Consensio in the Press
Published news articles in 2016

Consensio is a leading conflict management and workplace mediation provider.
Mediation, training, accredited courses, consultancy and coaching.

Welcome

Welcome to Consensio's news round-up of 2016, which features the articles we have published in leading HR and training publications this year. As you will see, our publications cover a range of topics from Brexit to gender differences in conflict and whether we really are good communicators.

Our publications are divided into four topics so you can pick and choose those that are of most interest: 1) Communication skills training, 2) Employee engagement, 3) 21st Century conflict, and 4) Mediation stories.

We hope that you will find these articles interesting, and that they will support you in making sound decisions about how to manage workplace conflict this year and beyond.

If you would like to discuss our articles, workplace mediation and training services, please feel free to contact us on 0207 831 0254 or via www.consensiopartners.co.uk

Season's greetings and wishing you all the best for 2017

TJ
Training Journal

Are you really a good communicator?

Training Journal | 23 November 2016 | Tania Coke

Thinking about your communication with others is an important skill to continuously develop. Tania Coke shares some tips.

The terms "active listening" and "emotional intelligence" have become common-place in organisational life. Many of us have attended communication skills or conflict management training courses and pride ourselves on our interpersonal skills. It's one thing to listen actively and speak with emotional intelligence during role-play in the training room. It's a very different thing to do it in the heat of the moment in real-life conflict situations.

We invite you to reflect afresh on what it means to be a good communicator, before or during a courageous conversation. We challenge you to make a realistic assessment of your communication skills and we ask what can be done to narrow the gap between the theory and practice of good communication.

What is 'good communication'?

How shall we define good communication? Often we assess communication skills in terms of tangible outcomes, for example what agreements were reached as a result of the conversation. For this article, we are not concerned with these tangible outcomes. We are concerned with the quality of communication itself and the effect on the relationship between the people involved.

Communication can be thought of as a two-way process of transmitting and receiving information between people. The information we are mainly concerned with is to do with thoughts and feelings, which includes observations, opinions, ideas, intentions, preferences, needs, beliefs, values, suggestions and emotions.

So what does it mean to transmit and receive this information well?

The transmitting mode of communication

Let's start with the transmitting mode. In our model, the good communicator transmits information with a certain intention. The intention is not to deny other people's thoughts and feelings, but to share their own with the intention of nurturing relationship and building mutual understanding. In choosing what information to transmit, they therefore focus on the information that they think will most help the other person to understand them. For instance, they will typically try to convey not just what they think but why they think it and why it matters to them.

The good communicator is also aware that there are various channels through which we transmit information. In the typical workplace conversation, there are three main channels of communication at our disposal. We can express ourselves through words, the way we use our voice (pitch, intonation and volume) and through our body (physical posture, facial expressions, gestures and actions). The good communicator pays attention to what s/he is expressing through these three channels and makes choices accordingly.

The receiving mode of communication

In the case of receiving information, we can distinguish between intention and attention. The good communicator pays attention to what the other person is transmitting through their words, voice and body. Although we are equipped with excellent faculties (eyes, ears, cognitive processes, etc.) to receive this information, our ability to do so gets derailed in many ways. We may have certain assumptions, preconceptions or prejudices about the other person that cause us to block out what they are actually saying. The good communicator is able to acknowledge information that goes against these preconceptions, enquire into that information and even, where appropriate, change their opinions on the basis of new information. Another reason we may lose attention is when we have an agenda that dominates our awareness to the exclusion of all else, for example: "I have to leave in five minutes - how can I end the conversation?" Or we are so busy trying to solve the problem that we are no longer paying attention to what the other person is expressing.

Good communication requires the self-awareness to recognise these agendas and put them on hold when necessary, in order to remain open and attentive to the other person. Good communication can also take the form of reflecting back to the other person the information that you have received, in order to test out your understanding and let them know that you are paying attention.

Like in the transmitting mode, the intention of the good communicator whilst in receiving mode is to nurture relationship and build mutual understanding. They are not scanning for the information that will best prove their point, but rather trying to understand what is most important to the other person and why.

Assessing your communication skills

The model of good communication outlined above may seem somewhat achievable in the training room. What about in our real lives, amid the stress of the working day, or in situations of heated workplace conflict? To help you assess your communication prowess, we have prepared a list of questions for reflection. Think of a recent conversation with someone with whom you want to communicate well, and ask yourself the following:

TRANSMITTING

1. What do you remember about what you said, how you said it, your posture and gestures?

2. Based on the above, what impression of you do you think the other person came away with?

3. Did you tell them something you care deeply about or was it a superficial conversation?

4. Is there anything you wished you had said, or asked, or done, that you didn't?

RECEIVING

5. What do you remember about what the other person said, how they said it and how they behaved physically?

6. Based on this, what impression of them did you come away with?

7. What seemed to matter to them most during the conversation?

8. Did they say or do anything that particularly impressed/delighted/annoyed/upset/surprised you? Did you tell them or reflect it back in some way? Why do you think it had that effect on you?

9. Were you aware of having any particular agenda, preoccupation, preconception or assumption during that conversation?

The theory and the practice

When it comes to communication, the gap between theory and practice is vast. Caught up in the web of deadlines, pressures, fears and longings of real life, it can be fiercely difficult to remain self-aware, attentive, open-minded and authentic. The occasional listening or communication skills workshop is unlikely to make any real change to our practice. Luckily, each day is bound to bring its own learning opportunities. You can use the questions above to reflect on any important conversation or meeting you have had, review your performance and identify ways to improve. Another idea is to team up with a friend or colleague at work, observe one another during meetings and give one another feedback on your communication skills. Through daily awareness and practice, we can start to narrow the daunting gap between the theory and practice of good communication.

trainingZONE

Is 'sorry' really the hardest word? Exploring the big effect of this little word

Training Zone | 27 July 2016 | Anna Shields

The word "sorry" means many things to many people. In this article, Anna Shields, co-founder of Consensio, talks about the impact of an apology in the context of workplace mediation and how this can be applied in many types of courageous conversations.

