

Mediation: an essential skill for today's leaders



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HR professionals and line managers who have been trained in mediation skills report a greater understanding and self-awareness of their own conflict management styles, as well as a significant increase in their confidence and skill levels which enable them to address conflict.

Importantly, HR and line managers also report that after undertaking mediation skills training, they no longer feel overwhelmed by workplace conflict, but able to deal with it effectively. The benefits of this, especially in today's economic climate, can be priceless.

The professional HR practitioner is acutely aware of the negative impact uncertainty and instability can have on their workforce. It is understandable that

employees, many of whom are bruised and disgruntled, allow niggles, tension and conflict in the workplace to take on exaggerated importance. Whilst in easier times issues may have been brushed aside, in the current environment, relationships between co-workers are more likely to deteriorate to the point of break down. Leaders at all levels need to be aware of this and to take a proactive approach to ensure productivity and efficiency are not affected. This means stepping in and dealing with issues quickly so that they don't spiral out of control.

As an HR professional, it is impossible to be aware of every set of dynamics between each and every individual within your organisation. However, you can and indeed you should take a hands-on role to effectively resolve workplace conflict. You can do this either by becoming a trained mediator yourself or by up-skilling your managers and leaders in mediation skills so that they are able to take positive action when conflict occurs. The message is clear: nipping conflict in the bud has benefits for the whole organisation.

Yet traditionally, when conflict occurs within an organisation, most people either avoid the issue, or try to deal with it in a heavy-handed and potentially unconstructive manner, for example through a formal grievance process. Besides often being unhelpful, these approaches do not actually deal with the underlying reasons as to why the conflict occurred and what led to the relationship break down. Mediation offers an alternative to these traditional processes and enables people to discuss a mutually acceptable resolution to the conflict that is conciliatory and non-judgemental.

Mediation skills and the ability to nip conflict in the bud are not an innate attribute – they need to be learned. A leader trained in mediation skills is able to confidently and effectively deal with conflict between their staff. Importantly, a leader equipped with mediation skills manages conflict at the first sign, rather than letting conflict fester and potentially result in a formal grievance.

We are all well aware that formal processes incur a lot of management and HR time and cost and they very seldom result in a resolution that is beneficial to all parties involved. Mediation, unlike a formal grievance process, allows parties to speak about the issues that have led to the conflict, try to understand the breakdown in their relationship and discuss ways forward that are acceptable to everyone involved.

A mediating HR professional or manager, for example, will work with staff members in conflict to help them to understand the issues that have led to the problems, facilitate a dialogue relating to how these issues can be resolved and then plan for an outcome that will restore the working relationship. This will not only result in a more productive environment, but it will show the team that the organisation is taking their issues seriously. In these times of economic uncertainty and instability, staff members want to feel that their issues are recognised and

addressed, and that a constructive solution is being sought. In short, they want to be supported through their conflict.

In today's workplace, people look for greater honesty, understanding and openness from their employer. By introducing mediation services or a mediated approach to conflict resolution into your organisation, you will be demonstrating your commitment to recognising and efficiently resolving issues that arise between your employees. This will also help to rebuild any trust which may have been lost during the turbulent times of conflict.

Consensio has seen a significant growth in the number of HR professionals looking to add mediation skills to both their own and their management level staff through either in-house or public training courses. It's essential that you look for courses that are highly experiential and allow each delegate to practice mediation skills by using tailor-made case studies that reflect the conflict situations they are likely to encounter in their specific workplaces. By practicing mediation skills in a safe learning environment, and getting detailed feedback from experienced mediators, HR professionals and line managers will be able to take a more proactive and even-handed role when conflict occurs in their team.

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