

# CharityVillage Connects: Workplace Conflict: The Enemy of Mental Health and Productivity Transcript



## **Mary Barroll:**

Welcome to CharityVillage Connects. I'm your host Mary Barroll.

*(SFX: Hummingbird flying and tone)*

That's the sound of the Hummingbird pollinating our world and making it a better place. The Hummingbird is CharityVillage's logo because we strive – like the industrious Hummingbird – to make connections across the nonprofit sector and help make positive change.

Over this series of podcasts, we'll explore topics that are vital to the non-profit sector in Canada. Topics like diversity, equity and inclusion, mental health in the workplace, the gap in female representation in leadership, and many other subjects crucial to the sector.

We'll offer insight that will help you make sense of your life as a nonprofit professional, make connections to help navigate challenges and support for your organization to deliver on its mission.

In this episode, we explore conflict in nonprofit workplaces and the toll it's taking on the mental and physical health of Canadians. We'll examine the contributing factors, including power dynamics, racism and microaggressions. We'll outline the legal requirements for employers to take action. And we'll provide some practical tips to address conflict when it happens in your workplace for both nonprofit leaders and staff.

## **Clip montage:**

### **Paula Allen:**

There's still a much higher proportion of individuals who are considered high risk in terms of their mental health now than there was in 2019.

### **Rensia Melles:**

Conflict and experience of conflict doesn't equal poor mental health. It has everything to do with how that conflict is managed.

### **Sarah Albo:**

We've got constructive and destructive conflict. When we talk about the difference between constructive and destructive conflict, it's usually the

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destructive version that we're referring to as what people are avoiding or afraid of.

### **Jackie Laviolette:**

We like to say get advice early and often, because sometimes if you're just seeing conflict in the workplace and you're not quite sure what to do, that first phone call to us may be able to de-escalate the situation or at least defend the organization against some of these larger concerns around occupational health and safety

### **Eileen Chadnick:**

And do you know that it takes 0.07 seconds for the brain to decide whether or not a situation is a threat or otherwise?

### **Donna Marshall:**

So, in not-for-profits, we are overtly nice and kind. And the bullying and harassment take place at a very covert level. And it's called passive-aggressive harassment or bullying, which is probably the hardest to deal with.

### **Clip – The Office**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sBC3YCTn\\_o&rco=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sBC3YCTn_o&rco=1) :48-56

*“Michael, what’s wrong? Everything is wrong. The stress of my modern office has caused me to go into a depression.”*

### **Mary Barroll:**

Workplaces have a notorious history as breeding grounds for stress and unhappiness. In its long run on television, the series, The Office, satirized those often-painful dynamics, using humour to ease the conversation.

But as we all know, conflicts at work are rarely funny, and often take a serious toll on our mental health, sometimes with devastating consequences.

## **TRANSITION MUSIC**

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### **Mary Barroll:**

Since 2020 TELUS Health has been measuring the mental condition of Canadians at their jobs and recently came up with some startling statistics.

### **Host:**

The most recent TELUS Health survey published in October 2023 found that people reporting conflict at work lose 55 days of productivity each year. People who identified their managers as the source of conflict lost 49 days of productivity.

And those who identified their colleagues as the main source of conflict lost 47 days. The report made links between workplace conflict and mental health with the finding that among sources of work-related stress, workplace conflict has the most significant impact on productivity loss.

### **Mary Barroll:**

The TELUS Health survey also found that anxiety and depression are the most prevalent diagnosed conditions among workers in Canada. Consequently, workers reported that mental health support is of equal importance to financial reward – and to young people it may be even of greater significance. Workers under 40 are more than twice as likely as workers over 50 to value psychological services the most. These key findings underscore how the state of our mental health remains at risk, despite the return to so-called normal life. In fact, the TELUS Health survey reports that as recently as October 2023, the mental health of workers in Canada was continuing to be near the levels of distress comparable to those experienced during the pandemic.

### **Paula Allen:**

We saw that happen in a significant way at the beginning of the pandemic for obvious reasons, change, upheaval, risk, but we haven't seen an improvement yet. So, there's still a much higher proportion of individuals who are considered high-risk in terms of their mental health now than there was in 2019.

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### **Mary Barroll:**

Paula Allen is the Global Leader, Research and Client Insights at TELUS Health. She leads the team of data scientists at TELUS Health and is well-recognized as an expert in workplace mental health.

### **Paula Allen:**

Two of the strongest indicators of what we're seeing right now are scores on anxiety and our scores on isolation. Those have been the lowest sub-scores in the mental health index for several months.

And even prior to that, they were typically the lowest sub-scores. So, anxiety and isolation are two things that impact how you show up at work in a very big way. And conflict contributes to both of them. There's many things that contribute, but certainly, conflict does. When you think about when you're in a conflict situation, you feel you can't control it. There is a feeling of being threatened that gives you a feeling of being anxious.

And that also gives you a feeling that you might not be supported, it makes you feel somewhat alone if there isn't anybody sort of, you know, in the same place that you are in. All of those things are not great for our mental health, but all of those things impact our productivity as well. When you are feeling threatened, when you're feeling anxious, there's very little else that your brain can focus on. It takes a lot of effort to focus on anything else. Your primal need is to get out of that uncomfortable state. So, if it happens on an ongoing basis, if it's chronic, that can really impact you and actually impact your physical well-being as well as your mental well-being and productivity.