Sorry. Even if the word itself doesn't actually come up, it's usually there beneath the surface in most workplace mediation conversations; and it can have a significant effect on the outcomes.

I remember one mediation where a colleague told his manager how much he'd suffered as a result of certain comments the manager had made.

The manager responded by saying: *"Actually, that happened to me at one of my previous jobs and it was awful. I can't believe that I did the same to you and I'm really sorry."*

The manager used the conversation as an opportunity to gain a new insight into herself.

She was surprised to discover that she had repeated the same mistake someone else had made with her. Her apology was both spontaneous and heartfelt and, as a result, made a profound difference to the conversation.

In another case, an employee had requested to be moved to another department but this was denied by her Head of Department.

The employee then went on stress leave and relations between the two parties suffered. During the subsequent mediation, the manager said: *"In retrospect, I should have moved you and I'm sorry"*. The manager was also able to explain how the employee's absence had affected his workload.

The employee responded by saying: *"Thank you for the apology. I'm also sorry - I hadn't realised how much my absence had affected you."* In this case, the apology triggered an apology from the other person and led to greater understanding on both sides.

But it doesn't always go so smoothly. On one occasion, an apology was offered but the response was *"I do not accept your apology."*

Likewise, I remember a colleague apologising to a co-worker. I asked the co-worker if that was what she wanted and her response was *"no"*. These are good reminders that the word "sorry" on its own will not necessarily solve anything. There has to be something behind it.

What do they want from an apology?

There are various elements that people look for in an apology. Very often people are looking for empathy or compassion. They want to feel that they have been heard and understood by the other person. Another element people seek is an acknowledgement of responsibility.

They want to see the other person taking responsibility for what has happened. Thirdly, people want to know that it isn't going to happen again – they want evidence that the other person will behave differently in the future.

So, what advice would I give to people going into a difficult conversation, seeking or offering an apology?

Firstly, don't get too attached to the need for an apology. Sometimes people go into a conversation thinking they want the other person to make a public apology in front of the whole department. But, as the conversation unfolds, they realise that isn't what they want.

Dialogue can change things. It's fine to have a goal, but be open to this goal changing as the conversation progresses and takes shape.

What type of apology do you want?

If you are seeking an apology, ask yourself what type of an apology you are looking for. Maybe what you need isn't the word "sorry" but an explanation, or a commitment that it will not happen again. If you're planning to offer an apology, think about what you are offering. Are you offering empathy? Are you accepting responsibility and if so, for what? Are you committing to acting differently in the future?

Next, remember that it's not just what you say, but how you say it.

I often hear comments like *"She's going to apologise, but she's not going to mean it"*.

So, what can you do to make your apology come across as heartfelt and genuine?

Part of this relates to where and when the apology is given. A few comments given hastily on the way into a meeting may not have the same impact as an apology offered in a private meeting set up especially for the purpose.

There are some types of apologies to beware of. In our media-trained world, we often hear apologies like *"I'm sorry if I caused offence"* which does not acknowledge responsibility for what has happened. Another common one is the conditional apology, such as *"I'm sorry but you need to understand…"*, which can make the other person defensive and close down the dialogue.

Above all, don't assume that the word "sorry" will solve everything. It's a word that means different things to different people. "Sorry" works best when it is used as a way to increase mutual understanding of what has happened, how it has affected each person, and what type of relationship they hope to have in the future.

changeboard

Build Trusting Relationships at Work

Changeboard | 28 August 2016 | Tania Coke

Do you value the importance of building trusting workplace relationships?

When conflict erupts in the workplace, the question of trust is never far behind.

"I trusted you. You let me down".

"I can't believe she did that. I'll never be able to trust her again."

"There's no point me trying to talk to him – I can't trust him with my true feelings."

These are phrases that ring constantly in the ear of the workplace mediator.

If trust – or its absence - is so central to workplace conflict, it is worth exploring what trust means to individuals in conflict to understand what it is, why it is lost and what can be done to restore it or prevent its loss.

The cycle of destructive conflict

Trust is what allows people to feel safe in a relationship. When we trust someone, we believe they will not intentionally say or do anything to intentionally harm us. Trust is lost when that person says or does something which does harm us. When this happens, we no longer feel safe. Instead, we feel under threat. As a result, we respond either by retaliating or by avoiding contact, for fear of further harm. Whichever response we choose, the relationship is sure to deteriorate, resulting in further retaliation or distancing on both sides. This is the cycle of destructive conflict, a cycle all too familiar to the HR professional, along with its various undesirable by-products, for example in the form of spiraling stress, inefficiency, sickness absence and financial costs.

In the case of workplace conflict, the initial trigger is rarely a deliberate attempt to cause harm. Most workplace disputes can be traced back to wrong assumptions of one sort or another. A hand raised in frustration may be misinterpreted as an act of aggression. A piece of developmental feedback may be perceived as a public insult. An oversight caused by tiredness may be construed as an intentional act of sabotage. But the cycle has now been triggered and the person who feels aggressed, insulted or sabotaged responds in a way that causes the other person to lose trust, leading to a cycle of behaviours that is increasingly - and deliberately - harmful.

So how can we prevent the cycle from being triggered?

In some cases, more can be done to communicate intentions and expectations before any wrong conclusions can be drawn. During a difficult conversation, the person giving feedback could explain the spirit in which the feedback is being given. The gesture of frustration could be accompanied by a verbal expression that lets the listener know the frustration is not aimed at them.

