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Consensio in the Press
Published news articles in 2019

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

Welcome

Welcome to Consensio's annual *News Round Up*. This year, as awareness of the importance of informal resolution and employee well-being has continued to grow, there's been plenty to write about. Here, we select 11 of our favourite press articles from 2019. As the year draws to an end, we start with some advice for festive conflict during the holiday season.

Conflict and Well Being

Skills development

A values-based approach

Cross-cultural support

Personal experiences of mediation

If you would like to discuss our articles or any of our services, please contact us on 0207 831 0254 or via www.consensiopartners.co.uk

Season's greetings and wishing you all the best for 2020

PERSONNEL TODAY

How to avoid Christmas conflict at work

Personnel Today | 3 December 2019 | Anna Shields

December can be a busy and fraught time in the workplace. How should managers deal with the stresses and strains of the season and avoid conflict in the office? Anna Shields suggests some strategies for the festive period.

"That" time of year is rapidly approaching. The season of goodwill to all will soon be here. However, the reality is that, at home and at work, it is often more the season of forced bonhomie and strained relationships.

Coping with the additional pressures of the holiday season alongside those of our day jobs often means that even the best planned festivities turn decidedly frosty as conflict rears its head. Some unresolved disputes can linger on year after year, while others can build up over the preceding months, boiling over as workmates or relatives gather together.

Both in and out of the office, many of us will find ourselves spending extended periods of time with people we usually see little of. The potentially varied mix of ages, backgrounds and political viewpoints can make or break a celebration. To go from choosing to spend time with colleagues or family, to feeling obliged to do so, can also lead to feelings of resentment.

Striving for perfection

Many of us set unrealistic expectations of the season. By nurturing fond memories from childhood and hoping to create the 'perfect' festivities, we heap more pressure on ourselves. This impractical optimism can extend to workplace conflict situations, imagining that disputes will be forgotten and issues resolved.

Altogether, this is quite a flammable recipe. So, if you want the only bang to be from the crackers, here are some tips to avoid unnecessary conflict over the coming weeks:

Awareness: Be aware and attuned to your triggers and those of your colleagues. Check in with yourself. What am I feeling and why? What might others be feeling and why? What triggers me during the festive period and how can I remain calm in the face of conflict?

Anticipation: Are there any known issues bubbling, either for yourself or for those around you? Conflict at work, as well as at home, can be stressful, so you might notice warning signs such as fatigue, irritability and withdrawal. What can you do to decrease your levels of stress?

Perspective: In conflict, we can lose the ability to see a situation from multiple perspectives, often becoming attached to a single, negative point of view. How might it look from other people's perspectives? How might it be affecting them?

Address it… or not: Decide whether to address conflict, and this will depend who you are in conflict with. If it's with someone you are in a close working or personal relationship with, you may want to raise an issue – even if it's small – in case it remains unsaid, festers and grows.

Tackle issues early: If you're a manager, don't wait too long before addressing a brewing office spat. Nipping things in the bud can be important because, if you don't, conflict can escalate and turn into something unmanageable. And if it's the annual company knees-up, it's best not to wait until the event is in full swing to broach the topic.

Mental health and well-being: Conflict can have a major effect on our health. In recent Consensio research, 75% of respondents said conflict had affected their mental health. Remember that some people find the festive season difficult due to experiences such as loss or separation. The festive season can be an opportunity to reach out. Be aware of those that are quiet and include them in conversation.

Listen, don't advise: When it comes to other people's conflicts, we can't always resist solving the problem for them. If a colleague opens up about a problem they're experiencing, it might feel unnatural or even unkind to refrain from giving advice. Often, the best support we can offer is to listen and ask open questions, which makes people feel heard and may help them build their own resources for handling disputes.

Avoidance: Yes, avoidance is sometimes OK. Steer clear of people you have issues with who you've been unable to reach agreement on. A seating plan can help for both a work social and a family event. A big gathering can be split into separate, smaller events.

TJ
Training Journal

Me-time or you-time?

Training Journal | 26 March 2019 | Tania Coke

Making time for other people can help them and you, says Tania Coke.

We hear a lot these days about the importance of me-time. I'm all for it. My idea of me-time would be going to bed with a good book and a cup of tea or sitting in a café and writing my diary. These little rituals help to clear my head, relax my body and soothe my soul.

It's like a re-set for the system, a boost to mind, body and soul.

Recently, it struck me that me-time isn't the only way to achieve these results. It happened when I was telling a work colleague about a conflict that was weighing on my mind. This colleague is an excellent listener. He didn't interrupt me, and he didn't try to bring the conversation back to himself.

He sat silent and attentive as I spoke, observing what I expressed and how. As he listened, I could feel my mind begin to clear and the tension in my shoulders dissolve. He had created me-time for me, acting as a sort of diary for me, a space in which I could express myself without censorship or interruption.

But here's the twist.

After I had finished speaking, he thanked me for sharing my thoughts, telling me that as he was listening, he felt his mind begin to clear and the tension in his own shoulders disappear. Not only had he created me-time for me, he had created 'you-time' for himself, with similar benefits for both of us!

How could this be? Thinking it over, I can see three possible explanations.

Catharsis

The first is catharsis. Witnessing the struggles of others can help us overcome our own because we see ourselves reflected in their lives. This is the social function of drama described by Aristotle and others.

