively impact the mental health of the parties involved when organizational responses are inadequate.

The Four R program is premised on an educated belief that if employees and employers understand how to manage workplace conflict and resolve emotional ruptures, they can reduce the occurrence and duration of unhealthy conflict. Implementing the Four R model reduces mental harm, promotes mental health, and maximizes a workforce's productivity potential. R1 has two parts to be considered to lay the foundation for R2, R3, and R4.

Part 1: Validate Employees' Experiences

Optimally, an integrated conflict management program will never operate in isolation. It will be aligned to the organization's psychological health and safety or safe and respectful workplace initiatives. The following four questions provide insights into the culture, habits, and perceived employee experience that can support a conflict resolution program's goal or directly enhance opportunities to prevent, address, or resolve workplace conflict.

Question 1: What is the primary leadership style used in this culture?

Most leadership styles range from command and control to trusted leadership.[50] Fear is omnipresent in a command-and-control workplace and drives employees' behaviours like silence, avoidance, blaming, and defensiveness. Command-and-control leadership constantly micromanages employees, increasing their risk of coming to work unmotivated. Employees who experience this leadership style often feel a lack of ownership and decision-making and a reduced sense of value and company contribution. [51] Command-and-control leaders are less likely to be open or care about employees' conflicts, dismiss their importance, not get involved, and expect employees to figure them out and move on, which often results in employees feeling that conflict is bad.

Trusted leaders welcome differences, are approachable, open to new ideas that align with organizational values, and inquire about any perceived conflict that seems to be impacting the workplace. A contemporary example of this form of leadership can be seen in Apple TV's hit series *Ted Lasso*. While the title character, Ted Lasso, consistently demonstrates open-minded servant leadership throughout his stint as the AFC Richmond coach, several glaring examples arise when Lasso takes strategy inputs from the team's equipment manager. This leadership style increases trust in the leader and a feeling of psychological safety, which lowers fear and reduces employees' anxiety about making mistakes. Trusted leaders increase the opportunity to create high-performing teams by expressing interest and curiosity, anticipating differences of opinion among team members, and respecting varied points of view and curiosity.[52] They expect conflict, recognize it causes discomfort, and believe it should be dealt with collaboratively and respectfully to help all parties feel psychologically safe, regardless of the outcome. A key observation is that every leadership style affects the degree to which employees feel comfortable asking leaders to help them deal with conflict.

Consideration of leadership style also presents an opportunity to embed the virtues of humility and forgiveness into an organization's values-based leadership foundation. For reasons that will be explained, organizational subscription to these virtues can motivate self-reflection regarding behaviours that may induce unhealthy conflict and moderate reactions to offensive conduct by coworkers. In these ways, humility and forgiveness help to: a) reduce the occurrence of unhealthy conflict-inducing behaviour and b) facilitate the resolution of conflicts that occur. A discussion of the positive impacts of humility and forgiveness in workplaces and how to implement them in your organization appears in Part 2, sections 2 and 3 below.

Question 2: What inclusion and psychosocial risk factors strain your workforce?

Employers should try to understand their workforce's reality without guessing. They need to recognize employees' experiences, perceptions (e.g., groupthink) on favouritism, differences in how salary and hourly employees are treated, rumours about workplace investigations, mediation, and how conflict is generally dealt with. It takes courage for those in charge of functions like "people and culture" to seek the truth of the workforce.

Factors beyond leadership can positively or negatively impact employees' experience and openness to deal with conflict. For example, how work is organized, interpersonal interactions, and having the proper equipment and resources to perform assigned functions can be positive emotional charges or drains. The future of work trends suggests that HR leaders must care about their workforces' mental health[53] and is influenced by how emotional ruptures are dealt with. Because Gallup reports that 85% of employees are unengaged or actively disengaged, and highly engaged employees are 87%[54] less likely to be engaged, it is prudent for employers to be clear on what psychosocial factors charge or drain a workforce.

Many employees, leaders, and HR professionals have never been provided training and are unprepared to deal with emotional ruptures.

Employers can use the Workplace Psychological Health Assessment ([WPSA](#))[55] to obtain aggregated data related to psychosocial factors like conflicts that charge or drain a workforce and provide guidance on creating a psychologically healthy and safe workplace. These workplace studies often report a much lower than desired level of employee confidence that their employer and HR team have the skills and trust to resolve workplace conflict (i.e., emotional ruptures) safely and respectfully.

When any psychosocial factor (e.g., work demand) becomes intolerable, it can increase employees' risk of psychosocial hazards (e.g., fatigue). Employees who are stressed and feel powerless and overwhelmed can be irritated and frustrated and have low tolerance. Every employee has a metaphorical battery of charge of how much stress they can manage before their energy (resilience) drains and they become emotionally overwhelmed, impacting their functioning. For example, if the 100 employees in division ABC feel overloaded and stressed because of how work is organized, feel short-staffed, and work extensive overtime, the organization can have all the conflict resolution programs it wants, but employees' energy will limit the opportunity to work to their potential.

Employers must see through an inclusion lens the factors that may increase some employees' adversity load. Every employee comes to work with a different adversity load related to their situation.

Therefore, it can be expected that some employees carry heavier adversity loads than others because they have faced a lifetime of inequitable social policies, cultural prejudices, or lack of support or awareness in dealing with trauma or mental illness.[56] Workers' ethnocentrism (i.e., judging another culture based on their culture's standards) can add to their adversity and feelings of injustice. Similarly, othering (i.e., categorizing by skin colour, sexual orientation, gender, or religion) can increase tensions between workers because of implicit bias that can drive value shaming.

Trauma is another factor that can impact employees, which is why more organizations are becoming trauma-informed workplaces that support workers experiencing trauma and prevent its occurrence.[57] The key point for this question is ensuring employees have the data, understand what inclusion and psychosocial factors are draining and charging them, and are mindful of their adversity load's impact on their energy and mental health. It is prudent to determine if senior leadership supports examining what, if any, psychosocial factors are draining and charging employees. This positions decision-makers to better understand what levers they can pull to reduce the drain (e.g., examine how to re-organize work, provide more staffing) and what chargers to maintain.