But it's unrealistic to think that this will work in every case. In the example above of the person who messed up through tiredness, it would be absurd to expect them to announce to all concerned: "I'm tired and may make an error, but if I do, it isn't intended to harm anyone."

So responsibility also lies with the person on the receiving end of the apparently offensive behaviour. They can help avert the conflict cycle by asking for an explanation, or expressing the effect it had on them. "What did you mean when you said…?" Or "I felt very uncomfortable when you said…" This kind of open communication can prevent the wrong assumptions that trigger the cycle of destructive conflict.

Understanding ourselves to understand each other

Another antidote to destructive conflict is self-awareness. The wrong assumptions we make often follow certain patterns. Some people have a tendency to feel criticised. Others have a tendency to feel victimised. We too easily interpret other people's behaviours in the light of these tendencies, assuming an intent to criticise or victimise where there was none. The more we can do to raise awareness of our own negative tendencies, the more likely we are to spot ourselves in the act of initiating a conflict cycle – and hence to prevent it.

But here lies the nub of the problem. At the very moment that calls for self-awareness and open communication, we are feeling unsafe or under threat. Far from wanting to open up and reaching out, these conditions make us clam up or lash out. It isn't easy asking for an explanation when your heart is pounding and the blood is rushing to your head.

It isn't easy, but it isn't impossible either. With enough training and practice, we can develop the skills needed to convey our intentions and feelings, and ask others about theirs. And we can develop the qualities we need to be able to access those skills even in times of imminent danger: qualities such as humility, openness, respect and presence of mind. As well as studying the theory and skills of conflict management, the ideal training would include role-play practice to simulate – in a safe environment – the conditions of workplace conflict.

Courageous conversations and conflict management training are the most effective ways to promote open communication and self-awareness, and prevent destructive conflict from emerging in the first place. But when it does emerge, workplace mediation is another powerful tool for minimising the damage. Mediation is a process which is designed to help people in conflict to talk to one another. It is a chance to explain our intentions, express our feelings, and ask questions about the other person' perspective. Many a wrong assumption has been uncovered through mediation, allowing the parties to break out of the cycle of conflict and start to rebuild trust.

Trust will always remain a mysterious and elusive quality, but through services such as conflict resolution training and workplace mediation, organisations can get closer to establishing trust as the true north of its working relationships. And ensuring that when the needle dips south, it won't be for long.

Intergenerational conflict at work – a workplace mediator's view

HR Magazine | 05 September 2016 | Anna Shields

The most common post-referendum comments I hear from those in the older generation who voted to leave is: "I'm doing it for your future." Yet the child or grandchild responds: "But I voted remain." Here lies the conundrum that I often see in my job as a workplace mediator; each party feels passionately that they are making the right decision not just for themselves, but also for their team, the department, or the organisation. However, difficult conversations at work often arise because of different perceptions, intentions, expectations and experiences.

Is this exacerbated when mediating conflicts between different generations? I see the age dynamic at play, but I am not convinced that it is the root cause of the issue. Yes, there are differences, but far more important is the need to be listened to, to be heard, and to be understood. These needs are ageless.

Do women and men communicate differently during mediation?

HR Review | 01 November 2016 | Alex Efthymiades

In John Gray's best-selling book from the early 1990s, Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus, he describes how women and men seem to be from different planets because they are so different from each other. Whilst there are always exceptions and individual differences, a lot of recent and reliable research by psychologists, linguists and other social scientists suggests that there are some distinct differences in the ways in which women and men communicate.

This article looks at some of the different ways in which both genders communicate, explores whether these differences are apparent in a workplace mediation setting, and then examines what type of communication helps or hinders the success of mediation. The article concludes by suggesting ways in which we can support women and men to communicate more effectively during conflict situations.

How our expectations inform our perceptions

There are many reasons why women and men communicate differently. Research suggests that whilst most women use both sides of their brains to communicate, men only use the left side of the brain for communication. In addition, because women and men are socialised differently, we place certain expectations on them regarding how they should behave and communicate. We have views about femininity and masculinity and our social norms impose huge pressures on how we expect people to communicate and behave with each other.

Most cultures expect women to be nurturing and cooperative and men to be assertive and competitive. This is played out in our different communication styles, both verbal and non-verbal. In general, men communicate in more direct ways and with less eye contact, whilst women seek connection with others and focus on relationships. This can at times lead to miscommunication, misinterpreted messages, and even conflict. For example, when the more direct manner in which a man communicates is perceived by a woman to be insensitive or aggressive. Or when the more 'coded' manner in which a woman communicates to a man is perceived as unfocused or unassertive. Because of these differences, there are often gaps between what is expressed by the speaker and what is heard by the listener.

How we communicate when we are in conflict

When in conflict, research suggests that women tend to want to examine the detail of a conflict, whilst men want to fix the problem rather than talking about why it happened in great detail.

Workplace mediators are particularly interested in workplace communication and how differences in how people communicate may result in workplace conflict. For example, we know that face-to-face communication is the most effective way of having a conversation and yet more and more workplaces are relying on other forms of communication that exacerbate miscommunication and thus conflict. The over-reliance of email usage is one obvious way in which miscommunication happens and this is often a huge source of conflict, regardless of gender.

Different communication styles in workplace mediation

But the question is, if women and men generally tend to communicate differently, do they also communicate differently when they are in mediation? And if that is the case, does this influence the success of mediation?

There is no reliable research into this area, however, based on the hundreds of mediation cases that we have done, there are some interesting conclusions that we can tentatively draw and learn from.