### **Eileen Chadnick:**

Well, our brains are highly sensitive to threat, and they actually operate in a very sophisticated and unsophisticated way as a threat detector.

### **Mary Barroll:**

Eileen Chadnick is an Executive Coach, Workshop Facilitator and Author, as well as a contributing Columnist to the Globe and Mail - and a

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Principal at Big Cheese Coaching in Toronto. Her practice - draws from the disciplines of neuroscience and emotional intelligence to provide guidance to both employers and employees to navigate, and find solutions for workplace conflict.

### ***Eileen Chadnick:***

Do you know that it takes 0.07 seconds for the brain to decide whether or not a situation is a threat or otherwise? It may not be a real threat, of course, but if the brain decides this is a threat, it comes from a part of our brain known as the limbic area. It basically shuts down all that other good stuff that we need for relating, you know, our critical thinking, our reflective ability, our ability to take a wider perspective. All of that is bye bye thinking capacity and hello, threat. And it gets us really ready to either fight, defend or get the heck out of town.

### ***Mary Barroll:***

But what causes conflicts? A Canadian study by the workplace consulting firm Psychometrics, aptly named, Warring Egos, Toxic Individuals, Feeble Leaders, puts warring egos and personality clashes at the top of the list of causes of workplace conflict, according to 86 percent of the survey respondents. Poor leadership came in second at 76 percent. These conflicts frequently result in very negative outcomes. Three-quarters of respondents have seen conflict result in personal insults and attacks, and 43% have witnessed someone being fired. 81% of those surveyed have seen conflicts leading to someone leaving the organization, and 77% have seen it result in sickness or absence.

### ***Sarah Albo:***

That's typically what emotions do. They tend to be a cause and a driver of destructive conflict.

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### **Mary Barroll:**

Sarah Albo specializes in resolving conflicts. The Founder of Novel HR, she is a Mediator, a Psychological Health and Safety Advisor, and a Conflict Resolution Coach.

### **Sarah Albo:**

Not to say that emotions are bad or negative. Some may be harder to deal with, like frustration or sadness, but emotions are really important because they give us information about what our needs are, how we may have been impacted in a situation. It's when we act based on these initial and personal emotions that we can start to see some destructive behaviours and conflict.

So, I find it helpful to keep in mind, we don't choose the emotions we experience or to what intensity. So, by acknowledging them and taking some time to understand them, we can take this information and try to incorporate it into the conversation in a way that's constructive. I also think it's important to consider when an emotion's affecting us strongly, is this a now emotion or is this a back then emotion? So, is there something in our past that the current situation's bringing up - that can escalate a conflict and that's something to watch out for when the intensity of the conflict doesn't seem to match the current situation.

### **Mary Barroll:**

So almost a triggering event of past conflict. Why is it important to manage our emotions when we're in a conflict situation? How does this help us to better work towards resolutions?

### **Sarah Albo:**

I want to be cognizant that we're not just trying to make them go away. Emotions give us important information. So, what's coming up and why. If we're just ignoring them and trying to push them down or away, that typically doesn't work. They're likely to going to come out somewhere else and not necessarily in a constructive way. If we're trying to ignore

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them in the conflict, it's likely that they're coming out in other ways like our tone of voice or non-verbal behaviours.

So, we're going to be giving an indication to the other person somehow, and then we're opening up ourselves to their interpretation of that, rather than communicating it authentically with them. So, we want to be recognizing our emotions, naming them can be helpful, sharing them with the other person if you feel safe to do so.

So, one way to do this is to express the emotion we're experiencing and our reasoning behind it, not putting blame on the other person because that's likely to turn this into a destructive conflict. So, in the workplace, this might sound like, I'm frustrated because I expected to be informed that there was going to be a delay with the project. So, we're using because I, because we're taking responsibility for our emotions, not to say that we're not going to address the other person's behaviour - we can still do that by putting forward a request after we understand their perspective as well. So that might sound like, I'm frustrated because I expected to be informed that there was going to be a delay with this project. It's really important that we're working together on this. So, I'd like to understand what happened and what stopped you from coming to me with this so we can ensure it doesn't happen again. So, this is coming from Nonviolent Communication by Marshall Rosenberg. It's a great communication tool for communicating our experiences and needs.

### **Mary Barroll:**

And just as emotions may not all be bad, experts say conflicts also aren't necessarily negative. In its survey, Psychometrics reports that more than half of HR professionals have seen conflict actually lead to better solutions to problems. One in five say they've even seen conflicts result in major innovations. But the challenge is managing conflict in a way that leads to positive outcomes. And in Psychometrics' survey, 63 percent of HR professionals reported that their managers are only "somewhat" effective at navigating through conflicts.

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### **Sarah Albo:**

We've got constructive and destructive conflict. When we talk about the difference between constructive and destructive conflict, it's usually the destructive version that we're referring to as what people are avoiding or afraid of, and rightfully so, it can be extremely difficult to handle. So destructive conflict is characterized by more of a focus on the person than the problem, might have higher emotional intensity, group functioning decreases, and you tend to see more in the way of behaviours that either prolong or escalate the conflict. On one hand, we might see avoidance, and on the other, we might see more trying to win at all costs or hostility. With constructive conflict, we might disagree, but there's a level of safety and trust involved where it's a conversation, not necessarily a conflict that's going to escalate. We're able to do more problem-solving. We're focusing on the task at hand. We're keeping personal attacks out of the conversation. So, this is more of an us versus the problem mentality rather than a me versus you.

