

## Case study on Marshall Aerospace: “The employee was about to physically lash out... now we all sit down and talk”



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**How a defence firm more used to a ‘command-and-tell’ culture has replaced confrontation with mediation**

Picture a workplace where mediation is flourishing and [Marshall Aerospace and Defence Group](#) might not be top of your list. The organisational culture in the Cambridge-based aviation and engineering business is best described as entrenched. Ninety per cent of Marshall’s 1,800 employees are male, many of them ex-military. Add to that being family-run, with a history dating back more than 100 years, and you get “quite a command-and-tell culture”, admits Vicky Keating, senior HR business partner. “We have employees who have been here a long time and have only ever known Marshall. They manage in the way they’ve been managed, and over time you get an ingrained way of behaving and managing staff.”

When Robert Marshall (great-grandson of founder David) became group CEO in 2012, he sought to affect the culture – behaviours were reassessed and values were plastered on walls and discussed in team meetings. And the company, which was seeing between 10 and 12 formal grievances a year, decided to explore mediation as a way to “nip disputes in the bud before they caused problems”, says Keating.

After a week of intensive training, Keating embarked on her first mediation earlier this year. There have since been five cases at the firm, four of which she has handled. “They have all been early stage conflicts,” she says. “They hadn’t actually submitted a formal grievance – we work very much out in the business so we hear a lot of what is going on at an early stage. That makes a difference. We don’t just sit back and wait for a grievance to drop into the inbox.”

The first stage of mediation is to explain the process to the individuals and offer them the chance to agree to it. “I then have individual meetings with them to understand what their issues are, so they can clarify in their own minds what they would like to say in the mediation,” says Keating. “On the same day, I then hold the joint meeting – it’s voluntary and confidential, and it’s important for people to feel they can be open without it necessarily being taken further.”

All Keating’s cases so far have been between line managers and direct reports, and each was successfully resolved. “There were issues around being micro-managed, sidelined, excluded, bullied, and it was often building up over a number of weeks,” she says. “One employee in particular reported getting so wound-up and angry he felt he was going to physically lash out. But it can also involve quite subtle behaviours that add up to someone feeling undervalued... There is a bit of ‘You do as I say’ among the ex-military managers, but I have been really surprised by how willing everyone has been to face each other, look each other in the eye and really talk it through.”

Keating believes that, without mediation, most of the cases would have gone on to become formal grievances: “We all know it takes time, effort and sometimes a bit of heartache to resolve grievances. Because [mediation] is resolved outside of any formal process, there is a cost saving both in terms of time and productivity... If people resolve their differences, their focus returns to their work.”

The fifth mediation was deemed more serious, and was undertaken by an external mediator. “It was between a senior manager and a member of staff,” says Keating. “It was a complicated and difficult situation, and had been going on quite a long time... They were both willing to try mediation, but ultimately a grievance was submitted. If my previous cases had been left to fester, they would have got much more entrenched too.”

Marshall's foray into mediation comes as part of a government pilot involving a number of SMEs in Cambridge and Manchester, organised by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. HR professionals and managers are trained by mediation management experts from Consensio, which also provides professionals to handle more complex cases. "I've had people say to me, 'I mediate – I get two people in a room and bang their heads together,'" says Consensio director Anna Shields. But proper mediation is an effective tool in the armoury of many SMEs and larger businesses, such as Marshall, she notes.

For Keating, it proved a learning curve: "I was slightly nervous in the first couple. But in the training we did lots of role play, and working in HR you're quite used to gauging reactions. It really draws out what sits beneath a conflict, and allows each person to hear the impact of their action and behaviours. If someone is being accused of bullying, they get the chance to explain what their intent was.

"When they hear how the other person is feeling, they recognise how their behaviour is being perceived," she adds. "On a day-to-day basis, supervisors don't always say 'I want you to do this for this reason.' They just say 'I want you to do this' and the person is left feeling 'why me?'"

Word of mouth suggests the pilot has worked well and yielded savings in management time, says Keating. And if it can work in a business where "command and tell" had become an unofficial motto, it can work anywhere.