In a workplace mediation, the mediator creates a safe environment to support all parties, regardless of gender, to speak about their conflict, their perceptions of what has happened, their feelings and the impact that the conflict is having on them. We have observed that this often comes more naturally to women, who are more likely to speak about relationships and emotions. But men, when they are comfortable and with a skilled mediator, will also open up and speak about their emotions, though this tends to take longer.

Being able to speak about emotions is helpful in a workplace mediation. Because parties who are in conflict with each other tend to demonise each other, being able to have empathy for the person that you are in conflict with can be a really useful first step in being able to see the other party as a human being with feelings and needs that are likely similar to ours.

So what happens when there are two women in mediation? They may speak more openly about their feelings, but this does not mean that the conflict is less complex or more easy for the parties to resolve. At times, the focus on why the conflict has happened and how it has destroyed the relationship, may make a resolution more difficult to attain.

In contrast, when there are two men in mediation, this does not mean that they simply ignore feelings and go straight into problem-solving mode. We have found that when men are sensitively asked about their feelings and they allow themselves to open up emotionally, they are also able to find the empathic connection that will allow them to heal some of the hurt that has fueled their conflict.

What we can learn

There are some important lessons that we can learn from successful mediations and that is that effective communication is key to mediation, regardless of the gender of the parties. Here are some key learning points to support us in any conflict resolution conversation, including an actual workplace mediation:

– It is important to understand that differences in communication exist and that women and men do communicate differently. By understanding this, we are less likely to misinterpret what others are saying and thus less likely to get into conflict.

– In and out of work, focus on face-to-face communication and don't rely on technology as a form of communication. It is much easier to misinterpret someone's message via email or text than it is if you are engaging in a dialogue with someone.

– Speaking about the impact of a conflict is key to creating empathy between parties in conflict. Parties who are able to have empathy for one another, regardless of gender, are more likely to be able to resolve their conflict amicably.

– It is important to realise that there is no best way to communicate. Often, we think that our way of communicating is superior to that of others. For example, a woman may believe that because she is able to focus on relationships, this is more important than her male colleague's tendency to focus on the practical. However, by realising that there are differences in how we communicate and that these differences can be understood and talked about, will help us to have healthier and more productive conversations.

HR review

Conflict management – another answer to employee engagement?

HR Review | 07 March 2016 | Alex Efthymiades

Employee engagement is something every organisation desires, but few know how to achieve. In this article, we approach the issue from a different angle. We argue that an effective way to raise employee engagement is to improve an organisation's ability to manage conflict quickly, informally and collaboratively. This is because conflict at work, when badly managed, can have an immensely detrimental effect on employees' motivation, commitment and levels of engagement. Conversely, if employees are able to transform potential conflicts into opportunities for greater creativity and deeper relationships, this will positively impact employee engagement.

What is employee engagement?

There are myriad definitions of employee engagement. For simplicity, we will use Forbes Magazine's definition: "Employee engagement is the emotional commitment the employee has to the organisation and its goals. This emotional commitment means engaged employees actually care about their work and their company. … When employees care — when they are engaged — they use discretionary effort."

With this definition in mind, we can start to explore how most organisations' conflict management processes – usually based on formal, top-down and evidence-driven processes – hinder rather than support a culture of healthy conflict management and how this links into employee engagement.

When people are in conflict with each other, they aren't happy at work, and vice versa. This leads to less engagement. But when employees are happy at work – because they enjoy their work, feel valued and respected and have good working relationships – they are more likely to be engaged.

How do traditional conflict management processes damage employee engagement?

Traditional conflict management processes, such as grievance procedures, tend to be formal, top-down and evidence-driven. This often further damages rather than repairs working relationships and, therefore, decreases levels of engagement. Our work as mediators gives us an insight into the various problems associated with the use of traditional conflict management processes:

1. A focus on "victim" and "perpetrator" – When employees aren't given the opportunity to resolve their conflicts informally and collaboratively, they are left with processes that look for evidence of a "victim" and a "perpetrator". Most workplace mediation cases include allegations of bullying and harassment because when employees are in conflict, they feel victimised by the other party and, often, by the organisation as a whole. When someone feels like a victim – and most people in conflict do – they aren't able to engage because they are so embroiled in conflict that they are robbed of the emotional energy necessary to do so.

2. Perceptions of an unjust organisation – Parties who are in conflict tend to feel undervalued and disrespected by the other party and by their organisation more generally. In addition, conflict affects engagement because employees may blame the organisation for its response to conflict. One employee, on hearing that a colleague had taken out a grievance against him, said: "My feelings shifted from disbelief, to anger, to sadness and, most painfully of all, to a sense of betrayal that my company had not nipped this complaint in the bud."[1] For this mediation party, and for many others like him, the conflict contaminated not just his relationship to his colleague, but to the organisation as a whole, making it very difficult to feel any sense of loyalty or engagement.

3. Workplace conflict causes stress and demotivation – Workplace conflict causes staff members considerable stress, loss of motivation and anxiety. When workplace conflict is avoided by the organisation, or managed in an overly aggressive and formal manner, it can lead to high levels of sickness absence due to work-related stress. Many parties who attend workplace mediation have been on sickness absence and their levels of engagement are minimal.

How does good conflict management improve employee engagement?

Organisations that adopt a culture of constructive conflict management by using informal and collaborative processes are likely to have higher levels of employee engagement. Here are a few reasons why:

1. Conflict is viewed as normal – Healthy conflict organisations view conflict not as something that needs to be done away with, but rather as a phenomenon present in all relationships which, when addressed quickly, informally and collaboratively, has the potential to strengthen working relationships and lead to greater creativity. These organisations don't avoid conflict: they work with conflict, not against it. They fundamentally believe in the opportunities conflict offers and they understand that strong relationships result in better team work, higher morale, better productivity and happiness. And higher levels of engagement.