### **Mary Barroll:**

But it would seem that positive outcomes from workplace conflict, while possible, are more of the outliers than the rule. Let's get back to that sobering statistic from TELUS Health that concludes people who experience conflict lose 55 days of productivity - that's 11 weeks – every year.

### **Paula Allen:**

Yeah, we looked at that in terms of two main drivers. One was the period of time where you're not able to focus fully on your job. And everybody has that. We all have ups and downs. Hardly anybody can focus 100% of the time. But when there is some emotional distraction, obviously it goes down. You're not able to focus as we were speaking about before. So that focus, that ability to actually do your job and do it at the best of your ability is one measure of productivity. The additional measure that we use when we combine them includes absence days, so time that you are taking off and you're not able to work. And what's very interesting is that without question, by orders of magnitude, the productivity impact of

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ups and downs in terms of our well-being and emotional health is much more impacted than absence.

### ***Rensia Melles:***

But when we're talking about 55 lost days, I think that is a combination of people taking sick days, perhaps being more prepared to take a sick day.

### ***Mary Barroll:***

Rensia Melles is a Workplace Mental Health Consultant, Manager of Clinical Operations at Lyra Health Canada and Founder of Integral Workplace Health with over 20 years of experience managing and designing employee support programs for Fortune 500 employers and nonprofits alike.

### ***Rensia Melles:***

Because they are more aware, whereas in the past, they would have just tried to power through, they're more willing to say, you know what? It's not worth it, I'm just going to take the day off because I'm so stressed or so upset. So that's part of it. I think also that is a loss, that could be attributed to presenteeism, where people are going to work but not performing well, where they are distracted, where they are not able to produce or they're just being there without actually being able to produce. So that is a huge economic cost for employers, but it's also very unfulfilling for employees because despite what we think that people don't want to work or whatever stereotypes you have, people actually like being productive. People like feeling that they're contributing and that they have something to do and have a purpose. So, when you're not engaged in the workplace and feeling that sense of purpose, that does affect people's mental health.

### ***Mary Barroll:***

Rensia Melles also says the statistics may reflect the greater awareness of the importance of psychological safety in the workplace and more

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resources that are now out there to help employees cope with their stress, along with more robust employee assistance programs that provide supports for mental health.

### ***Rensia Melles:***

What we are seeing is that there is a huge increase in the cost of and the uptake of mental health provision. A lot of insurance plans have accepted more providers. For instance, it used to be only psychologists. A lot of insurance plans will now accept social workers and registered psychotherapists instead of just going for the PhD level counselors. So, there's more resources available. There's more awareness. So definitely the uptake on that has been the fastest growing and is the largest segment of cost on the mental and the paramedic aspects of health insurance. So, there's no two ways that there's an impact that things are going on in the workplace and that there is an increased need for mental health and well-being support in the workplace.

### ***Mary Barroll:***

According to Rensia Melles, a critically important factor that impacts the mental health of employees is not necessarily the experience of the conflict itself, but rather how conflicts in the workplace are managed when they occur.

### ***Rensia Melles:***

Conflict and experience of conflict doesn't equal poor mental health. It has everything to do with how that conflict is managed, what my expectations are about how it's going to be managed, what my expectations of outcome are, whether I have expectations that I'm going to be heard or whether I'm just going to be steamrolled.

So, conflict in and of itself isn't the problem. I may be more vulnerable to thinking that something is an insult when I'm more stressed out than otherwise, but it has a lot to do with when I want to bring that up with somebody or with my, whether that's my manager, whether it's my

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employer or with my coworker, are they going to listen? Are there going to be repercussions for that? And is there an opportunity for us to come to a fair resolve or some kind of mutual understanding? Those are the factors that ultimately make a difference. But that's also, of course, a definition of a psychologically safe environment where I feel that I can speak up, that I can do that without repercussions, and that there will be an effort made to come to an agreement with each other.

### **Mary Barroll:**

And so, the question of “power” is a huge factor in how conflicts are resolved, and even how they sometimes arise. The imbalance in power between an employee and a manager can play out in the form of harassment. Canada’s Labour Code defines harassment as any action, conduct or comment, including of a sexual nature, that can reasonably be expected to cause offence, humiliation or other physical or psychological injury or illness to an employee.

### **Host:**

A nationwide survey found that 71 percent of respondents said they had experienced at least one form of harassment and abuse at work in the previous year. The research conducted by the University of Toronto, Western University, and the Canadian Labour Congress found that those more likely to experience toxic work environments and sexual harassment are women, Indigenous Peoples, members of the LGBTQ+ communities, and People of Colour.

The survey of nearly five thousand workers in corporations, service sectors, hospitality and blue-collar jobs found that harassment included verbal, sexual and online abuse, along with intimidation aimed at undermining work performance.

### **Donna Marshall:**

So, there's actually two ways that harassment shows itself in the workplace.