According to some versions of the theory of catharsis, when we empathically observe the turmoil of others it serves to purge our own, releasing our emotions and soothing our souls. Other versions stress the intellectual benefits: catharsis brings intellectual clarity, helping us to re-order our thoughts and rid ourselves of mental confusion.

Either way, the benefits are remarkably close to the benefits of me-time.

Deep listening

The second possible explanation is that the state of mind required for deep listening is itself good for us. Through the act of listening with intense concentration to the experiences of others and absorbing ourselves in their world, we can achieve a state of 'flow.'

This is the state of mind achieved by immersing ourselves in a challenging task, which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines in his book 'Flow'. He claims that being in this state raises the quality of our lives, bringing happiness, growth and fulfilment. At the very least, by concentrating on the thoughts, feelings and needs of other people, we can gain temporary relief from our own worries.

Golden Rule

A third possible explanation relates to the Golden Rule. This is the principle, shared by the major world religions, of treating others as we would like others to treat us. And why might 'doing to others as we would be done by' benefit us?

It could be that obeying the Golden Rule has a positive effect on our hearts and minds simply because it is morally or spiritually good. Or maybe doing something good for others is good for us because human beings are innately connected, in the sense that my happiness is fundamentally tied to yours. Or more simply, seeing others happy makes me happy, full stop.

Whatever the explanation, that comment by my colleague made me realise that as well as me-time, I also need to ensure a healthy dose of you-time in my life. One obvious way to do this is through deeply listening to the stories and experiences of people around me, drawing on the listening skills I have learnt as a workplace mediator.

Through this kind of listening, I can help others to disentangle the confusion in their hearts and minds and thereby do the same for myself.

By devoting my attention to other people's lives, I can reconnect with them, and, paradoxically, with myself.

www.hrmagazine.co.uk

Conflict at work linked to mental health issues

HR Magazine | 9 May 2019 | Anna Shields

Workplace conflict may be behind a rise in mental ill health among employees, research has suggested.

Conflict management and mediation provider Consensio surveyed 57 individuals who attended workplace mediation to establish the impact workplace conflict had on their physical and mental health and wellbeing.

It found a significant link between unresolved workplace conflict and the worrying growth in mental health issues among employees.

More than eight in 10 (84%) reported that workplace conflict had affected their overall health. Specifically, 75% said it had affected their mental health, 65% their physical wellbeing, and 25% had to take time off work because of the negative impact it had on them.

Director and co-founder of Consensio Anna Shields said: "For the past 12 years we have seen the detrimental impact of workplace conflict on employee wellbeing. Our research suggests the significant and growing impact of unresolved workplace conflict on our overall health and wellbeing."

Speaking to *HR magazine*, she explained that conflict can have a far-reaching effect. "Anecdotally, we'd increasingly been hearing about the effects of conflict on people's mental health, and the physical, emotional, and behavioural effects. Conflict can affect everyone deeply, even people who witness it but aren't directly involved – we'd spoken to HR professionals who had been in tears dealing with situations where there's conflict," she said.

"Work and home life should be separate, but if people are experiencing tension in the workplace they can bring those issues home with them so it can affect partners and families too. We become cocooned."

Addressing the problem early, rather than waiting for problems to escalate into mental health issues, is key Shields added: "We dealt with all kinds of conflict, from harassment and bullying to other more subtle grievances. No matter what kind of conflict people are experiencing our key message is to nip it in the bud. Don't wait until it develops into a mental health problem, try and address the problem as soon as you can.

"Everyone has a responsibility here. HR has a really important role to play in dealing with these issues, but employees also need to take responsibility for their own wellbeing and emotional health."

These findings coincide with Consensio launching a free guide for employers and employees, which aims to help people make the healthiest choices in the face of conflict, minimise any damage and better protect themselves.

Resolving not to solve other people's workplace conflicts

The HR Director | 22 August 2019 | Tania Coke

There's a well-known chinese proverb that teaches: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." At the heart of this are two principles, both of which chime with the wisdom of our times. Contributor Tania Coke, Senior Mediation consultant – Consensio.

First, the principle of thinking to the future. Today we appear to be more mindful of the longer-term. Just think how commonplace the word 'sustainability' has become. The second is the principle of empowerment. Today, many organisations aspire to be networks with power distributed away from the centre.

Over the past few decades, these two principles have become engrained in many aspects of organisational life. Take, for example, the field of professional development. It used to be common to assign mentors to younger employees: the mentor would offer advice drawing on their longer experience in the business. Today, many HR departments prefer the coaching approach in which the coach, often someone with no experience of the coachee's industry, helps the coachee to think for themselves and find their own answers to the challenges they face.

Resisting the urge to problem-solve

But there's one area where these principles have yet to take root. When it comes to other people's conflicts, we can't seem to resist solving the problem for them. If a team member or colleague opens up about a problem they're having with another person, to many of us it feels unnatural or even unkind to refrain from giving advice. But there are reasons why the kindest thing may be precisely that. Here are a few.

People in conflict too often feel helpless, confused and stuck. Bombarding them with advice can compound their helplessness and leave them feeling more disempowered than before. What's more, conflict is a highly subjective matter. If you describe the same dispute to ten different people, you're likely to end up with ten different opinions about who's to blame and what should be done. Surely then the best people to decide are the ones who are going to live with the consequences, i.e. the people in conflict themselves. Moreover, if we're to honour the principle of long-term thinking, we should be looking for ways to help people build their own resources for handling disputes, now and into the future. There are better ways to do that than doling out advice based on our own past experience.