2. Employees feel empowered to make decisions – One principle of good conflict management is employee responsibility – the idea that even in conflict situations, employees are trusted enough to make their own decisions. This principle can be put into practice through mediation (which allows parties to make their own decisions regarding resolution) or conflict resolution training (in which managers learn to nip issues in the bud quickly and to support team members in making their own decisions, where appropriate). When employees take responsibility in conflict situations, they are demonstrating their engagement: they are making discretionary effort to solve a business problem. At the same time, the organisation is demonstrating trust in their employees, which leads to more loyalty and engagement.

3. Learning opportunities for staff – Another principle of good conflict management is self-development, as it supports employees in transforming conflicts into learning opportunities. When employees experience conflict as an opportunity for growth, understanding and deeper relationships, they learn a valuable lesson: that, by working with conflict, better working relationships are fostered.

Conclusion

Workplace mediators see a clear link between employee engagement and conflict management. There are some simple ways that you can raise the levels of employee engagement within your organisation by looking at the ways in which your organisations manages conflict:

• Focus on nipping issues in the bud as quickly as possible so that they don't escalate.

• Upskill your managers so they have the necessary skills and confidence to manage issues in their teams informally and collaboratively. Because most managers don't have these skills, they either avoid the conflict, try to deal with them too aggressively or rely on HR to try to resolve issues, often when it is too late.

• Offer parties an informal means of resolving their issues. A grievance should never be the first point of call. Instead, allow parties to have difficult conversations with each other in the presence of an experienced and accredited workplace mediator who has the skills to listen to both parties impartially and who supports them to come to their own resolution. Not only will this allow parties to feel that they have been listened to, but the sense of ownership this brings will have long-lasting positive benefits for them and their ability to trust the organisation and engage with it.

• Take a hard look at your organisation's current conflict management processes and decide whether your organisation is promoting a culture of constructive conflict management. Then look at your employees' levels of engagement. You are bound to find a correlation.

Brexit: how will people work together post-referendum?

HR Magazine | 11 May 2016 | Macarena Mata

When discussing controversial issues it's important to listen, explore and analyse the different perspectives

You can't see the news without hearing about Brexit. Whatever the result, a large number of politicians will have to move forward and work together, despite the obvious antipathy and backbiting that has already started. Similarly, the polarising views of both camps mean that voters are engaging in difficult conversations with each other.

So how does one recover? How do we learn to listen to each other's differing positions so that we can engage in dialogue? What is the role of empathy? How can we build bridges to help understand each other?

Four skills will be needed: non-judgemental listening (impartiality), acknowledging the other person, empathy, and encouraging self-responsibility (self-determination).

Non-judgemental listening

Mediators are impartial. When we listen our brain tries to make sense of the situation, and offers us mental images that come from our experience. It is an internal dialogue that is essential. However, it can also prevent us from being present and neutral. When we listen to someone we need to put aside that internal monologue. Instead, we need to feel curious and expand our own views.

Non-judgemental listening also entails not taking things personally. For example, the 'losing side' in the aftermath of the referendum may say 'I can't believe people made such a big mistake!' However, the mediated approach would be to listen and try to understand where they are coming from.

Acknowledging and valuing the other person

Feeling acknowledged and valued are two key human needs. When we find ourselves in a conflict situation wanting to be right is generally the expression of these deeper needs. Therefore agreeing with the other person's views is not as important as communicating that we value them as people and that we acknowledge their feelings.

Mediators can't agree with anyone's views as they would lose their impartiality, but we are still able to gain the respect of the mediation parties. Generally, reflecting back the feeling or behaviour we observe signals to the other person that we are acknowledging them without judgement. For example, if someone is angrily arguing that we shouldn't remain in the EU, you could say: 'It seems that what X says makes you angry. Could you explain how that's affecting you?'

Empathy and what's under the surface

Understanding others' needs is fundamental, and is one of the roles of the mediators. Someone's position in relation to Brexit might be 'immigrants will leave us without jobs'. Rather than being immediately judgemental one could ask what they mean by this. The response may be that 'there isn't much work in my town and jobs need to be created'. Further exploration might reveal that their deeper needs are to feel a valued member of their community.

Encouraging self-responsibility and self-determination

As workplace mediators we don't tell people what to do, but respect that every person is an expert on their own life and they have the right to determine their future. This helps people take responsibility for their decisions and actions. Mediators ask questions that challenge the issue being discussed, not the person. These could be 'what would you like to see happening?' or 'what would improve this situation?'.

When we are discussing complex and potentially controversial issues such as Brexit it is important to listen, explore and analyse the different perspectives. The aim of the dialogue might not be to agree with the other person or to force them to agree with you, but to search for greater understanding or different possibilities.

The bigger picture is always bigger than any of us alone can imagine. We all have a piece of the puzzle that, if brought together, could benefit everyone. Using the principles of mediation after 23 June could make this more possible.

How to solve workplace conflict when no-one is present

HRD Connect | 10 October 2016 | Tania Coke

Modern working practices have brought a new world of workplace conflict. Tania Coke asks what can be done to support healthy human relations in the age of absence.

You might say the 21st century is the age of absence.

We are absent to the colleague sitting next to us when we skype with a client on the other side of the world. We are absent to our family when we check our work emails during dinner.

Flexible working allows us to be physically absent from the workplace even during working hours.

This proliferation of ways to be absent while at work is affecting the kinds of conflict that emerge in our working relationships.

Three factors

We can identify three factors fueling conflict in this age of absence.　The first is the rise of technologies that allow us to be elsewhere while at work. This is a factor that crops up repeatedly in the cases that Consensio mediates.

In one workplace mediation, an employee was infuriated by the amount of time her colleague spent online shopping. She claimed it was demotivating and distracting to see her colleague browsing for clothes and holidays while she herself was hard at work.

