

FROM ANIMOSITY, SERENDIPITY

THE WORKPLACE IS A NOTORIOUS BREEDING GROUND FOR CONFLICT; FROM TRIVIAL SPATS TO MULTI-MILLION POUND COURT CASES, AND THE CONDITIONS ARE BECOMING EVER MORE CONDUCTIVE TO CONFLICT. BUT COULD THIS DEVELOPMENT BE AN OPPORTUNITY IN DISGUISE THAT COULD IMPROVE THE SITUATION?

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One fundamental way to change an organisation's conflict culture is to change the procedural response to workplace conflicts. Typically, organisations respond to workplace conflict by initiating formal processes such as; grievance, disciplinary procedures or even employment tribunals. Such processes tend to reinforce the estrangement of the disputing parties, making it even harder for them to understand one another's perspectives. A very different approach is being introduced in more and more British workplaces; endorsed by Government initiatives such as the 2012-2014 regional mediation pilots in Cambridge and Manchester. In particular, many organisations are setting up in-house mediation schemes, whereby disputing parties are offered the support of a workplace mediator who helps the parties communicate in a confidential setting. The mediator is trained to be impartial and non-directive; in other words, they do not express an opinion as to who is right or wrong, and they do not make suggestions as to what the parties should do. The parties are invited to; express themselves, listen to one another and make joint decisions about their future. In this way, the parties have a far greater chance of converting their conflict into an opportunity to gain increased understanding of themselves and one another.

Training programmes are a crucial component of shifting an organisation's culture. Some organisations are choosing to train internal mediators, in order to embed the mediation skillset within the workforce, rather than using external mediators. These in-house mediators can apply their skills daily to help prevent conflict rising and to set an

example through their behaviour of how to convert interpersonal differences into opportunities for greater understanding and improved relationships. To become an accredited workplace mediator typically takes five days of training, but there is a wide range of shorter conflict management training programmes that can also foster the mindset and skills needed to promote open communication in conflict situations. It can be especially valuable to train line managers in conflict management skills; for example, in how to spot conflict in its early stages, help disputing parties to understand one another and avoid formal process.

As we have seen, the desire to understand that we are trying to foster is not only the desire to understand the other party to a dispute, but also the desire to understand oneself. In other words, self-awareness is a key component of the culture change we are working towards. Coaching is one powerful way to build self-awareness and foster the willingness and ability to understand one's own motivations and behaviours. Whether conflict coaching is a regular commitment which forms part of the employee's self-development programme, or is an ad hoc service to be used when conflict or other difficulties arise, it can do much to enhance the emotional intelligence of the workforce. If an organisation is serious about changing its conflict culture, it will also need to re-think its recruitment criteria in order to support this change. During the recruitment process, job applicants could be assessed for qualities such as; self-awareness, emotional intelligence and tolerance.

Explicitly naming these qualities in company literature and recruitment guidelines can increase the likelihood of attracting candidates who value and aspire to such qualities.

No culture change can take place without the active support of top leadership and appropriate leadership skills. If the organisation is trying to encourage employees to become more self-aware and open to difference, then these leadership qualities need above all to be demonstrated by the people at the top. If factionalism and hostility are rife at board meetings, then almost inevitably these behaviours will also be rife in the wider workforce. But if senior executives treat differences of opinions as opportunities to expand their worldviews and build deeper relationships, then the chances are far higher that the same will be true at grassroots level. To achieve this, the criteria for promotion should be set accordingly and budding leaders should be trained to respond to conflicts of opinion and personality in the desired way. By re-calibrating the way our employees react to interpersonal differences in the workplace, it may be possible to influence the way conflict plays out at a social and even political level. Could this be a new departure in corporate social responsibility? I hope so. ●



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