So how can we apply the wisdom of the Chinese proverb to the way we handle other people's conflicts?

Time to think

The first is by simply listening. It is a rare and precious thing to find someone willing to listen to our experiences of conflict without blurting out their opinions or steering the conversation in the direction they think best. This kind of open-minded, non-judgemental listening is precisely what most of us long for when we're caught up in conflict. It helps us to clear our mind, figure out what we really think and feel and decide what course of action would be best.

We also value being asked questions that help us find our way forward and gain insights that will make us better at handling conflict in the future. Some of the questions we appreciate most are those that do not imply judgements or assumptions or railroad the conversation into a different direction to the one we want to take. One way to avoid this is to ask questions which follow directly from what the speaker has just said and to offer them options about where to take the conversation. For instance: "You've been speaking about how this has affected your working life. What has that been like for you? And what could make it better?" (For more ideas about the kind of questions that can empower people in times of conflict, see our Guide to Conflict and Wellbeing at Work.)

Building the conflict muscle

Another way we can help people in conflict is to signpost them to services that build their capacity to handle conflict themselves. Conflict coaching and workplace mediation are two such services. A conflict coach is an independent expert who helps people in conflict think through their situation and get clearer about what they want to do. A workplace mediator offers the same support and also helps people in conflict to communicate with one another directly. Both services are based on the principle of self-determination, namely that the people in conflict are the ones best placed to make judgements and take decisions about the situation they are in. There are also a wide range of training programmes available specifically designed to empower people to deal with difficult conversations, handle conflict better and build conflict resilience.

According to the zeitgeist of our times, instead of doling out quick-fix solutions, we should be looking for ways to help people solve their own problems. The question is whether we are able to follow this advice even when it comes to the thorny issue of other people's conflicts. You will see that, once you stop trying to solve other people's conflicts and instead listen to what they are going through and help them come up with their own solutions, conflict can be an enormous opportunity for growth and creativity.

EMPLOYER NEWS

The need for upskilling your 'first responders' at work

Employer News | 4 January 2019 | Author: Tania Coke

Tania Coke, Senior Mediation Consultant, Consensio, discusses the importance of upskilling line managers with conflict management training.

In cases of interpersonal emergency – when workplace conflict erupts – line managers are usually first on the scene. You could think of them as the organisation's conflict 'first responders.' They have the opportunity to provide emergency first aid to help defuse tension before the professional emergency services arrive on the scene – that's HR to you and me. So what is it that the first responders can do to minimise the damage? What actions are needed to get the casualties of unresolved workplace conflict in the recovery position?

Resisting the Urge to Judge

Before talking about the actions that the first responders can take, we need first to think about their presence. This, more than anything they do or say, will determine their effect on the conflict. For most line managers arriving on the conflict scene, the default behaviour will be to ask questions such as: who is right? who started it? whose fault is it? The parties to the conflict themselves will almost certainly be wrapped up in this way of thinking, looking for people they can win over to their side to confirm their own rightness and the other party's wrongness. But it is precisely this impulse to defend and attack that triggers the kind of behaviours that cause most damage. So the first priority of the first responder should be to steer the parties away from defensive and aggressive behaviour. They can help do this through role-modelling. If the parties sense that the line manager is not in the business of taking sides, this can encourage them to drop their defences and leave off attacking the other side. That opens the door to a more reflective state in which the parties can reflect on the situation in a mature, constructive way. So that is the first challenge for line managers: to resist the urge to take sides.

But this is easier said than done. Judgements form at the speed of light, fed by a host of assumptions and biases. I may assume, for instance, that a person is innocent because I see them as the underdog, and my bias is to defend the underdog. Or I may assume innocence on the basis of what I already know about the situation, which is not a complete and accurate picture of what is going on. It takes training and practise to overcome these assumptions – especially the ones we are not even aware of. Being realistic, we should accept that we can never be entirely rid of prejudice, but we can nurture the desire to become more self-aware and, through practise, get closer to reaching that state.

Opening the Door to Honest Reflection

What can line managers actually do, other than taking care not to leap to conclusions about the rightness and wrongness of the case, and not making assumptions about who is right or wrong? Of course the right thing to do or say will depend on the situation. Let's take the case where the line manager is alone with one of the parties to the conflict. In the moments after conflict erupts, the parties are at their most vulnerable. This is the time when they are most likely to do or say things they may regret. The line manager can help them recover their senses and gain perspective on what has just happened by asking open, non-judgemental questions. This can give the parties an opportunity to express honestly how they feel and why, free from the compulsion to defend or attack. The challenge for the line manager is to listen patiently and without judgement as each party lets off steam. The line manager will probably feel pressure to identify solutions to the conflict as quickly as possible. But rushing into problem-solving while the parties are still embroiled in the frenzy of conflict rarely produces the best outcomes. The ideal is to wait until they have regained their senses and are able to make their own decisions about what needs to be done and how to achieve this.

To sum up, the best way for line managers to ease a workplace conflict situation is through the presence that they bring. An impartial, non-judgemental presence in the room can help steer the conflict parties away from defensive, aggressive behaviour, and help them return to their best selves. The line managers can also offer open questions to help the parties reflect honestly on what has happened and eventually get clearer about what they need to do and what they can learn from the experience. And just as emergency first aiders require training and practise in order to qualify for the role, conflict first responders need conflict resolution training too – in the skills of listening, questioning, non-judgement and self-awareness.