The colleague replied that the nature of her job was to be available when clients needed her, but that in moments of downtime she was entitled to do whatever she wanted.

In the days before internet perhaps she might have engaged in less obvious time-fillers. It is hard to disguise an Amazon browser.

Technology trials

In another case the technology issue surfaced in the mediation room. It was during a break in the middle of a day of mediation. One of the parties reached for her phone and sent an email to a colleague.

The other party (her boss) was outraged. She assumed the email must be about the mediation and saw it as a breach of confidentiality.

The mediation nearly ground to a halt, until the first party was able to convince her boss that the email was a reply to a work-related query, and nothing to do with the mediation.

What this case shows is that any means of communication that is not transparent to bystanders, such as email and messaging, can feed mistrust and fuel fears. Unlike the online shopping example, in this case it wasn't the fact that the employee was absent that caused the problem – it was the fact that her boss did not know what she was up to, and assumed the worst case scenario.

Working patterns

The second factor we can point to is the introduction of new patterns of working – flexible working is a prime example.

There was one case in which an employee was turning up for work at 11am in the morning. During mediation, her boss told her she found this unacceptable since the organisation was going through a merger.

The boss felt that the team should be physically present and together at such a critical time. The employee insisted that she was present, but at different times from others, and that she was working more than her contracted hours.

Hot-desking is another workplace innovation that can trigger disputes. In one case there was an employee who arrived late every morning, and as a result never managed to get a desk near the rest of his team, causing problems which eventually led to a facilitated conversation with a workplace mediator. Again, the conflict centred on the issue of presence and absence.

Time pressure

Third we have to acknowledge the growing time pressures facing the 21st century worker.

In almost every workplace mediation the parties refer to time pressure as a factor in their conflict: the pressure to check emails outside working hours, the pressure to communicate daily with customers or shareholders via SMS, the pressure to keep up with the avalanche of information that floods their inboxes every day.

These are all pressures unknown to the workers of the 1960s onwards, pressures which have given rise to a kind of frenetic hyperactivity which can make us absent to the people around us.

In this state of breathlessness and bottomless to-do lists, it is hard to take the time to listen deeply to what someone is saying, praise a job well done, or offer constructive feedback.

Instead we often feel defensive and under threat. We assume the worst in others, and jump to conclusions instead of stopping to enquire 'What did you mean by that?'.

In short, we retreat into ourselves, viewing the outside world through a dense filter of our own needs and preconceptions, blind to the needs and preconceptions of others.

No wonder conflict is rife.

Divisive practices

This trio of factors – the rise of new technology and media, changing patterns of working, and spiraling pressures on our time – can be seen as driving people apart, as shown in the cases above.

Of course these factors, especially the new technologies and working patterns, have many positive effects as well. But we should still take care to do what we can to counteract the negative effects.

We need to find ways to make people more present to one another: more supportive, more inquisitive and more attentive to one another's needs, even in this age of absence.

First and foremost, we can do it by trying to set a good example: by being as present as possible to the people around us. We can also do it by offering and promoting training that nurtures communication skills, courageous conversations and self-awareness. Finally, we can do it by creating opportunities for people to be present with one another away from the frantic working environment.

Making a difference

While workplace conflict may be more prevalent in the fast-paced 21st century, it has been, and will always be, a natural part of organisation life.

We need to embrace the numerous benefits of new technology and flexible working practices, as well as helping employees to be ever more present to one another, even in conflict situations.

If we can make this shift from absence to presence, it will be a great step forward for employee wellbeing.

changeboard

A guide to reducing workplace technology conflict

Changeboard | 26 February 2016 | Alex Efthymiades

Communication technology, such as email and smartphones, as well as social media, have dramatically changed the way we communicate and share information in the workplace. But what happens when issues arise?

We witness on a daily basis the numerous ways that these technologies increase workplace conflict. I will discuss the negative consequences of the increasing use of technology, including examples from our mediation work, and what we encourage clients to do in order to minimise such negative impacts.

Constantly connected

Technology allows us to communicate with immediacy and informality, in real time and with wide reach. Whilst this can be advantageous, it also has the potential to hugely increase employees' levels of stress at, and outside of, work.

In a workplace mediation setting, many of the parties we work with tell us that they feel under immense pressure at work to be available at all times. They often believe that job security and career advancement are tied into how committed they appear to be.

Another issue that we regularly come across is the over-reliance on email over face-to-face communication. In some organisations, it is normal for people who sit next to each other to send each other emails or instant messages rather than actually speaking. The excessive use of email as a communication tool is becoming more prevalent as employees hot desk or work remotely. In addition, many organisational cultures, consciously or not, promote this practice of email communication over all else.

There are a lot of problems with using email as a primary communication tool. It is easy to erroneously infer a specific negative tone from an email. People are also much more likely to write something in an email or instant message on impulse which they may later regret. Email can also create a feeling of suspicion when people think that it is being used as a tool to document 'evidence' for a grievance or disciplinary. Importantly, communicating via email at all times doesn't build relationships in the same way that face-to-face communication does.

We have witnessed many occurrences of the 'misconstrued email' leading to unnecessary workplace conflict. One employee came to mediation with an enormous folder comprised of hundreds of print outs of email messages he had received from his manager, in date order and with highlighted sections which 'evidenced' bullying. We wondered at the time how much time and energy this employee was spending on this rather than work and family life. Another employee went on sickness leave after reading a very negative instant message about himself, which was meant for someone else. We have countless examples.

The blurring of the personal and professional

More and more of us post our thoughts, feelings and reactions to events on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter. There are many benefits to being connected in this way both personally and professionally but, in our view, users need to be mindful when using such tools.