Question 3: How confident are employees in the employer's ability to manage conflict?

One recommendation often made to employers from the WPSA study is to ensure that trained investigators conduct formal investigations required under provincial or federal OHS legislation. OHS or HR professionals, leaders, or external investigators should be trained through credible and proven programs like the UNB Workplace Investigation Program[58] to mitigate the risk of faulty investigations. When a workplace investigation takes a long time and findings and consequences are unclear or not transparent to the parties involved, it indicates ambivalence and poor procedural justice (i.e., lack of a fair and trustworthy process respecting the rights and dignity of all parties involved). Such a result can increase unpleasant emotions and decrease confidence and trust that there is a fair and safe road to a resolution.

A workplace investigation that takes six months and no employee fully understands the outcome can be like burning your hand on a stove. It creates a negative experience for those involved and those watching, who often think reporting a concern would be too painful. A mistake many employers make is adding new programs and training without understanding the employees' voices. Change improvement begins with being open, transparent, and humble about what those in positions of authority see as strengths and opportunities for dealing with workplace conflict. The critical point is to be clear on employees' experiences, confidence, and trust in the employer to deal with conflict in a way that can improve things.



Question 4: How are employees onboarded regarding workplace conflict?

Most employers onboard new employees with little to no training or discussion about how conflict is dealt with in the organization and what employees' expectations are. One common topic missed is the reasoning for the corporate values so employees can relate to them.[59] Providing a short discussion on corporate values is less valuable to employees than explaining why values matter and examples of how employees use them to make decisions. Ensuring corporate values are lived and enforced is non-negotiable to creating a psychologically safe workplace.

Enforcement is about accountability and intentionality. When someone breaches a value, it is an opportunity for education, accountability, and learning. It also allows employees to choose to live the values or leave. Social standards are critical for holding the fabric of society together. There are consequences when we do not drive on the right side of the road.

Corporate values must say something about teamwork. Discussing teamwork can explore what happens when there is a conflict between team members. Teamwork in our culture means that when conflict occurs, team members own their part and agree to deal with it.

Understanding the answers from Part 1 allows the organization to see the baseline for workplace conflict management effectiveness, the role leadership, psychological safety, and inclusion play, and understand the confidence in the employer's ability to facilitate conflict resolution.



Part 2: Preparing for future conflict resolution efforts

This part provides insight into employees' experience and clarity on what actions other than implementing a conflict resolution program are synergistic, like preparing leaders in a command-and-control culture to become psychologically safe leaders.[60]

The Four R program for implementing conflict resolution begins by laying the foundation. Preparing for conflict resolution requires being aware of the current environment and setting the employer's clear expectations regarding conflict resolution with all employees when they start employment.

Every employee has a role in preventing unhealthy conflict and facilitating a resolution when engaged in unhealthy and healthy conflict. The more employees and teams learn to embrace healthy conflict, as described by the Google Aristotle[61] project, which clearly showed employees who were comfortable in resolving conflict believed they worked in a psychologically safe culture, was a predictor of high-performing teams.

The Four R program builds an inclusive and psychologically safe foundation to ensure the following five elements are addressed.

Employee selection: Research suggests a positive relationship between structured employee selection interviews and future performance in work-related situations.[62] A study found that behavioural interviews can help predict up to 55% of future job behaviours.[63] Knowing that employees will experience workplace conflict, how they react affects their willingness to address healthy conflict regardless of the cause. Behavioural interview questions can help to understand a candidate's competency and how they may react in a particular situation.[64] For example, "Tell me about a time you were faced with a complicated personal conflict. What did you do to resolve it? How did it end?" How the candidate responds provides insights into their experiences, competency, approach to conflict, and honesty about their experience. Ensure new employees know that conflict will happen and that the organization expects them to take responsibility and resolve it, whether they are the cause or victim of circumstances.



Onboarding orientation training: Most employees have some form of onboarding that covers technical and administrative issues. There is also an opportunity to facilitate clear expectations for a safe and respectful workplace policy, procedure, program, and conflict resolution. The goal is to anchor the expectations for all new employees to live the corporate values and accept their role in conflict. Onboarding can anchor how employees can spontaneously deal with conflict and how third parties may be leveraged to resolve issues. It is helpful to normalize healthy conflict and to expect it to help employees challenge bias about conflict. Make it clear that, based on values and safe and respectful workplace policies, there is no tolerance for hurting others or retaliating.

When onboarding employees about conflict, ensure they are clear on their duty to protect human rights and be upstanders in creating a safe and respectful workplace free from harassment and violence. Onboarding training can begin to anchor key performance behaviours (KPBs) that offer benefits in moderating workplace conflicts:

Humility: One applied research study found that humility was a predictor for mitigating conflicts from escalating and resolving them.[65]

Forgiveness: The benefits of forgiveness, though often overlooked, are impressive.[66] Worthington teaches two types of forgiveness[67]: 1) Decisional forgiveness, deciding to forgive a personal offence and letting go of angry and resentful thoughts and feelings toward the person who wronged you, and 2) Emotional forgiveness, replacing unpleasant emotions with positive feelings like compassion, sympathy, and empathy.

A third valuable KPB is discussing the value of learning how to receive feedback informally from leaders, peers, and customers. This KPB can encourage a willingness to engage in difficult conversations to ensure appropriate direct feedback is given to protect productivity and job satisfaction.[68] Each of these KPBs begins to anchor emotions' critical role in resolving conflict.