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### **Mary Barroll:**

Donna Marshall is a Registered Psychotherapist, Lecturer and CEO of Workright, who specializes in mental health and psychological safety in the workplace.

### **Donna Marshall:**

One is overt, obviously that we can see it, we can hear it, it's very obvious to ourselves, and if it happens in front of others, they're very aware of it as well. So, examples of this would be yelling, swearing, ridiculing, offensive, derogatory, sexually explicit communication, unwanted, unnecessary touching, and threats. Now, most of us moved into a hybrid work environment, now these things can happen online just as much as they can happen in person. The other piece is the covert, which is hidden, and that's really harder to see and also to prove. So, some of these examples might be deliberately withholding information from people who need that information to do their jobs or leaving them out of the information loop.

And I'm a Psychotherapist, as you mentioned, in private practice as well. And a lot of our clients are experiencing workplace bullying and harassment. And they are deliberately left out. I've seen senior, senior people. One example comes to my mind of a senior person who got a new boss. And this person started keeping information from her, leaving her out of meetings and then doing the covert thing like, oh, I forgot. Well, you don't really need to be there. And it became so bad for her that she had to take time off from her stress leave quite a bit of time. And she's an extremely high-functioning individual. And it turned out that the new boss had somebody they wanted to put in her place and were setting her up for failure and doing a good job of it, might I say.

### **Mary Barroll:**

Well, sometimes the nonprofit sector has a reputation for being overly nice or caring. And there's a sense that this kind of behaviour might be a lesser problem for nonprofit organizations than in the for-profit world, for

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example. How big of an issue is this in our sector? Are there differences in how it shows up here as opposed to, for example, a corporate office?

### **Donna Marshall:**

That's a really good question. So actually we go back to the overt and covert. So in not-for-profits, we are overtly nice and kind. And the bullying and harassment take place at a very covert level. And it's called passive-aggressive harassment or bullying, which is probably the hardest to deal with.

So being nice and caring isn't the problem. It's how nice people deal with conflict and passive aggressiveness. There was research done and published in Harvard Business Review a few years ago and they surveyed not-for-profits in North America and found that passive-aggressiveness is the biggest way of leading and managing conflict in not-for-profits.

So this is something, and this is because nice people have a hard time with conflict. Nice people are drawn to be involved in not-for-profit work because we want to change the world. We're kind people, but then we're also afraid of conflict. And so, it really comes to our own development as leaders and as individuals, that we work on this part of ourselves. And a big piece of this is training, training on how to learn some assertiveness skills. So not aggressive skills, assertiveness communication skills, in order to be able to handle these conflicts and not let it spill over into harassment.

I actually had an example of that. I was doing a training at a very large not-for-profit a number of years ago, and I had the leaders of all the departments in the training. And we were talking about harassment and these kinds of things and the legislation around it and against it. And one leader, a manager said to me, said to the whole group, he said,

So I've got this employee I really don't like so I can't just make this employee's job so difficult that they'll quit? And I thought he was being sarcastic and trying to be funny and he wasn't he was literally setting up an employee to be fired, and so this is not only cruel but it's also against

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the law. There's a really good saying I like, when you're kind to the cruel you're cruel to the kind.

### **Mary Barroll:**

That “cruelty” can materialize in different forms, sometimes through obvious conflict, and other other times through subtler comments or actions called microaggressions. Here again is TELUS Health’s Paula Allen.

### **Paula Allen:**

So when you're in a situation where you're experiencing a microaggression, there's a comment, there's a statement that throws you off balance, that's not predictable, gives you a sense that you don't have a sense of belonging - your stress level has to go up if you're a human being.

So, if you look at sort of a situation where you're experiencing racism or discrimination or exclusion for any reason, number one, it's not logical. It's stuff that we sort of build as a part of one of the flaws of society, these attitudes.

And because it's not logical, it's not really predictable. Our brain goes to what's logical, and this isn't logical, so we don't really predict it, even if it happens on an ongoing basis. When you have something happening that's not predictable, it really impacts you, because our brains adapt to change, but when the change isn't predictable, when the change is frequent, we can't adapt. It really throws us off balance.

The other thing that's really important, I mentioned isolation before as a major factor in our mental and physical health and something that we really do need to make sure doesn't continue to be compromised. When you feel that sense of racism, discrimination, lack of inclusion, you cannot feel a sense of belonging. You cannot feel a sense of trust. And that sense of belonging, that sense of trust, is something that is our best counter to stress. So, we're diminishing resilience when we have those experiences.

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So, this is not insignificant. And we also found in our research that when we have inclusive environments, when we have environments where, you know, inappropriate behaviours are not tolerated, the mental health and wellbeing of everyone, not just racialized groups, not just people who are differently abled, everyone, their mental health and wellbeing improves.

### **Mary Barroll:**

New research from KPMG shows that corporate Canada is making headway in the fight against racism and in attempts to make workplaces more inclusive, faring about ten percent better than in a similar survey a year ago. And yet eight in ten Black Canadians report that they are still facing some form of racism or microaggression at work. And reports of hate crimes are up dramatically across the country, 83 percent higher than pre-pandemic reported incidents, with anti-semitic and anti-Islamic hate crimes spiking in recent months. All of which emphasizes the responsibility employers have to their employees, not only morally – but legally.