HR
www.hrmagazine.co.uk

On election day I'll be voting on values, not policies

HR Magazine | 4 December 2019 | Tania Coke

What we most lack in politics is not good ideas or clever analysis. If anything can break the deadlock it will be the attitudes and values of our politicians, not their policies.

There is also extreme emotion, as the Brexit debate continues to rage in our homes and in parliament. And there are extremes of opinion on many issues, from immigration to healthcare to counter-terrorism.

What are the qualities our politicians will need to navigate these extremes of uncertainty, emotion and opinion? As we go to the polls next week what should we be looking for to help us cast our vote?

We are swimming through uncharted waters. No country has ever left the EU before. How can we know the impact on our finances, our institutions, or our positioning on the world stage? In the face of this uncertainty what our politicians most need is humility.

What would impress me would be a politician who acknowledged that we do not know whether we are better off inside or outside the European Union.

I would vote for someone willing to admit that they don't yet know the answer to the Brexit conundrum. I would be inspired by a politician who acted as if their own opinion was just one piece of the jigsaw – somebody open to finding solutions collaboratively, even across party divides.

In the face of polarised opinion, the quality we need more of is respect. I would love to see politicians listening to members of the opposition party because they may have something useful to say.

Imagine if an MP on one side of the room invited an MP on the other to say more, in a sincere attempt to gain a new perspective. What would happen to the quality of the debate if our politicians had more courageous conversations, and spoke to one another with this kind of respect?

As for handling extremes of emotion, what would help is more compassion. When faced with an aggressive outburst, of the kind we regularly see in Brexit debates, the typical response is a knee-jerk reaction of the fight or flight kind: hitting back with equally-charged emotion or shutting down the channels of communication.

What if our politicians were mature enough to see emotion as an expression of longing or hurt, and to relate to that emotion as something they have experienced in their own life? It may sound absurd to expect this of a politician, but talk of compassion is becoming mainstream in business, education and society. Why should it not take root in politics as well?

Cultivating these qualities of humility, respect and compassion is no easy task – especially when the prevailing political culture is so opposed. But cultural change is possible.

The business environment is starting to soften around the edges, with the emergence of training programmes focused on listening skills, emotional intelligence and conflict resolution. Schools are paying more attention to their pupils' personal qualities and success beyond exam results.

Peer mediation, which allows young people in conflict to move beyond their differences, is offered in many schools. And as a society we are learning to respond to mental health issues with compassion and respect.

If any of the political parties were to devote their energies to bringing about this kind of change in the world of politics they would almost certainly get my vote.

But perhaps it's too early to expect that. Until we reach that stage, I will be voting for the candidate that best embodies the qualities of humility, respect and compassion. And happily, this is far easier to assess than manifesto promises that can so easily be broken.

trainingZONE

How to make people trust you at work

Training Zone | 27 June 2019 | Tania Coke

The key to clear communication and effective collaboration at work is trust – but how can we inspire trust in others and learn to trust them in turn ourselves? Here, we'll look at some training methods that can help develop these skills.

As more and more work becomes automated, we need to consider the qualities human beings have that machines cannot replace. Trust is one quality I would place high up that list because human beings can inspire trust in a way that computers cannot.

I don't mean trust in the sense of reliability – for that, computers probably have the edge over us. I'm referring to the kind of trust that can spark life-long loyalty and lead people to do extraordinary things for one another.

Trust is a highly desirable quality, from a commercial and personal point of view.

First, it leads to a better working environment. When people do not trust one another, the work atmosphere can become poisonous. Looking over your shoulder in fear of being stabbed in the back is gruelling and wastes emotional energy.

Second, trust leads to better relationships. If people trust you, they are less likely to be offended by a poorly worded email sent in haste. They will be more inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt and support you in times of need.

Finally, trust leads to better results. When I trust my leader, I feel more motivated and engaged, and I therefore produce better work. I am also more likely to enjoy work, and therefore less likely to get stressed, move jobs or take time off.

The big question is whether the ability to trust and inspire trust is something we are born with, or whether it can be acquired and developed like any other skill.

Sharing your values

Thinking back over my own experiences, I realise the people I trust most are those whose vision or values resonate with my own.

Something about the way they are, the way they think or the way they act touches me. I feel a connection at a personal level and that connection triggers extra loyalty, motivation, productivity and goodwill.

Can we train ourselves to inspire this kind of connection? Some people seem to inspire trust with no apparent effort, often without being aware of it.

For the rest of us, however, there is hope. There are ways we can increase our chances of inspiring trust in those around us.

One way is to work on our self-awareness. The more aware I am of my own vision and values, the more likely it is that I will live in tune with them, and they are therefore more likely to be felt by those around me.

Personality profiling and psychometrics are useful tools that can help us know ourselves better.

Life coaching is another: a skilful coach can help us reflect on our experiences and get clearer about what matters to us most.

Learning to communicate better

In addition, our vision and values need to be conveyed. When it comes to communication skills, there are many ways to work on ourselves.

Through presentation training we can get better at speaking and conveying our vision with passion. This includes the way we use words and the way we express ourselves verbally and non-verbally.

Conflict management and courageous conversations training also strengthen our ability to communicate about matters that are important and that lead to stronger teams and better morale.

One way to speed up the process of building trust is through group work.

Group experiences such as outward-bound activities or team sports can fulfil this role.

There are also very effective group coaching and team facilitation programmes which invite participants to open up to one another, for instance by discussing their life experiences, or sharing their hopes and dreams.

