



Mediation and mindfulness

Tania Coke, JULY 07, 2014



Mindfulness has recently caught the popular imagination as a way to counter the stress of everyday life. Mediation has also caught on, as a way to minimise the suffering (both human and financial) caused by workplace conflict.

On the surface, mindfulness and workplace mediation are very different: the former is most often considered a silent, solitary practice aimed at self-development; the latter typically involves a conversation between at least two parties and a mediator, and its aim is business improvement. Nevertheless, by placing these two practices side by side, we find some striking parallels and far-reaching implications as to where responsibility for conflict management lies.

Jon Kabat-Zinn – probably the person most associated with the spread of mindfulness in the West – defines it as “the awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose in the present moment without judgement”. I will take each of the elements of his definition in turn.

Paying attention

In mindfulness, the practitioner’s work is to pay attention to what is happening. This can include internally (such as one’s breathing or thoughts) or externally (such as the surrounding sounds or smells).

In mediation the same is true. It may be less obvious that a mediator also needs to pay attention to what is happening internally. But in fact, self-awareness is at the very core of the mediator’s skillset. During the course of a mediation, he or she is bound to experience all sorts of thoughts, feelings and sensations. Feelings might include the fear of being out of control. Sensations might include a quickening of the heartbeat as the conflict conversation unfolds. Not all of this internal activity is desirable but it does arise and the mediator needs to acknowledge this. We might even say that in order to pay attention to another person, I need to pay attention to myself.

On purpose

This next element of Kabat-Zinn's definition also chimes with the work of the mediator. Mediation is based on the idea that the parties are best placed to handle their own conflict, given the right environment and support.

The mediator helps to create these conditions by paying careful attention to the parties and reflecting back to them what was observed. Through this support the parties can gain a new perspective, which could help transform their conflict into an opportunity for deeper understanding of themselves and one another.

In the present moment

In both mediation and mindfulness, being aware requires the ability to let go of the sensations and thoughts that occurred in the past and remain open to what is arising in each new moment. If the practitioner gets too attached to any one sensation or thought, the quality of their awareness (both internal and external) starts to deteriorate.

Without judgement

Unlike the arbitrator, the mediator's task is not to judge which of the parties is right or what should be done to resolve the conflict. Instead the mediator aims, through their non-judgemental presence, to help the parties re-gain the strength and clarity to make their own decisions. This provides another reason why mediators need to pay attention to their own thoughts during mediation: in order to be aware when their impartiality is being compromised.

Conclusion

To sum up, in both mediation and mindfulness, the practitioner consciously chooses to pay attention to what is happening in each moment, without judgement. Through this process, mediator and meditator can reverse the downward spiral of destructive stress or conflict, both within themselves and in those around them. If that is so, there are big implications.

We need no longer think of conflict management as the sole responsibility of specialists such as mediators or HR. Each one of us can play a role in helping to transform conflict just through the quality of our awareness. When witnessing conflict around us, instead of picking a side and reinforcing the parties' perceptions of victimhood or righteousness, we can purposefully choose to bring greater mindfulness by paying attention to what is happening without judgement.

Of course it is no mean feat to cultivate this kind of non-judgemental attentiveness. It can take a lifetime of training. But with enough desire and discipline we can at least commit to trying.

Tania Coke is a senior mediation consultant at Consensio