### **Paula Allen:**

If you saw two people going at it, right? If you saw a fight in your workplace, I would hazard to guess that if you were a leader or a manager, you wouldn't tolerate that. You would intervene. You would say, stop, you would pause, and you would make sure that you had the parties in a place where they were able to kind of reflect and move forward. Like it wouldn't just continue. We have legislation in this country that protects people from bullying and harassment and that requires employers to understand what's happening and step in.

I think the same mindset needs to be applied to the microaggression and the subtle things that actually can cause as much or more damage because they are ongoing.

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### **Mary Barroll:**

Whether covert or overt, history has shown us that unresolved conflicts in the workplace can lead to devastating consequences - sometimes even tragic.

### **Jackie Laviolette:**

I think we have to go back and look at where some of the legislation came from. And for individuals, particularly in Ontario, there was the OC Transpo fatalities back in 1999.

<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1472401987778>

:04 - :17

“The gunman entered the OC Transpo headquarters at St. Laurent and Belfast at about 2:30 this afternoon. Witnesses say he entered a stockroom where about forty people were working and opened fire with a rifle or shotgun.”

### **Mary Barroll:**

On Tuesday, April 6, 1999, former OC Transpo employee Pierre Lebrun, armed with a Remington Model 760 pump-action rifle, shot six people, killing four, in a shooting spree at an OC Transpo's garage, before killing himself. Lebrun had been fired but later reinstated, and subsequently quit. He came back to the workplace – with a vengeance. Here's Employment lawyer Jackie Laviolette from the firm Mathew Dindsdale & Clark to explain.

### **Jackie Laviolette:**

That was a very unfortunate, horrific incident where workplace conflict led to, unfortunately, the fatalities of a number of employees as well as two people being injured. Coming out of that, I think politicians as well as just generally the public said, you know, I think there's a protection mechanism that needs to be put in place. Ensuring that people have a safe and healthy work environment to come to is kind of a foundation

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within the Occupational Health and Safety Code. So, when you think of that obligation, you think you have that duty to protect from the hazard of workplace conflict. And so, in doing that, when things are brought to your attention, that's where that employer has to look and really illustrate its due diligence when a complaint comes forward. What did you do about it? How did you action it and how did you protect your employees from what I would say is the hazard of an unsafe work environment, whether it's through conflict, verbal conflict, physical conflict or some other type of conflict. What actions did you take?

### **Mary Barroll:**

Even if workplace conflict does not escalate to the tragic circumstances of the OC Transpo murders, the consequences can be extremely serious, and costly for the employer. Failure to protect employees from harassment and abuse can lead to significant fines and drawn-out court cases, like the 1.1-billion-dollar class action claim against the RCMP – and yes, that's billion with a B.

[https://www.google.com/search?sca\\_esv=b9f5dc3cd9c9d28f&q=class+action+lawsuit+against+rcmp&tbm=vid&source=Inms&sa=X&ved=2ahUK Ewin-sOB0-CEAxWwzABHT95AxwQ0pQJegQIChAB&biw=1297&bih=442&dpr=2#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:e229e1b8,vid:bzKwwq9o2F8,st:0](https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=b9f5dc3cd9c9d28f&q=class+action+lawsuit+against+rcmp&tbm=vid&source=Inms&sa=X&ved=2ahUK Ewin-sOB0-CEAxWwzABHT95AxwQ0pQJegQIChAB&biw=1297&bih=442&dpr=2#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:e229e1b8,vid:bzKwwq9o2F8,st:0)

:00- :15 “The RCMP is facing a mammoth new lawsuit, a 1.1 billion dollar class action claim and it contains allegations of harassment, bullying and intimidation within the force dating back decades”.

### **Host:**

Certified in 2021 by the Federal Court of Canada the class action lawsuit seeks damages on behalf of all current and former RCMP members and reservists, dating back to 1995. The lead plaintiffs, two veteran officers, allege there was a culture of systemic bullying, intimidation and harassment at the RCMP that affected everyone who worked for the national force.

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### **Mary Barroll:**

That billion-dollar claim is still winding its way through the courts after the Supreme Court denied an appeal from the federal government to overturn the certification of the class action.

The RCMP class action suit is historic in its scope and seriousness for the force, but even relatively small lawsuits can be extremely disruptive, time-consuming, expensive and damaging to the workplace of a nonprofit employer. To head off danger and potential lawsuits, and to ensure a safe workplace, Jackie Laviolette's advice to employers is to consult a lawyer at the first sign of conflict.

### **Jackie Laviolette:**

We like to say get advice early and often, because sometimes if you're just seeing conflict in the workplace and you're not quite sure what to do, that first phone call to us may be able to de-escalate the situation or at least defend the organization against some of these larger concerns around occupational health and safety.

In terms of retaining a lawyer, there'd be a conversation about who's involved. And then there'd probably be, it can be a phone call, potentially might be the first way that we just try to de-escalate the situation and protect your interests. Or it can lead to giving the advice and moving forward with a more formal investigation, you know, creating that report. And there is a spectrum in terms of dealing with it. Ultimately, when clients call me and they say, I just have this situation, I consider it, you know, the situation can be having a conversation with those two individuals and being able to illustrate to a court what actions an organization did to protect itself and its workers and de-escalate the situation. Sometimes that is a conversation. And I say that's a small investigation, right? You're trying to figure out what's going on and you're trying to figure out what to do to protect your employees. Then it can move all the way into, hi, we've received a human rights complaint, right? In that case, you're looking at something more formal. You're looking at receiving the complaint and having to respond in writing, whether it's to the occupational health and safety, to workers' compensation, to human rights, and then that engages its own court

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process with its own rules and procedures. It's a more lengthy process. It can be very time-consuming in terms of years potentially. So that's why we say early and often is usually the best advice in these cases.

