

Mediating Conflict

Through effective mediation, workplace conflict can be not only resolved but also a valuable source of information that leads to organizational improvement. **BY MICHAEL ROSENTHAL**



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Q As an HR manager, I have been tasked with mediating conflicts that arise within the business lines I support. I often find myself caught in the middle, with both parties treating me as their confidante, and I have trouble identifying and implementing a good resolution. Any advice?

A: The key to mediating is remaining impartial. Since the substantive problem and its potential solution “belong to” the parties involved, your role is to facilitate the process and help them reach agreement.

To be most effective, avoid becoming invested in specific outcomes. Sometimes mediators think they see the solution, and then push the parties in that direction. A problem with this approach is that when people feel pushed, they often resist. Additionally, the parties probably have more information than you have about the situation; accordingly, they generally are better equipped to identify creative solutions. By insisting on a particular solution and steering the conversation, you could inhibit that creativity.

Instead, implement active-listening skills to shepherd the process forward. Uncover the subtext to each side’s statements. Determine their underlying needs. Figure out what systemic elements are at play. What about the situation is not working for them? What has the other party done that is contributing to the stalemate? Are there external pressures that

create an opportunity for the other party to hear the substance of the message tempered through an impartial voice (which can have a profound effect and help move things forward). Try to be empathetic to each party’s viewpoint, or, at the very least, suspend judgment. Be sure to do this in equal measure with both parties.

Ideally, conduct the entire mediation with all parties present. Unlike shuttle diplomacy (in which the mediator convenes separately with each party over a series of meetings), facilitating a meeting attended by everyone generally yields better ideas, increased buy-in, improved long-term relationships, and efficiency. At the same time, it requires more skill on the part of the mediator—the conversation could go from bad to worse if not handled appropriately.

Nevertheless, assuming the parties are not hostile, you should try to start the process in the group setting. If things heat up, you can end the session and revert to shuttle diplomacy or involve a third party. More likely than not, though, by giving each person the opportunity to express themselves without interruption (followed by your repetition and clarification of what was said), the parties will better understand each other’s perspective, and will be poised for problem-solving and reconciliation.

If you ever feel you are in over your head, consider turning to others for help. Company ombudspersons, mentors, supervisors, and third-party mediators and consultants could be valuable resources in such situations. Should you exercise this option, try to find someone who can get involved sooner rather than later. “Time heals all wounds” doesn’t always ring true in conflict situations—left unaddressed, conflicts tend to resurface with

greater severity and complexity over time.

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should be considered? Ask open-ended questions that elicit the information you seek. And when you obtain the information, summarize what the person said—this will help them feel heard, ensure you correctly understood what they meant, and