

Mediation: how to avoid conflict

Or how to stop a fortress mentality developing and retain the potential for future relationships in the workplace

Mediation can save firms time and money – and cut through quickly to a problem on the spot. All this without having recourse to senior management or formal procedures.

Our case study below shows how this works.

ABC Insurance's IT development department comprises a group of managers (four, who, in turn, represent 10 managers) and a group of IT developers (seven managers representing 90 people). Their story illustrates just how effective mediation can be.

The mediator drew on psychological expertise about how people change – through dealing with the interaction of emotional feelings and rational thoughts – as well as conflict management techniques.



When troubles comes knocking many people adopt a fortress mentality, but this often makes conflict worse

What was the problem?

The challenge was to agree a laptop specification to enable out-of-hours work with overseas colleagues. Discussions had been underway for several months. These had been hostile, distrustful and destructive. The mediator first met both sides separately and noted that each had built a fortress. No one was listening.

A mediation meeting was arranged.

During this each group outlined their point of view. This immediately led to the developers walking out. The mediator provided separate rooms for a cooling down period. The parties then agreed to come back.

This is not unusual at the beginning of mediation. Research indicates that the early stages of conflict discussion can involve contentious behaviour.¹ However, this can also clear the air – it did here. The mediator's "Let me see where we are" summary was then agreed upon.

The mediator then moved on to "Let's take our time and come back to the issues, and both groups will get a chance to..." and then turned to the first issue. This was: "Let's see how we go and have a talk about communication first of all."

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Musing like this can often soften questions during mediation. For example: "I'm just wondering, developers, is there an example you can use to help us understand a bit more?"

At this point, the groups began to talk to each other directly. They moved into joint problem solving, aimed at co-creating a solution. This required concessions from both sides.

Reflection: what both groups learnt

Lead manager: "The mediation felt like a cathartic experience. I was surprised. We were able to forgive and move on. Forgetting will take a bit longer.

"Looking back we panicked about costs and stopped listening. It felt very personal. I even found myself saying to other management colleagues that 'someone will die before this is finished'. I realise now that the conflict reduced my personal effectiveness just when I needed it most."

Lead developer: "We got so angry. I guess this got magnified between us all. We got to the point where we had no interest in the manager's concerns. No wonder we needed help."

Post-script: The developers' specification was modified slightly and then implemented successfully. Relationships, while not cosy, remain in good enough condition so working together continues smoothly. As a result, after mediation, the managers and developers agreed to pilot the requested specifications. This allowed for identification of some problem areas, such as using two screens and the question of broadband quality. This, in turn, simplified the specifications and reduced general costs, as well as implementation costs.

What the commissioning manager said

"Marjorie took a very measured and considered approach. She wasn't thrown by hostile behaviour, personal verbal attacks, difficult questions or contravention of the ground rules. It was evident that she was experienced in dealing with problems in the workplace. Things have certainly calmed down now. Everyone is working together productively now."

What the mediator (Marjorie Raymond) said

"Mediation is not a silver bullet or a miracle-producing wonder. It takes experience and confidence to work with conflict. The learning points raised by both groups were good to hear."

TOP TIP: "Everyone involved in a conflict must consider the interests of the other side and recognise that both will need to make concessions to reach a workable solution."

1 Carnevale, P.J. and Pruitt, D.G (1992) Negotiation and mediation, *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol.43.

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Here are some examples of approaches that can be used and tailored to your individual needs:

- Mediation – to address workplace conflict
- Individual and group coaching
- Change Management: ...[Straight Talking: creating change through conversation.](#)
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- Special projects, secondments and assignments
- Psychometric assessment, which can identify strengths, as well as derailing behaviours, and include 360 degree feedback