As well as building trust, this kind of training directly works on participants' communication skills.

Trusting others

All the approaches above not only build the ability to inspire trust, but they are equally effective at building the capacity to trust.

It can be hard to trust others, especially if we have had negative experiences in the past that now make us habitually suspicious of other's intentions.

Through coaching, conflict resolution training, and other personal development, we can dig into the root cause of our fears and unlearn unwanted habits.

Trust may sound like a nebulous quality whose laws cannot be predicted, but as standards of emotional intelligence rise and the sophistication of available training programmes grows, we are increasingly able to enhance levels of trust in the workplace and reap the benefits at a commercial and personal level.

TJ
Training Journal

Multicultural teaming at work

Training Journal | 28 October 2019 | Tania Coke

Today's teams operate across boundaries of culture, generation and lifestyle – and this can lead to conflict. Tania Coke reveals how to overcome differences in a multicultural working environment.

The mono-cultural team is a thing of the past. In Britain today, it's hard to find any team that does not operate across boundaries of ethnicity, generation and lifestyle.

This can make for a hugely enriching experience. However, it can also lead to a large dose of frustration and workplace conflict.

As our places of work become ever more diverse, it's worth reflecting on what we can do to minimise the pain and maximise the joy of working in multicultural teams.

As a Brit living in Japan, I have plenty of opportunities to reflect on this. When I moved here nine years ago, I thought I knew a thing or two about dealing with difference.

After all, I was a qualified workplace mediator, trained in a range of conflict management styles and a healthy portfolio of cross-cultural mediations under my belt. I underestimated the size of the cultural gap I was facing.

Awkward silences

Here's one example. I found that in Japan, when I posed a question to a room full of people, I was typically met with an awkward silence. No one was willing to speak out in front of the whole group, to respond to my question.

It unnerved me, and I held it against them. "Doesn't anyone have an opinion?" I thought to myself.

I didn't yet realise that in Japan it can be seen as presumptuous – even arrogant – to voice an opinion in front of a group of people, especially if those people are strangers.

Another cultural shock was the Japanese reluctance to say no. I remember once asking a shop assistant if she sold a certain product. By way of response, she inclined her head and said: "Well, hmmm, err."

I was irritated by her lack of clarity and the inconvenience it caused me. Why couldn't she just say no? It took me years to acknowledge her answer as a different – but equally valid – style of communication to my own.

In her culture, a negative answer is considered rude and should be inferred by the listener from the manner of the response.

These little differences have big potential to erode teamwork and cause workplace conflict.

Here in Japan, there's a risk of teams splitting down the cultural divide, with the Japanese feeling aggressed by the indiscretion of their non-Japanese counterparts, who in turn feel alienated by the apparent vagueness of the Japanese.

I still get caught out on occasion, judging people unfavourably when they behave in ways that clash with my values and expectations. So I've been collecting ideas to remove my cultural blinkers.

Replace judgment with curiosity

One approach is to train myself to replace judgment with curiosity. To do this, I first need to notice the differences that are triggering me and acknowledge the effect they are having on me.

For instance, I need to recognise if I am getting irritated by the lack of a clear answer and acknowledge if I am judging someone negatively as a result.

Having done this, I can ask myself why I am feeling or thinking these things. Am I irritated because I assume a decision can only be made once everyone has expressed an unambiguous opinion?

Am I judging someone unfavourably because they are frustrating my desire to get the decision made? What is it about my personal or cultural history that explains my reaction?

I can also investigate why the other person is behaving in this unfamiliar way. I could do this using my own imagination to guess the reasons. Or I could ask questions to find out.

It might be helpful to address the issue as it arises. Or it may be better to wait until later to ask them, or to ask someone else – perhaps someone with more experience of cross-cultural communication.

By activating my curiosity, instead of succumbing to judgment, I can gain better understanding of the reasons – both personal and cultural – behind previously alien behaviours.

This in itself is fascinating because it helps me to see the limitations of my own thinking. It is also rewarding. I am rewarded by better relationships at a personal and team level. It also gives me information I can use to overcome the difficulties and adapt to the differences.

For instance, a better understanding of Japanese group dynamics can lead to the idea of holding small group discussions before asking people to voice their opinions in front of a larger group.

Team coaching

The benefits of this curiosity-led approach can be multiplied if the whole team is involved. One way to do this is through team coaching. I've had some eye-opening and moving experiences of this.

In some cases, it took the form of facilitated conversations: a professional coach invited team members to name the behaviours that were frustrating or confusing them, enquire into the reasons for those behaviours, and brainstorm ways to get around them.

On other occasions, it involved more personal sharing, in which team members opened up to one another about their private dreams and challenges.

This can be done through straightforward conversation, or through exercises designed to help people know one another at a far deeper level than everyday work typically allows.

The above are just a few of the ways which have helped me to minimise the frustration and multiply the delight of working in multi-cultural teams.

There are countless other possibilities open to anyone with enough awareness and curiosity.

UK MEDIATION JOURNAL

Mediating cross-cultural conflict

UK Mediation Journal | 2 January 2019 | Tania Coke

In Japan, interpersonal relations are governed by the notion of "wa". According to this philosophy, individuals are expected to prioritise the harmony of the group over their own personal interests. They do this by "reading the air" (kuuki wo yomu), to sense the collective feeling in the group and then choosing their words and actions so as to fit in. It is very unusual for people to say or do anything that goes against the group feeling – in line with the oft-quoted adage: "The nail that sticks out will be hammered down".