Employee conflict resolution readiness training: Training helps to guide emotional regulation that measures how employees can deal with unpleasant emotions like rejection, worry, excitement, frustration, anxiety, or feeling low.[69] This is a skill many employees may not have been taught. Provide all new employees with basic training in emotional regulation to develop their emotional literacy and manage their emotions during times of stress.[70] The training should include the R elements' high points, general guidelines, and expectations to prevent unhealthy conflict and resolve healthy and unhealthy conflict. It should also build in follow-up training and skills reinforcement, avoiding the "one-and-done" approach that has become commonplace in respectful workplace training.

With the exception of stress, most causes of workplace conflict (including warring egos and personality clashes, poor leadership, lack of honesty, and clashing values)[71] are matters of interpersonal conflict relating to how disputants interact, and at least three (warring egos, lack of honesty, and clashing values) relate to perceptions of individual correctness. Behavioural economists have repeatedly demonstrated the human propensity for misconduct, irrationality, and egocentric thinking of these types; for example, Mazar et al.'s research on cheating,[72] the well-established 'better than average effect,'[73] belief superiority,[74] and dogmatism.[75] Given these fallibilities of the mind, it is unsurprising that matters of dispute arise among organizational members. As previously mentioned, humility and forgiveness have been selected as two virtues that may moderate the effects of, and responses to, misjudgments and misconduct.

Humility

Several definitions of humility exist. In a study conducted by VanBuskirk,[76] however, the definition was proposed as "a willingness to see the self accurately, including both strengths and limitations." They also note that humble people are not self-important and are not particularly interested in dominating others to receive entitlements or elevate their status. On the other hand, humility should not lead people to take harsh or condemning approaches.

In that research, it was hypothesized that at least some workplace conflicts are generated by egocentrism, belief superiority, cheating, and irrationality (referenced generally as "self-centredness") and that the conscious practice of humility in workplaces will reduce the occurrence of self-centredness and increase members' commitment to informal resolutions of interpersonal conflicts.

Forgiveness

The VanBuskirk study advanced the proposition that organizational commitment to forgiveness would, like subscription to humility, support the informal resolution of workplace interpersonal conflicts. For this study, "forgiveness" was defined as "A conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness."

Forgiveness can be challenging, particularly in a highly individualized society where personal rights figure prominently. The question arises, "Why should I forgive someone who has wronged me?" One answer that may be overlooked is that forgiving has been demonstrated to offer positive health effects for the forgiver:

Forgiveness benefits physical health (Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007), mental health (Toussaint & Webb, 2005), relationships (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010), and spirituality (for a meta-analysis, see Davis, Worthington, & Hook, 2013) ...To date, the interventions have been designed to promote physical health (Luskin, Ginzberg, & Thoresen, 2005), mental health (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), and relational (Worthington, 2006) and spiritual benefits (Rye et al., 2005), but most have been aimed at mental health benefits.[77]

A doubter regarding the healing powers of forgiveness may be persuaded by this list of medical benefits published by the Mayo Clinic: “healthier relationships; improved mental health; less anxiety, stress and hostility; fewer symptoms of depression; lower blood pressure; a stronger immune system; improved heart health; [and] improved self-esteem.”[78]

In summary, the research findings suggest that while the virtue of humility is viewed as less complicated and more easily adoptable than forgiveness, organizational subscription to both may moderate self-centredness. Further, even relatively brief references to these concepts in workplace policies may help to facilitate employees’ reflections on their responses to workplace conflicts caused by the self-centredness of a coworker. Specifically, 61% of a cohort of 79 MBA students who participated in an experiment involving a workplace policy containing references to humility and forgiveness reported that the policy references made them more likely to exercise humility and forgiveness when confronted with coworker self-centredness.[79]

For employers, this research offers promise in that if informal resolution of some workplace conflicts is to be pursued in appropriate circumstances, achievement of that objective may be facilitated by creating a favourable mindset among workforces. This condition may be helped by drawing employees’ attention to the concepts of humility (including recognition that they may not have all the relevant data regarding a workplace conflict and may not have accurately interpreted the data they have) and forgiveness (that there may be benefits gained for them and others by forgiving wrongdoers). Here, it is crucial to be mindful that forgiveness should not entail overlooking wrongdoing but, instead, should begin with a recognition that wrongdoing has occurred but that feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a wrongdoer can be released.

Humility and forgiveness can be encouraged in workplaces through their inclusion in respectful workplace policies and training. The above-referenced study identified an opportunity for organizations that involves a prescription of humility to dissuade workers from taking inappropriately “harsh or condemning approaches” towards others. As most of the study’s participants indicated, encouraging the virtues may foster tolerance and reflective thinking that can reduce conflicts. On this point, the narrative responses of the participants are instructive, including: “[humility can help] you look inward to see your imperfections and prepare you to learn from others”; “[humility can enable] people to respect others’ ideas and abilities”; “[humility can assist] you [to] be willing to accept your wrongdoing”; and “[humility helps to] be reminded constantly that nobody is perfect.”

Similarly, the value of practicing forgiveness seemed to be widely acceptable to the study’s participants, and it is recognized that its applications may be more nuanced. In that regard, the study’s participants suggested that the application of forgiveness may be highly contextual, depending on the nature and extent of the wrongdoing and the relationship of the disputants. It may be that Konstan’s contemporary forgiveness model,[80] which requires the offender’s moral transformation as a condition of forgiveness, is more appropriate for secular organizations than that proposed in the study’s experiment.

A strong organizational commitment to humility and forgiveness may support a sense of “challenger safety”[81] among employees. This form of safety facilitates the sharing of ideas, the confident use of organizational harassment and violence policy procedures, and the resolution of unhealthy conflicts.



Leadership conflict preparedness training: Beyond preparing direct leaders (supervisors and managers) to become inclusive and psychologically safe leaders,[82] organizational leadership training must teach the modelling of commitment to organizational values, open-mindedness, and the practice of humility and forgiveness. Trusted leaders are aware that employees' emotions matter. They understand that the directives provided are not always what matters most for employees; instead, it is how they are communicated. An organization committed to the appropriate early and informal resolution of unhealthy conflict should, therefore:

- provide its leaders with a toolkit to facilitate conversations that resolve unhealthy conflict;
- teach skills to support employees in coping with and managing conflicts;
- explore learning modalities like peer-to-peer support models, team coaching where leaders can learn from peers' experiences; and
- remind leaders of the importance of intrapersonal skills (e.g., emotional regulation) and emotional intelligence (e.g., how their actions impact others' experiences) in this preparedness training.

