

Mediation and wellbeing: An all-weather strategy



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Conflict in the workplace is as common as a rainy day in the UK. And, like a miserable wet day, workplace disputes have a negative effect on our wellbeing in the workplace. Whilst we can prepare for rain, with stylish wellies and colourful umbrellas, most HR professionals and line managers feel ill-equipped and lack the confidence to deal with issues that arise from difficult working relationships.

Avoiding conflict may seem like the least stressful route for all involved. However, issues that are ignored or not handled effectively often lead to the escalation of conflict which, in turn, leaves staff members feeling more stressed and

demoralised. The financial and human cost of conflict seen through absenteeism, formal processes and staff turnover is a serious issue that organisations need to address. Indeed, the recent Government consultation on workplace disputes, launched in January this year, is directly aimed at achieving earlier resolution for all parties without having to go to an employment tribunal.

The UK National Work-Stress Network lists bullying, no opportunity to voice complaints and prolonged conflict between individuals as some of the main causes of stress in the workplace. With one in five Britons claiming to suffer from workplace stress and half a million stating that they have become ill as a result, it is essential that organisations have a wellness scheme and one that include methods to resolve conflict in the workplace.

Employers have a responsibility to provide a healthy environment for their employees. Mediation offers an informal and flexible way to deal with conflict and can form an important part of a company's wellbeing strategy. The process enables staff members to talk with each other in an open and confidential space to find a mutually acceptable resolution to their issues. Most employees and employers report positive outcomes from mediation.

Individuals who have gone through the experience often report that the issue with their colleague or manager has been resolved. They also note that they felt listened to, supported and back in control. Employers often comment that mediation is not only cost and time-effective compared to other processes, but that they observe increased productivity and staff morale post-mediation. There are a number of options available for organisations that are looking to embed mediation as part of a wellbeing initiative.

Managers are often tasked with workplace duties that directly impact their team's health and wellbeing. These can include dealing with disciplinary issues, staff conduct and poor relationships between colleagues. In other words, situations that can give rise to workplace conflict. Yet, the majority of managers have not received any training in mediation or conflict management skills. As the first port of call for finding out about issues, managers should also be the first port of call for resolving issues. Managers trained in how to handle difficult conversations, can help open the lines of communication and significantly improve wellbeing in the workplace.

HR teams play a key part in implementing a wellbeing development plan into their organisations. Many of these HR professionals have also trained in mediation skills. However, HR often feels unable to formally utilise these skills back in the workplace as they believe parties in conflict will not see them as impartial. This can be particularly acute in smaller organisations. It is a personal choice for both HR and the parties involved as to whether HR are the most appropriate people to mediate. Where HR can definitely play a key role is in advising parties in conflict about their options. Short training courses for HR, and others engaged in an

advisory capacity, can enable HR to identify when mediation might be appropriate and offer support to key stakeholders in the process.

For many organisations with a sizeable workforce, setting up an internal mediation service (IMS) is the most efficient way to deal with organisational conflict. An IMS gives organisations the facility to address and resolve conflicts internally at an early stage, it develops employee skills and it can create an organisational culture of conflict resolution. The service generally consists of a number of trained and accredited mediators who volunteer to mediate a few cases a year, in addition to their work duties. An IMS can sit within many areas of an organisation, for example, in HR or Occupational Health. Increasingly, a number of organisations have chosen to locate their IMS specifically in wellbeing.

Many workplace disputes can be resolved by using an internal mediator. However, an external mediator is sometimes required in more serious cases or where requested by one of the parties. An external mediator not only brings impartiality to any case but also has the experience of dealing with complex issues. Using external mediators directly supports the wellbeing of all parties involved in conflict.

With heightened stress levels in the workplace, it is clear that organisations need to look at new and reliable methods to increase the wellbeing of its workforce. While factors such as work demands and organisational changes are difficult to control, workplace relationships can be managed with a positive outcome. Whatever the right approach is for your organisation, it is clear that mediation can bring many benefits. It is a fast and effective process where most cases result in a positive outcome for all involved. Mediation also offers the opportunity for individuals and organisations to create constructive and healthy work environments. Staff members trained in mediation skills will be able to nip conflict in the bud and learn communication strategies to help employees feel listened to, motivated and valued at work.

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