

What can you do to defuse workplace conflicts?



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What could you do to help defuse workplace conflicts? This two-part series outlines the core skills used by trained mediators in a workplace mediation.

These skills can be applied on an informal basis, as a means of managing workplace conflict at the earliest stage.

Following Consensio's mediation principles, we assume firstly that your involvement is impartial: you are not going to judge who is right or wrong. Secondly, you will encourage the parties to make their own decisions and find their own way forward. Your role as facilitator is to help them have the conversation that will make this possible.

How to get started

A good way to start is with a quick outline of your involvement, by reminding the parties that you will not be making judgments (impartiality principle) and that they are responsible for making their own decisions (self-determination principle). It is also worth checking if they have any questions, for example, regarding confidentiality.

Another useful step is to establish guidelines. We propose two guidelines: that the parties listen to one another; and that they speak to one another with respect. However, you could also ask the parties directly "Would you like to set any guidelines for this conversation?"

We are now ready to help the parties to talk with each other. To initiate this, you can use an open question such as: "Where would you like to begin?"

Workplace mediations will often feature 'uninterrupted speaking time', which is a chance for each party to express upfront their own perspective on the situation. Your goal is for the parties to take responsibility for the conversation, as this is a step towards taking responsibility for conflict management.

What if the parties disagree about how to proceed? What if they cannot decide who should speak first? These dilemmas are an opportunity for the parties to express themselves, hear one another, and make joint decisions as to how to proceed.

The challenges they present to you, and the skills required to facilitate them, are at the heart of a workplace mediator's job.

How to listen

Perhaps the biggest part of your job, as you facilitate a workplace conflict conversation, is to listen. The quality of your listening can have a profound, and often underestimated, effect on the parties. Your primary intention as you listen is to understand the parties and how they view the conflict. Your role is not to judge them, fix their problem or try to comfort or sympathise with them.

Empathy is a more appropriate word, since it implies feeling for the parties without agreeing with them. This kind of listening requires a willingness to receive what is being expressed, however unpalatable the message and however much you disagree. Your aim is to be open and accept the parties' perspective, as their 'truth'.

Listening is hard work. It requires intense concentration and particular focus is given to this skill on workplace mediation training courses. Listening is not just about paying attention to the verbal message of the speaker, but also to the way their words are spoken, the emotions behind the words and the body language.

You need to pay attention to yourself, keeping a close eye on your own feelings and reactions as the conversation unfolds. If we take the principle of impartiality seriously, we have to be prepared to acknowledge the prejudices and stereotypes that we all carry within ourselves, consciously or unconsciously.

What does this impartial listening do for the parties? Firstly, you can become a role model for the parties.

They may start to listen to one another, and themselves, in the same way.

Secondly, by not judging, we create more space for the parties to exercise their own self-determination. In the absence of that external judgement, it becomes easier for the parties to reflect on their situation, make sense of what has happened and decide for themselves how to move on.

Playing back the issues

What can you say or do in response to help the parties move on? Play-back flows naturally from listening, and is like holding up a mirror to the parties to show them what you observe from your impartial perspective. By doing so, you demonstrate to the parties that you are seeking to understand and not to judge. You also help them to gain a better understanding for themselves, both of their own perspective and that of the other party.

Play-back includes two core skills: reflecting back and summarising. A reflection is a short intervention to reflect back what the party has just expressed. It can be in the speaker's own words, e.g. "You say you are feeling frustrated", or paraphrased in your own words, e.g. "It sounds as if you're feeling frustrated". You can reflect not just what the speaker has said, but their body language or you may even tentatively highlight any contradictions that you perceive in their self-expression, e.g. "You say that there is no problem, and yet it looks to me that there's something troubling you".

A summary serves the same purpose as a reflection, but is generally a longer intervention that covers a larger part of the conversation. You might summarise the key points each party has been making, or you might summarise what is happening in the conversation.

One of the biggest challenges when playing back is timing. Sometimes there will be a natural break in the conversation or at other times, you may wish to interrupt if no natural break occurs. Bear in mind that a gap in the conversation is not an automatic invitation to speak, so try to respect the parties' silence. It may be that they are busy thinking, or perhaps they are mustering up the courage to say something important.

As you play-back what you observe of the conversation, remember that your aim is to hold up a mirror to the parties without judging, offering opinions, filtering, sympathising, or trying to fix anything.