Train OHS and HR teams in the organization's R4 program review process: This training maps out the Plan-Do-Check-Act approach to preventing and managing healthy and unhealthy conflict. It is helpful to build in an anonymous reporting opportunity for whistleblowing on unhealthy conflict. Whistleblowing is one way to expose wrongdoing and address concerns[83] when the organization has established a safe system for doing so. Determining data collection tools like pulse checks, random one-on-one interviews and focus groups, employee engagement surveys, and workplace assessments is prudent. The review process should be able to generate a report card for continuous improvement, internal benchmarking, and feedback to senior leadership on the culture's maturity to deal with conflict and the volume being addressed.

The above elements lay a solid conflict resolution foundation to prepare employees, leaders, and OHS and HR professionals to facilitate a fair and psychologically safe process to repair emotional ruptures caused by unhealthy and healthy conflict. The foundation can help create a culture in which dealing with conflict is the norm. The successful outcome of R1 is every employee has been educated on the organization's expectations for dealing with healthy conflict and mitigating unhealthy conflict.

R2

RUPTURE IDENTIFIED

This R focuses on identifying emotional ruptures and initiating action. It aims to use the foundation from R1 to implement a Plan-Do-Check-Act conflict management program. R2 encourages every employee to facilitate emotional rupture repairs and practice the benefits of dealing with conflict rather than avoiding it.

The best outcome of R2 is to see the parties initiate a spontaneous conversation to resolve conflict in real-time without needing a third party. If the foundation was laid effectively in R1, employees will have obtained guidance on expectations, skill development to close gaps (i.e., how to deal with emotions in conflict), and the expectations to prevent unhealthy conflict and be open to dealing with healthy conflict head-on. Regardless of the type of conflict or their role in it, everyone should act when there is an emotional rupture.

When an emotional rupture happens for one or more employees, there are three options each person involved may take: avoid, resolve independently, or seek support to resolve the conflict. Regardless of how well R1 is done, it can be expected that some employees will avoid, resulting in unresolved conflict. When left to fester, unresolved conflict can result in an increased risk of mental harm.



The following key objectives are framed and covered in this step:

Identify the conflict: Acknowledge and identify the healthy or unhealthy conflict and the source. Regardless of the intent, words can cause harm. But if no malicious intent was meant, the party who caused the rupture may be unaware of the outcome of their actions. This is why at least one person must identify an issue or concern causing unpleasant emotions and be open to acting.

There are two paths to repairing an emotional rupture: 1) spontaneous and 2) assisted. If R1 (Readiness) is implemented effectively with appropriate risk assessment, policy development, and leadership and follower training, there is the potential that many conflicts will be addressed by employees without any HR record or metric. This is a desirable outcome from R1 healthy conflict, where individuals, leaders, and teams learn how to deal with conflict transparently and openly. A good result is seen when spontaneous conversations facilitate psychologically safe interactions that constructively address a conflict so all parties believe it has been resolved. In these cases, interpersonal relationships within an organization will be strengthened.

Unfortunately, spontaneous interaction can backfire when one or more parties are disingenuous and not authentically engaged with the resolution objective. In these instances, the conflict may flare up into a larger, more complex issue, erode trust, and block or delay an authentic repair process.

However, it is recognized that, even after training, some people will not feel comfortable attempting a resolution on their own and will require the assistance of a third party. A trusted peer may be brought in to help navigate the conflict. Once they are engaged in the process, they will move on to the next objective.



Getting the context of the conflict: Once the emotional rupture has been identified, the third party will secure the general context before moving to formal fact-gathering and decision-making about the path forward. During the intake process, third parties should try to understand who is involved, determine the nature of the conflict, and ensure emergency responses are not required (or activate them if they are). They should consider through an inclusion lens potential factors or nuances (e.g., diversity, language, age, role, gender, neurodivergence, mental health) that could come into play. This stage aims to assess the nature and severity of what has been reported and recognize that everyone involved has a unique lens and experience. It should be noted that policies like those required by the new violence and harassment regulations in the federal jurisdiction provide for how federally regulated employers must facilitate ruptures (in the form of violence or harassment). Whether a provincially-, state-, or federally-regulated employer, it is critical that the third party work within any legislated parameters.

Understand the conflict: Many tools (models) are available to facilitate a third party in understanding the underlying issues in a conflict. In this context, we will use the definition from Furlong, which states a model is a description or analogy used to visualize something that cannot be directly observed.[84] The third-party practitioner may utilize one or a combination of models to understand the underlying nature of the conflict. Some common, popular analysis models include:

- The conflict wheel (or circle of conflict)[85]
- The conflict (problem) tree[86]
- The iceberg tool[87]
- The triangle of satisfaction[88]
- The law of reciprocity model[89]
- The loss aversion bias model[90]

Regardless of the model or models used, once the nature and reason for the conflict are understood, parties can move on to R3, which calibrates available options and determines the approach to facilitate conflict resolution (i.e., emotional repair).

In summary, the goal of R2 is to determine the kind of conflict and participants' motivation to resolve it independently or, if needed or required by a harassment policy, engage a third party. One beneficial PDCA checkpoint is to evaluate if R1 is working to obtain feedback on the percentage of employees not dealing with conflict or the percentage of unresolved conflict. When working well, R2 reviews of conflict management find employees are engaging independently to resolve most healthy conflicts and leaning into unhealthy conflict with the support of a third party to move towards repairs.

R3

ROADS AVAILABLE

One outcome of effective conflict resolution, when there are emotional ruptures, is creating a process that all parties agree will facilitate a value-based resolution, which may include fixing wrongdoing and, when successful, will stop future misconduct.