### **Mary Barroll:**

But what about the individual staff members who might be considering taking legal action due to their experiencing harassment, violence, or bullying in the workplace? What kind of steps would that individual likely be advised to take?

### **Jackie Laviolette:**

So I think if an employee is considering legal action, ideally, you always like to be informed or educated first. And I would say that any employee who is looking at that, I mean, if you have a manager and you're considering that, they do have an obligation to let you know what avenues are available to you if you feel that you're experiencing harassment or discrimination in the workplace. The second would be any of the great government websites, whether you're dealing with Human Rights Commission, whether you're dealing with workers' compensation or occupational health and safety. There's a number of amazing and incredible resources out there related to what a complaint looks like and how to deal with that, or even speaking with individuals in that sphere or who work in that area. Really it's about informing you of the process as opposed to maybe advocating or representing you as a lawyer. Any employee would have a right, if they're not unionized, to be able to get their own lawyer, but if they are unionized, that's another option available to the employee to go and get advice and resources. And then ultimately it is a matter of moving into a more formal process through creating your complaint in writing and providing that into the tribunal and going forward from there.

### **Mary Barroll:**

Turning to the courts to resolve workplace disputes is a major step, but it's not the only way.

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### **Jackie Laviolette:**

We're actually seeing quite an increase in alternative dispute resolution because I say most times by the time that the investigation is occurring, if someone comes forward with a formal complaint, usually that's a very, very difficult situation and they're in a right fight, as I call it. I want to be right and you want to be wrong. So again, that early and often is helpful in alternative dispute resolution. When we use that term, we're talking about the opportunity for the parties to come together, do more interest-based conversation, really get to the root of the issues of what's going on as opposed to what maybe a tribunal might decide has occurred. And so when you do alternate dispute resolution, if you're with a mediation that might require a third party, it can be a lawyer, it can be someone who's trained in mediation to come in and can really listen to the interests of the parties and maybe sometimes the conflict does not come from what actually occurred but there's some deep rooted issues and an opportunity to understand how people come to that conflict as a means of resolution.

### **Mary Barroll:**

I'm curious as to whether you're seeing an increase in cases involving people from marginalized communities, perhaps complaining of discrimination or microaggressions at work, for example.

### **Jackie Laviolette:**

I would say that I have seen just an increase in complaints all around actually coming out of COVID. I describe it as a bit more of a conflict culture and really that right fight. But, you know, when I dig deeper into the issue, sometimes it comes from just more education and awareness that people are more familiar that rights are available to them and that they have these protections in the workplace that they may not have known, they may have just always thought that this is how people treat me. Right? So first off, I think the education and awareness is leading to more complaints. Secondly, I would say that more education awareness around not only the personality conflicts or the conflicts between two people, but recognizing that examination of the lens goes further. And

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what are the systems and the processes in place that may be contributing to whether it's harassment or discrimination in the workplace. So those marginalized groups are recognizing that there may be systemic discrimination at play or systemic racism at play and I have definitely seen an increase in my practice around marginalized groups coming forward and questioning and feeling that the harassment or discrimination is stemming from some more of those systemic issues or you know coming from recognition of decolonization and Indigenous recognition in Canada.

### **Mary Barroll:**

Beyond limited budgets and often uniquely difficult working conditions for frontline workers, charities and nonprofits have yet another vulnerable group of workers: Volunteers. According to Stats Canada and Volunteer Canada, there are 24 million volunteers in Canada who are well recognized as being critical to the success of the nonprofit sector. And notwithstanding their crucial contributions, perhaps surprisingly, legislation that protects paid employees does not cover volunteers. Here again is Donna Marshall.

### **Donna Marshall:**

An organization, a not-for-profit, is not required to train their volunteers because it's literally about the rights of workers. That said, I don't think they were considering volunteers when they wrote the legislation because volunteers are valuable, valuable people who we want to feel safe and good about their contributions. And so, I always recommend that you include volunteers in the training, and that you make sure that your leaders and other individuals are trained to include volunteers and contractors in their implementation of these policies.

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### **Mary Barroll:**

Donna Marshall adds that statistics show that 85 percent of workplace harassment and bullying occurs where there is a power imbalance, making volunteers especially vulnerable.

But that imbalance doesn't always happen within the immediate workplace. Staff can also encounter conflicts involving clients, major donors and even board members.

### **Donna Marshall:**

In not-for-profits, board members not infrequently bully and harass people either on their board or leaders within the organization. And this gets even trickier to deal with because these board members have influence. So, it typically occurs in that way and is very hard on people because there is no avenue for more junior people - and that could be even an Executive Director in relation to a board - being able to address these issues. Now there are also that 15% that occurs in non-power-related relationships. So that could be clients, that could be donors, that could be co-workers. I had an example of a young woman who was going off-site to meet with a donor organization, and she was alone in a room, and one of the senior people in that organization came over, stood behind her and started rubbing her neck and her shoulders and said, you know, we're going to just get along fine as long as you're the one who's going to be working with me on this project. Fortunately for the organization, they took that very seriously. They had taken harassment management training. They had implemented very strong policies and they dealt with that client directly.