A number of mediation cases we have recently facilitated involved the use of social media and, in all of those cases, there was a blurring between the personal and professional; the 'private' becoming 'public'. In one example, work colleagues and friends who socialised together after work had a very public falling out on Facebook when one accused the other of owing money; instantly it brought a personal issue into the workplace. In another example, a manager had an argument with his PA. Prior to the argument they had had a good relationship and were 'Friends' on Facebook. The PA took to social media to post negative comments about him. The manager was hurt and their relationship deteriorated as conflict escalated.

People in conflict are already in a highly stressful situation. Often, there is no reflection on whether a post is appropriate or that their comments will become forever public.

 The speed, permanence and abandonment of privacy when using social media often distort how we could deal with sensitive personal situations – face-to-face in an appropriate forum.

3 ways to manage technology

There are a number of basic steps that an organisation can take to support employees to rely less on technology and more on face-to-face communication in order to prevent or reduce instances of workplace conflict.

1.) Face-to-face communication. Most people like to think that they have good communication skills – in our conflict resolution training experience, they generally don't. Upskilling staff to have better communication skills is essential. This will enable them to understand why using face-to-face communication rather than overusing technology is so crucial and how to minimise the risks of using technology.

2.) Early intervention is the key. Managers need to feel confident to intervene where there is the misuse of technology. Such intervention should be informal and allow all involved to speak with each other to understand how they can communicate more productively in the future.

3.) Train your managers. Managers often don't have the confidence or the skills to deal with conflict situations. Managers often fear they might do something wrong if they step in. They need to have confidence to have those difficult conversations, as should every employee in the organisation. If they don't know how to have a tricky discussion with a colleague they will be more likely to use social media to air their views as this removes the awkwardness for them of a face-to-face interaction. Conflict management - and within this mediation - needs to be recognised as a powerful tool for building trust, opening the channels of communication and creating a more harmonious work place.

Technology has revolutionised the way we work. But where speed and immediacy delivers business efficiency, this can come at the cost of good employee relations. Ensuring the appropriate use of technology, giving people the tools to have meaningful conversations and the ability to discuss difficult issues in person are, in our view, paramount to better workplaces.

HRZONE

Is the workplace itself part of the problem?

HR Zone | 27 April 2016 | Alex Efthymiades

We all know that workplace stress can have long-lasting negative consequences on employees. Long hours, unrealistic demands, and looming layoffs can lead to an increase in workplace conflict and health problems. But these issues are compounded when the workplace itself is a part of the problem.

Academic research highlights the importance of the workplace environment on employees' physical and emotional wellbeing, including how the brain/mind reacts to different surroundings.

This links directly into the experience of workplace mediators, who not only deal with many cases that include conflict related to the office environment, but who also experience the effect of the room environment on a mediation process.

A key question this article asks and answers is: how can room environment affect conflict, and what can we do about it?

The psychology of office space

The effect of office designs is the topic of a recent presentation by the University of Southern California's (USC) on the psychology of different office spaces.

The history of office environments is illuminating in respect of the priorities of each era:

- the creation of large, open spaces with everyone facing a supervisor in the 1920s;
- the invention of air conditioning and fluorescent lighting in the 1930s and 1940s, which allowed independence from natural ventilation and daylight;
- cubicles in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, that gave the worker more privacy, but also led to cramming as many people into as little space as possible;
- a return to the open space offices of the 1990s, with the increase in technology;
- finally, the search for new design of spaces from the 2000s, where flexibility and collaboration are encouraged.

Open offices and lack of natural light as sources of stress

Open and lean work spaces, so prevalent in the last decades, bring more strain than benefits.

Studies showing that open space offices don't work include research by Laurence and colleagues published in the Journal of Environmental Psychology.

They demonstrated that low privacy in the work environment results in pressure on workers to divide their attention between focusing on their work, handling distractions and suppressing feelings of being monitored.

These stresses make people more susceptible to feeling defensive and on edge, which are an easy cocktail for destructive conflict.

The type and quality of light in an office is essential in maintaining low stress and greater performance.

Research by Cheung et al. reported that the detrimental impact of working in a windowless environment is a universal phenomenon.

They conclude that there is a strong relationship between workplace daylight exposure and office workers' sleep, level of activity and quality of life.

Workers without windows reported lower scores than their counterparts on quality of life measures related to physical problems and vitality. They also had poorer outcomes in measures of overall sleep quality, efficiency and disturbances and daytime dysfunction.

Again, this increases the potential for destructive workplace conflict.

Stress and workplace conflict

When we are under stress, we revert to our primitive fight or flight response - the brain doesn't appreciate that it's not a lion attack but an irritable colleague.

Or, if the company's open plan with hot-desking and workers feel stressed about lack of privacy, feeling monitored and being distracted.

Maybe they don't feel part of a team because each day they are sitting in a different part of the office or they are not allowed to make any of the space their own or are constantly under artificial light.

The stresses caused can very easily be the ground where difficult conversations ensue and conflicts are born and escalated.

In situations like these the parts of the brain that deal with problem-solving, empathy and complex communication are partially or totally hijacked by the parts that respond to those 'danger' signals.

And, in very quick succession, effective communication becomes less effective, assumptions become 'facts', psychological insecurities become our platform of communication and suddenly destructive workplace conflict erupts.

What can be done?

Personalise one's own space.

Laurence and colleagues suggested that it is important to 'own' a place in the office where individuals can choose the decoration and arrangements.

This "should further contribute to individuals' positive cognitive and affective states, resulting in enhanced mental resources, enabling better coping with the potentially debilitating interferences associated with low privacy".

Natural light significantly enhances wellbeing and productivity. Research on the impact of visual landscapes also offers evidence of positive health and wellbeing effects when the office had views to outside landscapes that workers could access.