The models used in R2 for understanding the conflict provide the information required to identify the most appropriate approach to the situation. Sometimes, the approach is predetermined (i.e., by legislative requirements), such as regarding an act of workplace violence. Ensuring physical and psychological safety is the first step before any repair can be considered, and, as mentioned previously, some instances are not appropriate for repair. Depending on the nature of the incident, there may be a need for a formal investigation and decision-making about any consequences that may be issued if the complaint is found to be true. Legislation such as the federal parliament's Bill C-65, which modified the Canada Labour Code and introduced new violence and harassment regulations, or organizational tools like the employer's safe and respectful workplace policy and procedures, may determine whether the path forward will be formal or informal.

Emotional repairs aim to allow people to work through conflict objectively, learn from it, hold people accountable, accept accountability for their part, and renew relationships. Conflict resolution techniques often help individuals experience justice (i.e., put things right).

A common challenge when dealing with workplace conflict is a divergence of what "justice" means^[91] to the parties involved. Organizational justice refers to the extent to which an individual thinks the workplace procedures facilitate fair outcomes.^[92] This term covers procedural justice (the perceived fairness of the decision-making process that determines the justice for being wronged),^[93] interpersonal justice (the quality of interpersonal treatment), informational justice (the perceived fairness of the information exchange with the decision-maker), and distributive justice (the perceived fairness of the resolution).^[94]

Good decision-making in this step requires considering what available options and resources would be most appropriate to facilitate emotional repairs. Conflict resolution outcomes for the same situation can be solved by more than one road. It is helpful to consider those involved, the stakes, and legislative requirements to decide which road makes the most sense to facilitate emotional repair. The following are two questions that must be answered. The responses shape what road will be taken.

Question 1: What options are available for this situation?

The situation, legislation, and parties involved influence what road options are available. The one common factor is that a third party will facilitate the process.

Relearning (informal): The Informal approach is different from the spontaneous, as mentioned in R2. In this case, a third party assists the parties involved in discovering a resolution. In the informal approach, a formal investigation may not have to be commenced, and all parties voluntarily opt to engage in a process to deal with the conflict. The severity of the emotional rupture can vary from the unpleasant emotions of a person who dislikes being in conflict to more severe feelings of hurt because someone was harassing, rude, or disrespectful, causing a conflict impacting relationships and the opportunity for the parties to work to their full potential.

Informal processes can be facilitated through open-ended conversations or leveraging conflict resolution tactics like mediation. Regardless of the type of conflict, the informal process aims to resolve it. Some legislation allows the person involved to participate in the decision-making process where seeking input from the parties involved is critical. For example, the previously-mentioned federal violence and harassment regulations establish that when breaches like bullying happen, there is an opportunity to deal informally with an emotional rupture through the negotiated resolution phase.[95]

This informal process can create space to learn from a mistake and support parties in conflict to move forward and repair and renew their relationship. One part of the decision-making process is securing the motivation and willingness of all parties to participate in an informal procedure.

Reframing (formal): This road is for more serious ruptures or when parties cannot see a way towards resolution on their own. A formal approach must be taken when legislation dictates it, as is the case under most provincial OHS legislation. In this case, the decision-maker must also consider timing and how and when it is appropriate to pursue reconciliation as part of the repair process. For example, repair attempts should await the workplace investigation finding and any required disciplinary actions. The severity of the conflict may also influence the timing of efforts to repair emotional damage and loss of trust. In some cases, there may be no such opportunity, nor would it be appropriate for the employer to attempt to facilitate an emotional repair in the case of severe bullying or sexual harassment that resulted in the termination of the attacker. The focus in such cases is ensuring employees involved have access to trauma support.

Why is there great value for HR professionals to become skilled at facilitating emotional ruptures and repairs? Under the law, employers cannot fire every employee who engages in every behaviour that causes unhealthy conflict. Organizational and legal risks often face employers once a workplace investigation is completed and a decision must be made in response.

Once the available option has been decided upon, the next decision is what resource will facilitate and what tactic will be used to help the parties achieve an emotional repair and renew relationships so they can move forward.

Question 2: What tactics and resources will be used, and when?

Be clear on the differences between conflict resolution tactics and programs. The Four R program frames a four-step process for facilitating prevention and support for conflict resolution that fits under an OHS/PHS management system or workplace mental health strategy. Different evidence-based strategies and tactics (interventions) are available for facilitating conflict resolution (i.e., emotional repair). Leveraging an appropriate intervention requires training, and the parties involved must approve the chosen intervention. When making that selection, it should be recognized that all parties may not be starting from the same point. One party may be starting from a position of denial, another from anger, and another from acceptance. In addition, the intersectional lens and an involved party's mental state and health must be considered in the decision-making process.

The following are examples of the many conflict interventions available. Each may require specialized training to be proficient in its use. Regardless of the tactic, universal rules must be adhered to when getting agreement and support from the parties involved for their situation. All parties involved must fully understand the terms of confidentiality and want to participate voluntarily in the process within the workplace conflict resolution context.

The following nine tactics are only examples. We are not endorsing or promoting any one over another. We do endorse ensuring the parties facilitating healthy and unhealthy conflict have the knowledge, skills, and an evidence-based approach to help the parties involved expand their perceptions and perspectives to create an opportunity for an emotional repair that meets the needs of all parties involved.

- Conflict Coaching Conversations—facilitated by individuals trained in conflict coaching and have developed coaching tools, enabling them to help others and resolve intra- and interpersonal conflicts more effectively.[96]
- Guided Negotiation/Mediation—negotiation between disputing parties, assisted by a neutral person.[97] The individual assigned as mediator is not empowered to impose a settlement. They facilitate collaborative and safe conversations to shape a settlement all parties can live with.