### **Mary Barroll:**

Rensia Melles agrees that clients can be difficult to handle, and when dealing with important clients or partners that are valuable to the organizations, nonprofit employees are particularly vulnerable within a dynamic that requires them to behave deferentially towards them, increasing the employees' vulnerability to potential abuse and harassment.

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### ***Rensia Melles:***

And the relationship to the client, that's also a really interesting one, because how I am with a client, that's called psychological or emotional labour in the workplace.

Because when I'm with a client, I need to be polite, I need to be smiling. You know, if I'm greeting people, if I'm talking to people that are rude to me on the phone, I can't say, well, you're a whatever, and hang up. I have to continue that conversation. So, there's a couple of things that are really important there. For one, you know, the company definitely needs to have your back and make it very clear that rude callers are not tolerated, that if people are continually rude, that the company will draw the line for you because it's very difficult to do that on your own.

### ***Host:***

A recent survey from Lifeworks (now TELUS Health) found that 20 percent of respondents who dealt with clients or the public had experienced increased aggression and conflict from the public or client. Women are 40% more likely than men to have experienced conflict or aggression from those external sources. Only 44 percent of the respondents said their organizations provided training or support in dealing with the problem.

### ***Rensia Melles:***

The other thing is that when you recognize that dealing with a client is emotional labour, and sometimes it is really hard because people are frustrated. It's not even malice. People are frustrated. Maybe they're stressed out. They're having some mental health issues. And so they may be very rude or abrasive, racist to the person they're talking to on the phone. And part of that is also recognizing that as an employer and giving people the space to then walk away, to go and talk to somebody, to debrief, to let go and to have like a safe space, to be flexible, to allow people to just go grab a coffee or a tea and get away from that customer and just take the time to recalibrate before they engage with the next person.

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So absolutely, who you're having conflict with and the power dynamic makes a big difference.

### **Mary Barroll:**

It can be tempting for managers to avoid dealing with low-level conflict on their teams, considering it perhaps just personality differences, but is addressing workplace conflict a factor in creating a psychologically safe workplace? What should managers and leaders know about what their responsibility is?

### **Rensia Melles:**

Absolutely. That's a really good question. And I always feel so bad for managers, when these things come up, because managers really, they do need to address it. They need to be able to recognize it. They need to have the diplomatic skills to address it with the individual, to make it safe. Managers themselves are under a lot of stress. And I don't know how your experience is, Mary, but my experience is always that front-line workers and the managers often have very different perspectives. And certainly, in the nonprofit sector where people are working with the front line, where they're working with the clients, you know, if it's a nonprofit sector where people are dealing with, you know, clients in need. So, they may not know the full story. The manager may be bound by not being allowed to tell the whole story. So yeah, definitely, a workplace that can be transparent as much as possible, creates a safe place to address conflict and to prevent conflict. Addressing it is part of it, but you need to also have your managers trained to do this. You can't just say, you know, part of your task is to deal with this conflict and, you know, watch the people and then talk to them.

## **MUSIC TRANSITION**

### **Mary Barroll:**

In this episode, we've been talking a lot about the negative consequences of conflict on mental health. But Management Coach Eileen Chadnick emphasizes the view that conflicts can also provide opportunities to create positive outcomes.

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### ***Eileen Chadnick:***

I have a little story of a client who I was helping prepare for job interviews. And I asked the question, how do you navigate conflict? And he said, oh, I never have conflict. And at first, I thought, no, that's not going to fly. But I let him speak and he went on to speak about how he looks at conflict as an opportunity to better understand, to have a deeper conversation, to be curious and to be of service and to a solution with another person. This gentleman was right on the mark. So, you can reframe if it's not conflict, what could it be? It's a conversation.

We might have differing perspectives. It's an opportunity for both of us to explore. Now, the next tip, if you've settled down that threat brain, because the words that you use to label a conversation, your brain is paying attention, very close attention, so the word conflict can be a trigger. The word conversation, less so. Now, the next thing you want to do is get curious, I mean really curious, not to ask questions to lead the person to your way, but to ask questions to genuinely seek to understand. And so, in doing that, that person, first of all, might even be disarmed by your sincere curiosity and they'll feel without even realizing it a little, maybe even taken aback and appreciative that you are giving them a chance to be heard.

The next one is to try to seek common ground. We might have things that we disagree on, but let's start with what we do agree on. And if we can co-create a shared aspiration, you're already in a partnering mindset as opposed to an adversarial mindset.

## **MUSIC TRANSITION**

### ***Mary Barroll:***

I'd like to thank our guests for taking part in this episode on workplace conflict and for offering their advice on solving the often destructive and costly problems that results. Before we go, here are some of their final thoughts and advice for nonprofit employers and professionals.

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### **Paula Allen:**

So, I'd love to see people just kind of pause a little bit, recognize that we might be a little bit more on edge than we might even realize, and turn that conflict potential into curiosity. Somebody has a point of view. Somebody has said something. Somebody has done something that is making you feel frustrated.