Natural landscapes gave a stronger positive health effect compared to urban landscapes.

A study by Velarde et al. identified three main kinds of positive health effects related to natural light: short-term recovery from stress or mental fatigue, faster physical recovery from illness, and long-term overall improvement in people's health and wellbeing.

Another factor which has a strong effect on workers' psychological and physical wellbeing in terms of their office surroundings is colour.

Research from Mehta and Zhu showed that using red enhances performance on detail-oriented cognitive tasks, whereas blue leads to better performance on creative tasks. Green was proved to enhance creative performance (Lichtenfeld et al,).

Colour can also be used to minimise the anxiety of open plan environments. According to interior designer Mark Zavislak, who was interviewed by Allen in 2015, "One way to do that is by mimicking natural environments to produce a calming effect - lots of greens, blues, and yellows."

So, in summary:

- Less stressed workers can better handle workplace conflict situations and are more likely to reach a constructive outcome.

- Be aware of the research on wellbeing and listen to the needs of your people. Their office environments will have a huge positive or negative impact on them and their wellbeing.

- Allow people to have different office spaces for different functions, some of which can be personalised by the workers.

- Use natural or full-spectrum lighting, preferably with windows that can be opened to allow for natural ventilation.

- Try to match the colours of the rooms with their intended usage.

- In an urban environment, allow for plants and natural colours to create more relaxing spaces within the office.

Finally, from the perspective of a workplace mediator, we encounter numerous situations where organisations attempt to conduct mediation sessions in small windowless rooms.

They don't consider that this type of environment will increase the stress levels of already stressed people (as all the people engaged in workplace mediation usually are).

When facilitating a mediation process, it is vital to work in a room which is private and spacious, with calming decoration (plants, drinks, pictures etc), with natural light and ventilation, soft colours and with some nature around it.

This provides a great starting point to support people in conflict to move forward in a constructive and positive way. As the research demonstrates, the environment is fundamental to our physical and emotional wellbeing.

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Tales of the Unexpected

The HR Director | 19 May2016 | Tania Coke

It is tempting to present mediation as a defined process with largely predictable outcomes. But to do so could rob HR of what should be one of the most powerful tools in its conflict management toolbox.

Long before a grievance needs to go to court, there are opportunities to solve an issue, before it has had the time to escalate to an irresolvable level. Here are three actual cases that typify this.
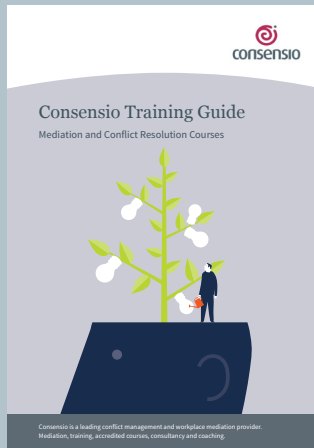
CASE STUDY ONE – STEVE AND JON

Steve recruited Jon to fill a vacancy in his team. As soon as Jon took up the position, Steve realised it was a wrong decision. The relationship rapidly deteriorated to the point where Jon was planning to take out a grievance against Steve. Mediation was set up as an alternative to this. But one hour into the joint meeting, and after some difficult conversations, Jon decided he had had enough and left the room. He subsequently decided not to pursue the grievance route and submitted his resignation. If success is defined in terms of reaching a written agreement or restoring the working relationship, this mediation was a failure. But as it happened, everyone concerned was happy with the outcome. Thanks to the mediation, Jon realised that he didn't want to pursue a grievance procedure – what he really wanted to do was to start again in a different company. From Steve's perspective the outcome was good because he had already decided that Jon was not right for his team. Their superiors were relieved because the conflict had been consuming far too much time and energy. And HR was relieved that a grievance had been averted. What mediation delivered in this case was clarity: Jon had reached a realisation as to what he really wanted. And it was an outcome which, in this case, suited everyone.

CASE STUDY TWO – ALI AND EWAN

Ali and Ewan were senior executives who had fallen out and were no longer able to work together effectively. They agreed to mediation but the process hit the rocks right from the start, when Ewan refused to sign the confidentiality agreement (a standard document which parties sign, agreeing to keep the contents of their discussions confidential). Throughout the morning the workplace mediator went from room to room speaking to the parties separately, unable to proceed to a joint meeting. Out of the blue Ali suggested going for lunch with Ewan. The mediator later found out that Ali and Ewan had resolve their conflict over lunch, and from that moment on were able to work together again. The outcome in this case was clearly ideal: Ali and Ewan were able to return to a healthy working relationship. But the process might be said to be dysfunctional because the mediation never really got started. Had it been a wasted investment? Not according to HR, who later revealed that mediation had served as a catalyst for the parties to take back the initiative and find their own way to repair their relationship. This was possible precisely because in mediation the parties are free to make their own choices.

CASE STUDY THREE – BEN AND ANDI

Ben and his boss Andi had become embroiled in a bitter conflict which they decided to address through workplace mediation. At the end of mediation, they had finally hammered out a written agreement. The mediator typed up the agreement and contacted Ben and Andi to arrange a time for them to come together to sign the document. But in the meantime a change had taken place within Andi. She now refused to sign the agreement on the basis that it was no longer necessary since the conflict had already dissipated. This case helps us to see paper outcome within the bigger context. Written agreements can of course serve a purpose, both in capturing the content of the parties' decisions and in symbolising a shared intention to do things differently. But they are only ever part of the story, and their purpose only holds for a certain period of time. Far more important in this case was the shift that took place within Andi, which was enough to neutralise the conflict. For Andi, the wording of the agreement represented a mindset she had left behind. She had outgrown the mediation agreement. In conclusion, mediation is not a mathematical formula which guarantees a pre-determined result.

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