- Lencioni’s Five Dysfunctions of a Team—According to Lencioni, you cannot have a successful team without trust. The five dysfunctions are absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of team accountability, and inattention to team objectives.[98]
- Conflict Resolution Circle Processes—A circle is a process in which everyone immediately impacted by a situation comes together to seek a resolution.[99]
- Restorative Justice/Practice—an approach to justice that seeks to repair harm by allowing those harmed and those who take responsibility for the harm to communicate about and address their needs in the aftermath of an emotional rupture. [100] The desired outcome is focused on learning and building relationships to heal and move forward versus punishment.[101]
- ACT Matrix—a model to facilitate psychological flexibility about how feelings help the parties involved move towards or away from conflict internally and externally. [102] Its goal is to help the parties discover how their internal stories influence their thoughts and feelings about the conflict and allow them to learn and resolve conflict safely and proactively.
- The Interest-Based Relational Approach—a six-step model for resolving conflict in a way that preserves and enhances the relationship between the parties.[103] There are four guiding principles: separating the people from the problem, focusing on the underlying interests rather than the positions, generating creative options for mutual gain, and using objective criteria to evaluate the options. The goal is to foster trust, respect, and cooperation and avoid win-lose or lose-lose outcomes.
- The SCARF Model—SCARF is an acronym for status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness, the five domains that affect how people perceive and react to social situations. Addressing these needs can reduce the unpleasant emotions and increase the positive emotions associated with conflict. The SCARF Model provides context to understand how the brain responds to conflict to help the parties involved reduce the perceived threat and increase focus and reward to resolve the conflict.[104]
- The REACH Model of Forgiveness—The REACH Model was designed by one of the world’s leading experts in forgiveness, Everett Worthington, Jr. The model engages six steps: **R**ecall the Hurt (and the Beginning of Empathy); **E**mpathize with the One Who Hurt You; Give an **A**ltruistic Gift of Forgiveness; **C**ommit to the Forgiveness You Experienced; and **H**old on to Forgiveness When You Doubt.

Conscious versus unconscious considerations for facilitating emotional repairs

Regardless of the tactic used, we encourage third-party facilitators to monitor how it facilitates conscious (thinking) and unconscious (feeling) repair.

The Four R program teaches the step-by-step process to facilitate emotional repairs with multiple parties using R4's conflict resolution tactic approach that draws on the authors' applied experiences and research to facilitate the following elements:

- *Conscious choice*: Moving through any process requires participants to make choices and decisions. Five choices that can help predict the likelihood that parties will demonstrate empathy, collaboration, humility and be open to forgiveness:
 - *Decide to engage in a process*—All parties involved decide to participate willingly. An authentic repair requires all parties to engage in whatever tactic is used to move towards a repair.
 - *Understanding of perceptions and perspective*—The tactic chosen must promote the value of listening and understanding different perceptions and concerns.
 - *Open to learning and growth*—Tactics provide opportunities to teach knowledge and skills to support forgiveness, collaboration, negotiation, and conflict resolution.
 - *Motivation to achieve a repair*—At some point in the process, the proverbial switch must click to create a repair that becomes the common goal. This happens when all parties accept and take accountability for their part, apologize when appropriate, and are open to fixing and accepting the consequences that may occur because of the situation.
 - *Accept appropriate consequences maturely*—The repair process may include restitution or discipline within the workplace context. This may be because of procedural standards.

- *Unconscious choice*—The emotional system operates on its own. When all the parties feel there has been a positive outcome from the conscious interactions, their emotional systems will validate if they trust there has been a meaningful emotional repair.
 - Emotions determine the individual’s experience. No words will be as impactful as how parties feel. When parties feel there has been an authentic emotional repair, it generates pleasant emotions that help the persons involved move past unpleasant emotions experienced because of the emotional rupture. Logic will never overrule human emotion. Humans determine what is good and bad by how they feel.

The primary objective of R3 is to decide on timing, resources, a third-party facilitator, and the appropriate approach and tactic(s) to facilitate a repair. It is recommended to always consider the nuances and approach used through an intersectional lens. One way to think about R3 is mapping out the game plan for how a third party will attempt to facilitate an emotional repair.



R4

REPAIR AND RENEW

The final stage brings the prescribed work of R1-R3 together. The parties to the conflict are guided through a resolution process to address the emotional ruptures and achieve an emotional repair.

The goal of conflict resolution is to repair emotional ruptures. However, the sequencing and timing for when the repair can be attempted depend on the circumstances. For example, if a workplace investigation and potential discipline are being administered, it may not be appropriate to facilitate a repair. This R focuses on what activities and tactics will be implemented to move the parties involved forward and in what order.

We recommend anchoring the restorative justice concepts outlined below, regardless of the intervention, to facilitate the repair. The repair must be hyper-focused on ensuring inclusion and psychological safety are in place to prevent the conflict resolution process from creating more harm. When facilitating the repair of relationships, be mindful of emotions and allow space for emotional healing.[105] A repair opportunity for success will be muted if the process does not coach the participants to avoid the urge to place blame, look for ways to inflict punishment, or invest overly in analyzing the “why” or root cause of what happened.

Repair opportunities are more likely and more successful when the process sets expectations that all parties involved must accept accountability for their actions, be open and willing to learn from their mistakes and make commitments about the future. The past cannot be changed. All any person can control is what they are doing now and moving forward in the future.



Activity #1: Facilitate repair activities/actions—At this point in the process, R2 and R3 will have facilitated the identification of the issues, the parties involved, and the method for moving forward with the repair tactics. The approach and considerations have been determined.