This deference to other people's opinions, and reluctance to express one's own, can be shocking to British sensibilities. My British upbringing taught me that it's good to think independently and stand out from the crowd. What Brit would prefer to be a sheep than a goat? In my observation, this British emphasis on individuality and self-expression has become stronger in recent decades. We are quicker than ever to assert our opinions, especially on social media where, "unlike in the offline world, there is little or no personal risk in confronting and exposing someone" (BBC).

There is a Japanese word, "tateyoko", which could be used to symbolise these two behaviours. "Tate" means vertical, whilst "yoko" means horizontal. The Japanese culture tends to the horizontal in that the focus is outwards, on relations with others. The British is closer to the vertical axis, because of its greater focus on the self.

Of course, neither extreme is intrinsically right. There are times when it is right to express an opinion strongly, even if it means standing out. And there are times when it is wiser to hold back our personal opinions and focus on what other people think. So both cultures, Japanese and British, have something to learn from the other. In Japan, as the population declines, businesses are increasingly looking overseas for customers and workers. This has triggered a conscious cultural shift in the workplace. Many Japanese companies are running global communication programmes, training their employees to be more assertive and to adopt more western ways of communicating at work. Often it is "gaijin" (foreigners), such as myself, who deliver this training.

I find it hard to imagine the same thing happening the other way round: British companies bringing in Japanese people to train their employees to be more oriental in their communications. Perhaps the comparison is unfair, because the British workforce is already far more racially diverse than the Japanese. But it is interesting just to entertain the idea. And I suspect the typical British employee would do well to spend a little less time expressing their own opinions, and a little more listening to other people and "reading the air".

The point I want to make is that there is always something to be learnt by looking to cultures, mind-sets and worldviews that are different from our own. We can gain awareness of our own predispositions, by seeing how they differ from those of others. Workplace mediation offers an opportunity for parties to

explore some of these cultural differences that may result in workplace conflict in a safe environment with an impartial mediator. Secondly, we can challenge ourselves to step outside our comfort zones and usual behaviours and experiment with different ways of relating to others. Then we will be in a position to choose, consciously and creatively, how to behave in each situation, drawing on a wider repertoire of interpersonal skills, and greater openness to behaviours different from our own. So now you have a new excuse to go on that dream holiday to Japan…

UK MEDIATION JOURNAL

Lifting the heavy weight of mediation

UK Mediation Journal | 24 July 2019 | Anna Shields

I've recently discovered a new podcast entitled 'Heavyweight', and I'm hooked! The show is hosted by Jonathan Goldstein and the premise is simple. In each episode, Jonathan helps his guest (and in some cases himself) deal with an issue from their past that remains unresolved.

Season 1 kicks off in a personal way, with Jonathan's Dad Buzz and his Uncle Sheldon, both in their eighties, who have been estranged for decades. Next up is one of my favourite episodes, where Jonathan's friend Gregor is haunted by a moment over 20 years ago when he lent his poor musician friend a box set of CDs. This friend turns out to be Moby, and the songs were those sampled on his breakthrough multi-million selling album 'Play'. Gregor just wants his CDs back!

The show is at turns funny, sad, heart-warming and, in many episodes, transformational. Jonathan takes his guests on road trips, facilitates tricky reunions and witnesses difficult conversations. He never describes himself as a mediator, preferring the term interlocuter – a person who takes part in a dialogue or conversation. However, each time I listen to an episode, I am reminded of the burden of my workplace mediation parties, and the heavy weight that is so often lifted through the process. What is it about mediation that helps release the burden of conflict?

Firstly, I believe there is a great power in being given the opportunity to communicate face-to-face. When someone or something upsets us, we quickly build up a picture of what we think happened, and try to make sense of it, sometimes with the help of well-meaning friends and family. Communication often shuts down on one or both sides, and we are left alone to deal with painful thoughts and feelings. As the issues remain unresolved, we often form fixed ideas and close ourselves off to the possibility of change.

In 'Heavyweight', Jonathan describes his role in this way: to "mince, wheedle, mealy-mouth, cajole and back-pedal my way into the past like a therapist with a time machine." This is a far cry from how I think of myself as a workplace mediator! However, I think the sentiment is similar. We are both there to create a space for individuals to come together, to listen and be listened to.

Secondly, this opportunity to talk, to hear the other person and to share memories, builds empathy and understanding. Jonathan's guests have held onto hurt and pain for many years, which also holds true in the workplace conflict situations I have been witnessing in my mediation practice for over a decade.

In episode 17, a guest called Skye recounts her memories of falling out with her best friends in middle school 30 years ago when they graffitied her home one night. Her son, now entering middle school himself, can't understand why his Mum never asked her friends why they did it. With Jonathan's assistance, Skye eventually meets up with one of her school friends and gains new insights not only from her old friend, but also from her own child.

Finally, through this process of communication and building empathy, we are able to look to the future. The individuals from the podcast and those who engage in workplace mediation, face the ghosts of their pasts in order to find clarity and move on. The decision to have these courageous conversations is not easy. Jonathan and mediators such as myself create an opportunity for these conversations to happen, but it is the brave individuals who take a leap into the unknown who do all the hard work that can lead to conflict transformation.

