

Boost participative leadership, employee empowerment and engagement

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There is a strong argument in favour of mediation as a means of handling workplace conflict because of the obvious cost-savings and the fact that mediation can bypass the need for lengthy formal processes and significantly reduce human stress and suffering in the process.

These are genuine and important considerations but there is another driver for workplace mediation which is less documented: the underlying principles of facilitative mediation complement the general trend towards a more participative style of management used in many organisations today. Facilitative mediation reinforces current management trends towards employee empowerment and engagement, as well as devolved decision-making.

The shift to participative leadership

Leadership theory distinguishes two main styles of leadership: autocratic and participative¹. The former is associated with hierarchical structures in which decision-making is the preserve of the leader; the job of junior employees is to implement orders passed down from above. Participative leadership, on the other hand, is associated with flatter organisational structures, in which team members participate in the decision-making process and are given greater autonomy within their specific areas of expertise. Whilst autocratic leadership held sway for much of the last century, today the prevailing trend is towards more participative styles of leadership.

One of the predominant reasons is the clear benefit in terms of increased motivation, creativity and personal development. When employees are given autonomy - within appropriate boundaries and with adequate coaching and support - they are more likely to put more of themselves into their work and to reach for more creative solutions. Meanwhile, the greater level of responsibility generally results in deeper learning and faster personal development. A similar trend can be seen in the field of education theory. The job of the teacher is no longer a matter of handing out set answers for students to memorise. Instead, the teacher's challenge is increasingly to ask questions and support students in finding their own answers. So the emerging model, in both schools and workplaces, is that of empowerment and participation. The old paradigm of 'command and control' is losing its iron grip.²

However, many organisations wishing to make the transition to more participative leadership are struggling to do so. It is hard for managers to unlearn habits developed over years. It can also feel threatening for someone accustomed to 'being in charge' to hand over decision-making power to their team members. It may feel like a loss of control, leading to a sense of powerlessness, even a crisis in self-confidence. It can be hard for team members too, if they are used to being told what to do and unaccustomed to taking responsibility for their own decisions and actions.

How mediation can support this shift

But help is at hand from an unlikely source. Mediation began to emerge in British workplaces towards the end of the last century as an alternative to formal processes such as grievances, disciplinary procedures and employment tribunals. Its benefits in terms of cost savings and reduced suffering are well-documented. What is also emerging, through feedback from training programmes, is that mediation training enables delegates to become better managers.

Facilitative mediation is based on the principles of mediator impartiality and party self-determination. As such, the mediator does not judge who is right or wrong and does not impose a solution on the parties. Instead, the mediator pushes responsibility back to the parties to take control of their own dispute and jointly design their own way forward. The approach is similar to that of the participative leader, who knows how to restrain the decision-making impulse and focus first on eliciting team members' viewpoints.

How the final decision is made will depend on the situation. But before that decision is made, the leader's job is to facilitate an open exchange of opinions in what is often an emotionally charged environment. It requires impeccable listening skills, knowing how to construct timely and even-handed summaries and the ability to

handle extreme emotions. These are sophisticated skills, rarely taught to an adequate level as part of general management training.

An accredited workplace mediation training programme focuses on precisely these skills. In particular, it involves intensive mediation role play in which delegates play not only the role of the mediator, but also the parties to the dispute. This provides a powerful, 360 degree experience of the benefits of not making decisions on behalf of the parties or urging them towards a specific outcome, but instead supporting them in finding their own way forward.

Trainee mediators are frequently astonished to discover that the parties to the dispute, when empowered in this way, often come up with far better solutions of their own, and in the process gain valuable skills for handling conflict better in the future. Attending mediation training is a transformative experience for managers and instills the confidence needed to experiment with more participative styles of leadership once back in the workplace.

In conclusion, not only does mediation bring cost and time savings, but it can also support organisations in shifting towards a more participative management style which is fast emerging as the model of the future.

For further information on mediation, visit [Consensio Partners](#).

Notes

1. Lewin, K., Lippitt, R., & White, R. K. (1939). Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created social climates. *Journal of Social Psychology*.

2. Ira Schor (1992). "Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change", University Of Chicago Press.