The focus now is to engage the parties involved in the repair work that facilitates human interaction, communication, and opportunity for resolution. Regardless of the tactic used, repair work is experiential and requires all parties to push through emotional discomfort and fear to start the conflict resolution process (i.e., tactic facilitating the repair work). Hope for a resolution and fear significantly influence attitudes and behaviours during the conflict resolution process.[106]

Hope for a resolution can create positive energy, tolerance, and willingness to work hard because the belief on the other side is something better than the current situation for all parties involved. Fear can result in cognitive freezing and distraction, inhibiting openness and the ability to trust the process. A universal imperative when facilitating repair work is to anticipate the potential for a power dynamic and keep the playing field level and fair to mitigate fear and feelings of being overpowered.[107]

The individuals involved must trust the process to move through conflict with any hope of emotional repair. Conflicts that create emotional ruptures are not necessarily all destructive. They can be engines to facilitate change and innovation to help organizations achieve their potential.[108] The success of any conflict resolution tactic depends on all parties' willingness to be open to other experiences, engage in active listening to each person's experience, and communicate respectfully and non-judgmentally.[109] The hurdle for a successful repair is navigating and respecting human emotions that can be barriers and catalysts for achieving an emotional repair, allowing for renewed relationships.[110]

Regardless of the tactic being used, the Four R checklist is a must to ensure all parties involved have a clear set of expectations and psychologically safe boundaries. Boundaries help shape conscious social constructs expected for all parties involved regarding the behaviours required to repair and renew relationships.[111] The following points offer guidance on what the Four R program proposes as minimal expectations for a successful outcome:

- Set rules around one person speaking at a time: no interrupting or talking over another person.
- Be mindful of non-verbal communication, like facial expressions and body gestures.
- Speak in a respectful tone that is not overpowering or intimidating to any party involved.

- Ensure all parties are allowed to express their concerns. Neurodivergent individuals may benefit more from sidebars and writing out their thoughts to organize and process the conversation.
- Set expectations for the end goal and remind parties involved of the key performance behaviours they were onboarded with, like the roles of humility, empathy, and forgiveness in achieving conflict resolution that supports emotional repairs.
- Frame the challenge in writing and get all parties' input on what must be resolved and why. Examine the tactic being suggested and how it can help solve the problem/conflict. Anchor the need for an inclusive process and for all parties to be open to taking accountability and responsibility for their part.
- Encourage all parties to frame what they believe is a reasonable solution to the challenge.

The above minimal standard increases the opportunity for all parties to feel included, valued, welcome to the process, and safe to trust it. This can reduce the risk of a party avoiding participating to make things better. When one or more parties are not ready or clear on a process, this can increase the risk of the conflict escalating, creating more stress for all involved, and making a successful repair more challenging.[112]

The timeline for the repair process may be set upfront and often depends on the circumstances and access to the parties involved. A typical repair process takes more than one interaction, but regardless of the number, success will depend on follow-up and ensuring new habits and change expectations. An effective emotional repair process anchors all parties' goal never to return to the way things were. The object is to learn and mature the relationship through the conflict experience.

For a repair process to be successful, all parties involved should be open to demonstrating humility, accepting responsibility for mistakes, and showing a willingness to be open to forgive. This does not mean that all will be forgotten or that what happened will be considered okay. Good repair work provides an opportunity to release negative feelings and renew relationships. This allows for accountability, learning to ensure wrongdoing is not repeated, and learning from the experience to strengthen and improve relationships.

Any tactic using a third party depends on the facilitator's knowledge, skills, and ability to adhere to the above guidelines to help all parties have a psychologically safe and inclusive experience. All the parties' emotional systems (i.e., how they feel) will ultimately determine if they are satisfied with the outcome and influence their future thinking and behaviours.

A simple apology (i.e., “I am sorry for …”) is a universal emotional repair micro-behaviour that transcends all roads in formal and informal processes and healthy and unhealthy conflict that can increase the opportunity for resolution (i.e., emotional repair) when offered with humility, vulnerability, and authenticity. Apologies are valuable because they are a first step to understanding the degree of emotional rupture. A thoughtful apology can mend a relationship as it acknowledges how the behaviour impacted the receiver[113] emotionally. Research suggests a sincere apology can facilitate forgiveness. [114]

Activity #2: Be ready when needed to help parties frame restitution—One potential outcome of healthy and unhealthy conflict is one party may determine a need to engage in restitution. Restitution is when a person takes accountability for wrongdoing and commits to fixing it individually. Restitution can help fix the damage done beyond an apology. One person agrees to allow the other to show remorse and make things right. Apologies and gestures that demonstrate heartfelt remorse for actions are powerful forgiveness[115] facilitators.

Restitution should not be confused with administrative discipline in the emotional repair process. It is a voluntary action to make appropriate gestures that demonstrate accountability and a willingness to make things right. Restitution cannot be imposed. It must be accepted as a meaningful gesture that parties willingly agree upon while fixing a wrong at the individual level.

Activity #3: Objectively evaluate the Repair outcome and quality—The degree to which all parties involved agree that the process used to facilitate the repair was just, fair, and meaningful determines the procedural justice of the repair. This happens during the process and after making agreements and a decision. After the last meeting, follow up with all parties to obtain feedback on the quality of the repair and the process regarding what was helpful and what could be improved. This step requires intention and energy because it facilitates the ‘Check’ part of the Plan-Do-Check-Act framework. Its primary goal is to evaluate objectively the repair goals achieved and the quality of the repair. The Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution purports that making this activity an automatic process is necessary to determine if the tactics used are working and if the facilitators have the skills to succeed. It also helps determine on a case-by-case basis if there is a need to adjust tactics or provide facilitators with more training and support. [116] In addition to the administrative benefits, it can help parties understand potential risks.