Personnel Today
HR practice, jobs and networking

‘I know I’m not a bully, and I felt the need to say that’: an employee’s account of mediation

Personnel Today | 2 October 2019 | Anonymous

Every HR professional will be aware of the benefits of workplace mediation, particularly if it can avoid the cost and stress of an employment tribunal. But how does it feel for the employee? Here’s one anonymous worker’s experience of the process.

I never discovered mediation – it discovered me.

After 15 years of success as a manager and with a good reputation in my company, I found myself caught in a storm of change: colleagues were leaving, new ones had yet to arrive, and for a few trying months I was having to take on more than it was possible to achieve. I was not quite running the show, but certainly holding up the circus tent.

Travel was extensive, emotions were high and decisions were being taken at a furious pace. It was just before Christmas and I was trying to tidy up a whole host of issues, some deep-rooted and others quite local and every-day.

Trying to force change in one particularly knotty department, I sent a couple of frustrated emails clearly explaining what was to happen next. It wasn’t the smartest thing I’d ever done in life and in the cold light of day it was wrong.

But there was no cold light and everyday blurred into another. To my genuine surprise, a colleague with whom I had no major disputes took out a grievance against me.

The first feeling I experienced was one of bewilderment: a desire to be understood as the person I am, rather than the ‘charges’ that had been brought against me.

Disbelief and anger

The process was relatively quick. I attended a formal meeting with our HR director, a brief summary of the complaint was communicated and she proposed mediation.

I erupted, went into a brief huff and felt victimised. But after I calmed down I agreed, not because I knew what mediation really was, or how it might help, but it seemed like an appropriate next step.

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. It took me a bit of time to accept that they were morally and legally obliged to treat both parties respectfully and that taking my side, irrespective of my track record, was never an option.

The word mediation sounded intimidating at first – it's a term you associate often with bigger and more ingrained disputes, industrial strikes, civil war or arms decommissioning. By comparison, telling someone to get a grip in an email suddenly felt like it had escalated out of hand.

The mediation day

I was invited to attend mediation in central London. All I remember now is it was opposite a branch of Rymans, so I bought a packet of posh pens hoping they might bring comfort. Times were carefully negotiated, explanatory sheets circulated and due diligence respected.

I arrived at the building. In a doorway was a tray of coffee and biscuits. I'm a coeliac with a wheat allergy, so I could only look at the custard creams with envy. I didn't say I had an allergy in case this was seen as faddish, or worse still, a sure sign I was difficult or troublesome.

At a side-angle through a glass door in another room, I could see the guy who was pursuing the grievance. I was shown to another room – my space – and encouraged to write down the things I'd like to communicate. There were two mediators, both women, and we talked about how the day would unfold.

Perhaps the most obvious thing was that they listened more than they spoke. It was not a programmatic experience – they didn't steer my thoughts or try to change my mind – they let me talk about all the slightly disordered things that had happened: the change, the loss of colleagues, the chaotic work-life balance I had been forced to pursue to get the job done, the frustrations I felt with a group of colleagues, including the complainant who I felt was driven by ego more than workload.

I wanted to say the word 'narcissism' but it stuck in my mouth: I felt I had to behave and not allow emotional opinion to overtake me.

Eventually, we were brought together: me and the guy that got the email. It was uncomfortable. Neither of us really wanted to be there. I was conscious of looking sideways on, not always able to keep eye contact. That worried me, as I didn't want to appear shifty, or deceptive or even weak. I just found it hard to look him straight in the face. I suspect deep down I still felt a bit betrayed.

He talked through the things that had hurt him. Without dwelling on the intricacies of the case, it is only fair to say he raised some reasonable objections to my conduct at work and I apologised for this.

I kept looking sideways at one of the mediators: almost for strength or a sense of silent support. I felt I had built up a rapport with them and, whilst they were scrupulously fair, I detected a feeling which I can only describe as 'emotional intelligence'.

They were listening to people's feelings as much as their words. I felt that they had listened to me and so in a very preliminary sense some of my story had been told. It was tense but in an odd way. This was not an adversarial dispute across a courtroom or a noisy TV studio debate – it was quieter, more spiritual than forensic.

After the first session, the complainant accepted my apology and reached down to pick up his bag. It was clear he felt it was all over and that we could close the proceedings early. But it wasn't over for me. I had my say and I was the person who was on the defensive. One of the mediators sensed my frustration and I was taken back into my single room to explain to them how I felt. What came out was therapeutic.

I was in effect arguing with myself. The rational side of me was thinking: "We have a compromise, cut your losses, walk away and take a half-day off work, you deserve it. This will all blow over." But at a deeper and more profound level, I couldn't do that. It would be a tacit acceptance that the problem was all mine, that I was aggressive and by circumstance the wrong-doer. Mediation is not about one-way problems.

Unfinished business

I am from the north and come from a part of the country where people value straight-talking. I tend to say what I mean and find it hard to play layered office politics. My accent is not particularly strong but it is 'regional' and I am aware through the prejudices of everyday life that my accent can be portrayed or interpreted as aggressive.

Ironically, my character is a complex mix of the boisterous and the shy and very rarely aggressive. To walk away, however convenient that might have been, got to me more deeply than I'd expected. If I'm honest, it felt to me that I was surrendering to a stereotype.

I am not by nature aggressive, and if I had been forthright it was for a purpose. If my language was emotional it had been ignited as slow-burn over several months. In today's lazy parlance, I know I am not a bully, and I felt the need to say that.