Well, work through that frustration by trying to understand and problem-solve. And that'll yield much more benefits and certainly counter some of the potential damage without going in the other direction.

### **Eileen Chadnick:**

I've worked with so many people and I've learned a lot. I learned from my clients. And I want to say that if you want to be an even better leader, and it doesn't have to be a positional leadership role, you can be anywhere in the continuum of your work. You want to have a great impact for yourself, and you want to have a great impact on others at work and in the continuum of the communities you serve. Invest some time with yourself. Start with you. Start learning about you. Be generous. Learn about your values. Be generous when you're feeling triggered and be there for yourself as best as you can. Learning to be there for yourself because the portal to being better with other people does start with yourself.

So, when we talk about conflict, very often people are looking immediately to others and there's a bit of a blame. But if you can start with yourself and check in on your own thinking and your own reflection and the meaning that you're making out of that, you might open up a whole portal that changes the conversation to something completely different.

### **Sarah Albo:**

I encourage people to try and resolve their workplace conflicts early and often. This is typically when there's lower stress, lower costs, and you have control over the process and outcome. When they get escalated or prolonged, stress levels go up, costs can go up - if you need to involve

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outside professionals. And then you start to lose control over the process and the outcome. So, like that's moving more towards litigation. And again, I always like to remind people, you've got some of the foundational skills for conflict resolution and they're learnable skills, but we've got our curiosity, our empathy, and kindness when we're finding ourselves in challenging situations like this.

### **Rensia Melles:**

When you start with these things, looking at each other as individuals instead of as labeled and titles. When you normalize and acknowledge good days, bad days, everybody has mental health and it's okay. And some people have mental illness. And with mental illness, you can still flourish. So it's good to understand those things. And the last thing that I think is really important, best practice that reduces conflict and makes it possible to address conflict when it's there - is to train your managers. So many people are promoted and almost punished for a job well done because they're really good at what they do. And then they get to become a manager and then they don't get management skills. They're just going, this guy is really good at doing the IT or putting the do-hickie on the thingamabob. So, we're going to promote them into a manager. And then they don't recognize that management is a whole other skill set - even just the promotion itself can lead to conflict with the people that you used to work as a coworker, as an equal with. And now suddenly you have knowledge, you have power that they don't have. So, train your managers.

### **Jackie Laviolette:**

I always like to say that if you're facing a conflict in the workplace, if you're particularly the organization, what you want to be doing is considering if somebody asked you a year from now, you heard about this and what did you do? So, you want to be able to answer that question and you want to be able to answer why did you do that. And that doesn't mean that you always have to jump to a formal investigation for every single thing that comes forward. It also means that you want to be able to address things that come forward and be able to illustrate is it

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a conversation and did I document that and why was I satisfied that would protect the individual in my workplace or no this is very serious and we've seen an escalation so we're not going to allow this to continue and we need to do a bit more of a formal investigation. Does it involve keeping people separate within the workplace, might that just resolve the issue? So really coming from a place of what's required to de-escalate the situation and what's required for the organization, separate and apart from the people, to be able to illustrate to a third party, these are the actions we took, this is why we thought they were sufficient to protect our workers in the workplace, and we can document that. I always like to say, lawyers love documents like kids love Smarties.

### ***Donna Marshall:***

Training your staff, especially those who are aggressive or even passive-aggressive actually, in soft skills and learning how to manage difficult people, manage situations, manage our own emotions in relation to these situations because we're all under stress, we're all dealing with a lot of things and sometimes we can say and do things that we feel badly about and don't intend to and then it can create a problem. So having that training can really help. So, the soft skills is crucial.

Absolutely, the compliance training is regulated and mandated and you need to be up to date on that without question. And then the other thing is the Mental Health Certificate Program. So, we've created a really good bundle of programs that can give the not-for-profit everything that you need, in order to implement these things because it can feel overwhelming. You work in a not-for-profit, you aren't mental health professionals, you're not lawyers. So, we've taken this all down and put it together in a really palatable way to be able to implement and access in also a very cost-effective way.

### ***Mary Barroll:***

The e-learning programs referred to by Donna Marshall provide the mandatory training for organizations, supervisors and employees to

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ensure they remain compliant with the harassment, health and safety and accessibility legislation in Ontario. Also, the Mental Health and Psychological Safety at Work Master Certificate Program is available to help employers to foster a safe, respectful workplace that support the mental health and well-being of their staff. You can access those eLearning courses at our eLearning Center on [Charityvillage.com](https://charityvillage.com) or check out our show notes for links to those and other resources mentioned in this podcast. If you want to learn more from any of our subject matter experts featured in this episode, the full video interviews with them can be found on [Charityvillage.com](https://charityvillage.com).

FADE IN MUSIC

In our next episode, we delve into new reports examining the current state of fundraising, the challenges facing nonprofits amid unprecedented demand for their services and lower levels of donations. We'll explore the impact of inflation on giving, demographic changes requiring new fundraising strategies, and larger sociological shifts for the current downward trend in donations. We are taking the pulse of fundraising for nonprofits in 2024 and looking ahead to major trends that will impact the sector in the future - along with potential solutions. That's next time on CharityVillage Connects. I'm Mary Barroll, thanks for listening.