

# Case study: Independent Police Complaints Commission

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## How the police watchdog got creative to deal with an outbreak of conflict in its own ranks

Plebgate, child abuse in Rotherham, the Hillsborough tragedy: the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), responsible for monitoring the police forces of England and Wales, investigates some of the most complex, difficult and emotionally charged scenarios in law enforcement.

People who come into contact with the organisation – police officers, victims and family members – do so at one of the most traumatic times in their lives. “It is a pressurised environment that is quite emotionally raw,” says Colin Woodward, head of HR. “Staff are dealing with people who are upset, possibly bereaved, or who are being investigated. These things are hard to deal with, so that has an effect on employees. Working in that environment day in, day out brings an additional pressure on relationships at work.”

These issues came to the boil in a series of potentially damaging disputes. While IPCC officers were expertly managing disagreements between others in their day jobs, they were at risk of running into conflict with their peers. In 2007-08, the commission had to deal with 11 internal grievances despite having only around 300 employees at the time.

The dispute resolution regulations in force at the time only made matters worse, Woodward feels: “They set out a very prescriptive way of dealing with grievances, and what was defined as a grievance, and we were getting into situations where people would be raising things they never intended to be a grievance, but which we had to treat that way.” Someone who wanted to know why they did not get an internal promotion, for example, might end up making a formal grievance when a straightforward conversation could have resolved things, he says.

Clearly, such an approach added to the HR workload and did little to foster an open and trusting environment. But it also didn't resolve the underlying issues. “I don't think I have ever seen people come out of a grievance process saying ‘that was worthwhile’,” says Woodward. In 2008, he decided to try a different approach. Having read about alternative dispute resolution (ADR), he suggested it as a way to deal with a disagreement between two colleagues. “They had managed to get themselves into what I imagine many people from the outside would see as a relatively petty argument, but it was becoming quite a big thing, and you could see that one of them was going to go.” The IPCC wanted to avoid that, not least because finding a replacement would be difficult and expensive.

Woodward was not optimistic – “I had suspended all belief in anything at that point” – but when the pair walked out of mediation saying they would be able to make things work he “had a light bulb moment” and began to build ADR into the IPCC’s everyday approach. “It wasn’t cheap, but compared to the cost of losing one of those people, it was good value,” he says.

ADR is a form of mediation that encourages affected parties to work through their differences to reach a mutually beneficial agreement, while not precluding future litigation. Mediation has become an increasingly important topic since 2014, when those bringing grievances were required to contact Acas before they could lodge a tribunal claim.

The IPCC has undergone a difficult few years following an independent review into its handling of deaths in custody led to changes in recruitment and training methods. But it is now on top of its internal grievance issues, says Woodward. HR led the project but got advocates from other parts of the organisation on board. “One thing we should have done sooner was involving the trade union... they or the staff reps will probably be the first people staff turn to,” he says. Getting unions to back the project was a critical part of the puzzle, as their recommendation that the individual consider ADR would go a long way in persuading them to look at the unfamiliar approach. Those staffing the company’s EAP line were also encouraged to explain what the process involved and how it could help.

Initially, the IPCC trained a couple of trade union reps and staff members as mediators but now relies on external professionals from consultancy Consensio, as the in-house mediators’ services were not used enough to keep them fresh. An external service also aids staff confidence, adds Woodward: “But looking back, training staff was still a good thing to do because it enabled them to understand the process and be able to talk about it positively.”

Mediation is not a panacea and is certainly not appropriate in every situation – sexual harassment claims being one obvious example – but it has proven highly effective in situations that require participants to deal with their emotions rather than simply facts, he says. It is also far from the first step in effective conflict management. The IPCC now trains all its managers on handling conflict in an emotionally intelligent way, rather than falling into the “natural” habit of simply judging the rights and wrongs of a situation.

“We are doing a lot on conflict prevention and dealing with things early on by giving good feedback and managers understanding that their role is to get involved when they see something wrong in the team,” says Woodward. “We still have more to do on that side... there is more we can do to get people coaching others around dealing with their emotional response to things and helping people modify their behaviour when they get into situations.”