So for me, for my pride, and even for a bit of my background that had brought me to London, avoiding custard creams in an unfamiliar room, I needed the mediation to continue.

The mediators brought us back together and I was allowed to outline the many frustrations I felt and I listed the context as I saw it: profound overwork, extensive travel and stress over a period of months.

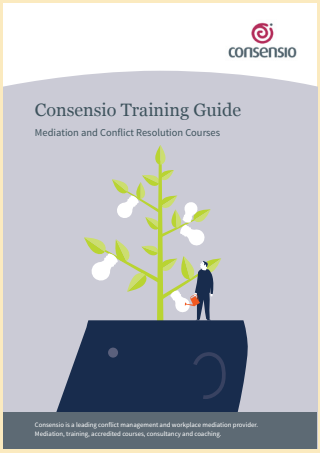
But lurking in among all that was my frustrations about a major company project that had been frittered away by people who I believed were less loyal to the company than I had always felt. It was cathartic, the apology was still on the table, but now it was offered in a very different spirit. My behaviour was not endemic, it had a root cause and the complainant had participated in that cause.

Lessons learned

On reflection, mediation worked for me but not in quite the ways I had imagined. I had gone there fearful of new-age whimsy and self-referential indulgence. I was wrong; there was no great mystique and no bogus psychoanalysis. It was a fair space where people were encouraged to talk.

I look back now with a mix of feelings. The initial confusion and anger are long gone. What I see now in much greater clarity is a set of circumstances: the squall of change, the unsettled office environment, the need for haste and my impatient desire to get things done in record time. It was fertile ground for dispute and maybe that was the biggest factor of all, that the dispute had largely been circumstantial. Neither party had particularly wanted it.

I have learnt to be more delicate in emails, happier with events unfolding in their own time and satisfied that justice of a sort was done. I still avoid custard creams, reluctantly.



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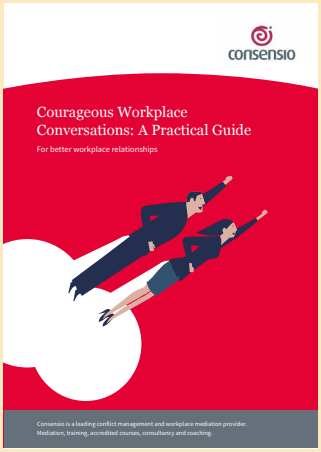

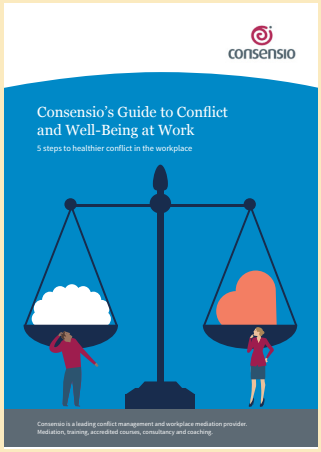

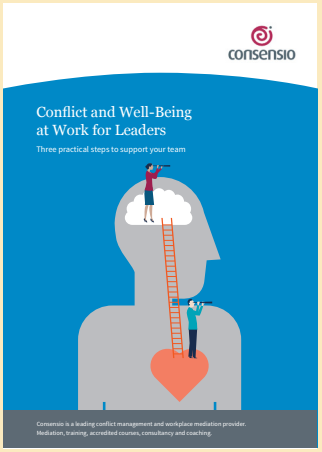

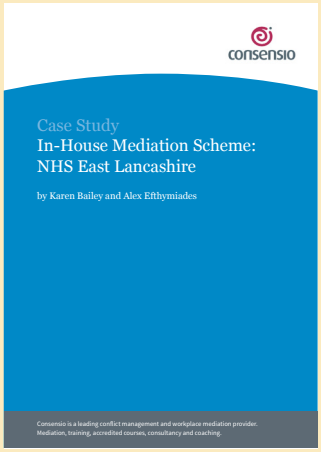

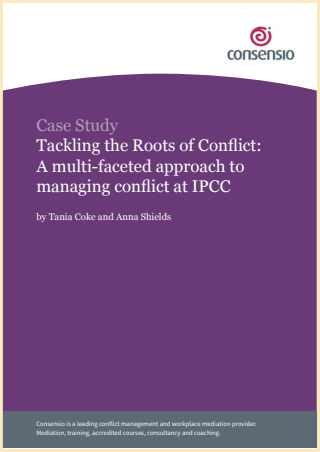

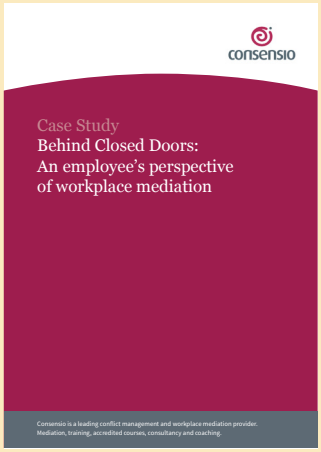

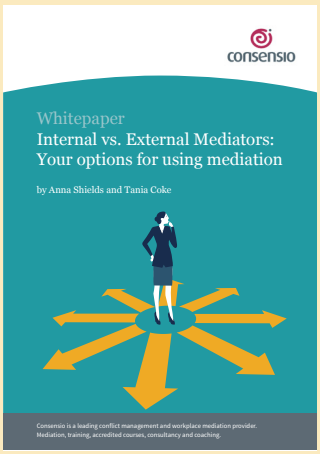

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