Activity #4: Recordkeeping and Reinforcement of Repair—Factoring in the role of habits in creating lasting change is often missed in the conflict resolution process. Agreements about future behaviour are often made during the repair process. For example, one person determines they need to learn to be less aggressive when challenged, and all parties agree this is a desirable outcome. The person agrees to take anger management training to obtain new knowledge and skills. This seems reasonable and proactive on the surface. The problem is this plan is often flawed because it can end up being nothing more than a check-the-box activity focusing on action, not the desired key performance behaviour (KPB) or a strategy to help the person learn and develop helpful KPBs as automatic habits. Creating an opportunity for learning new habits requires correcting for what Ebbinghaus called the “forgetting curve.”[117] The forgetting curve highlights that information not practiced, relearned, and reviewed will dissolve. Retaining information and transforming it into a habit requires practice and time. As James Clear has indicated, learning new habits can take about 66 days and up to 254 days.[118]

Continual improvement feedback loop

To complete the programs and align to a Plan-Do-Check-Act model, organizations should schedule time or develop processes to assess how the programs managed the conflict and restored the working relationship. If an analysis of the conflict shows that the sides could not reconcile in a way to at least work with each other respectfully or that the rupture between the parties resurfaced, it will be important to review the program tactics and approach to determine where the issue is and find an opportunity for improvement. Potential weaknesses in the program could occur in setting expectations, understanding the conflict, or not using the correct methods to resolve the issues with the parties. Regardless, it is important to make an honest evaluation and consider where shortcomings exist so that corrections can be made to create a healthier and safer workplace where unhealthy conflict is avoided and effectively managed.

CONCLUSION

In our areas of work, we are acutely aware that employers are legally required to address complex interpersonal conflicts among employees. A failure to do so can result in legal liability but, more likely, organizational breakdowns and increased risk of mental injuries, turnover, disability, and lost time due to illness and presenteeism.

The Four R program has been designed to provide employers with clear directions for preventing and repairing healthy and unhealthy workplace conflicts using appropriate policy development, training and education, conflict diagnosis, and resolution tactics and approaches. For employers, developing conflict resolution capacity offers an ability to resolve healthy and unhealthy conflicts rather than allowing them to fester into poisoned work environments and legal liability risks.

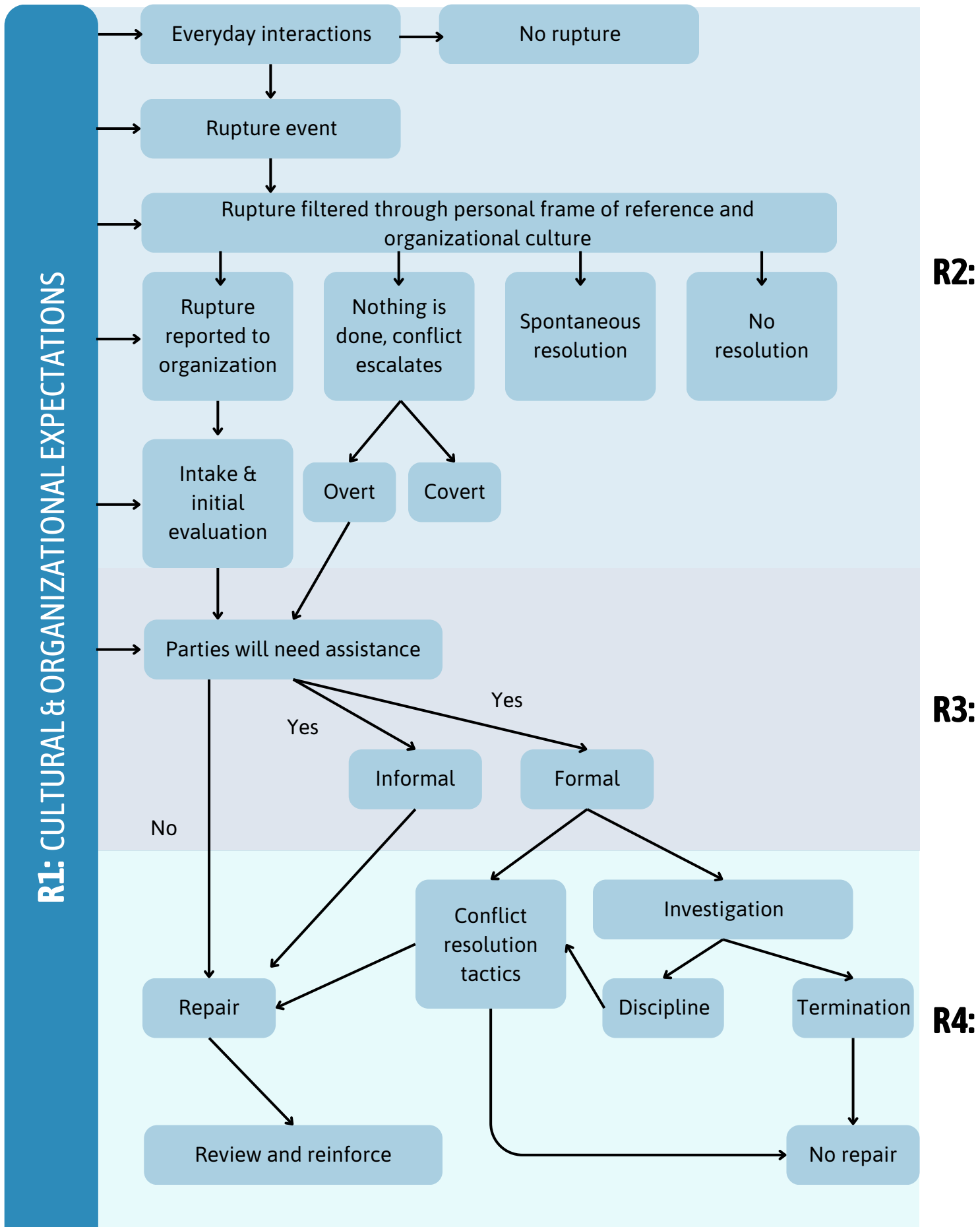
The end goal of the Four R program is to promote mental health and prevent mental harm to maximize the employee's experience and the organization's potential to achieve its maximum productivity and facilitate its substantiality.



APPENDIX A

THE FOUR R'S PROGRAM IN ACTION

When reviewing this program, please keep in mind that each R will require an ongoing Plan-Do-Check-Act approach to ensure it is doing what it should be doing and for continuous improvement.



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