



Mediate to alleviate: reducing workplace stress

Alex Efthymiades, NOVEMBER 08, 2012



Yesterday was the 14th National Stress Awareness Day. The day was organised by the International Stress Management Association UK (ISMA-UK), a not-for-profit organisation which promotes wellbeing and stress prevention.

Workplace stress is on the increase. The ongoing economic uncertainty and constant change in many organisations means that people feel unsettled and unsure about their futures. Many people are scared that they may lose their jobs and that they will be unable to afford the higher cost of living or their mortgage repayments.

The Office of National Statistics (2012) states that last year alone, 131 million days were lost due to sickness absence. These statistics are staggering.

Stress has a huge impact on people's emotional wellbeing, as well as that of their families. And if people are stressed and unable to work productively, this also has a huge impact on business.

There is a clear link between stress and conflict. ISMA-UK lists 10 tips for reducing stress. Unsurprisingly, one of these is: "Avoid unnecessary conflict... Look for win-win situations. Look for a resolution to a dispute where both parties can achieve a positive outcome. Find out what the real cause of the problem is and deal with it." This is a very good tip. But how can it be implemented in practice?

Stress and workplace conflict

There are many different reasons why people suffer from work-related stress, and these are often complex and inter-linked. Does stress cause conflict, or does conflict cause stress? The answer is both, depending on context and the personalities involved.

It is clear that many people identify their source of stress not as work *per se*, but as someone that they work with. Someone may feel bullied or harassed at work. Someone else may feel that they are not trusted, respected or treated fairly. A manager may feel that their stress stems from someone who is under-performing or resisting their management style.

Organisations deal with these conflicts in a myriad number of ways, though formal process is often the preferred route. But if we are to follow ISMA UK's advice to "look for win-win situations" and to seek "a resolution to a dispute where both parties can achieve a positive outcome", formal process will not reach either of these outcomes.

Therefore, more and more organisations are using mediation as an alternative form of dispute resolution, including in cases where one or both parties identifies 'stress' as the source of their conflict.

How mediation reduces stress at work

Mediation is a confidential, voluntary and informal process that involves two or more parties in conflict and an impartial mediator. The goal is for parties to speak with each other openly and honestly to try and reach a mutually acceptable resolution. The impartial and experienced mediator uses techniques to facilitate a conversation in a safe and constructive environment. The guiding principles of mediation - confidentiality, impartiality, self-determination and voluntarism - mean that mediation is a process of empowerment, not blame or punishment. In other words, it is a process that enables 'win-win situations' for both parties.

Many organisations respond to conflict by invoking formal process. Not only does this not resolve the issue of "stress", but it often exacerbates the stress felt by both parties. Unlike mediation, the concept behind formal process is to rely on 'facts' and 'evidence' which are investigated, and an 'outcome' is determined which is outside the parties' control. Formal process is based on principles of 'right' and 'wrong' - a black and white answer to what is usually a grey area.

In contrast, mediation allows parties to have control of the situation and to take responsibility for the outcome. Mediation parties often comment that the process allowed them to tell their story without being blamed or judged. This reduces stress by addressing, in a non-confrontational and impartial way, the cause of the conflict.

Benefits to both employees and the organisation

Mediation enables people to sit in a room together and talk honestly and openly about what is upsetting them and what they need from each other to make it possible for them to work together more constructively. Many of the companies we work with report reductions in levels of stress and sickness absence, as well as higher staff retention following mediation. Employees and employers, as well as organisations as a whole, can reap long-term benefits by having a less stressed, more productive, engaged and motivated workforce.

With heightened stress levels in the workplace, it is clear that organisations need to look at new and more reliable ways to increase the wellbeing of their people. Whilst factors such as work pressures and organisational change are difficult to control, stress related to relationships can be managed with a positive outcome. Mediation can bring many benefits. It is a fast and effective process where most cases result in a positive outcome for all involved. On National Stress Awareness Day, what better way to recognise that stress is causing unmentionable harm to your employees and your bottom line than to think about introducing a more conciliatory way of resolving conflict within your organisation?

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