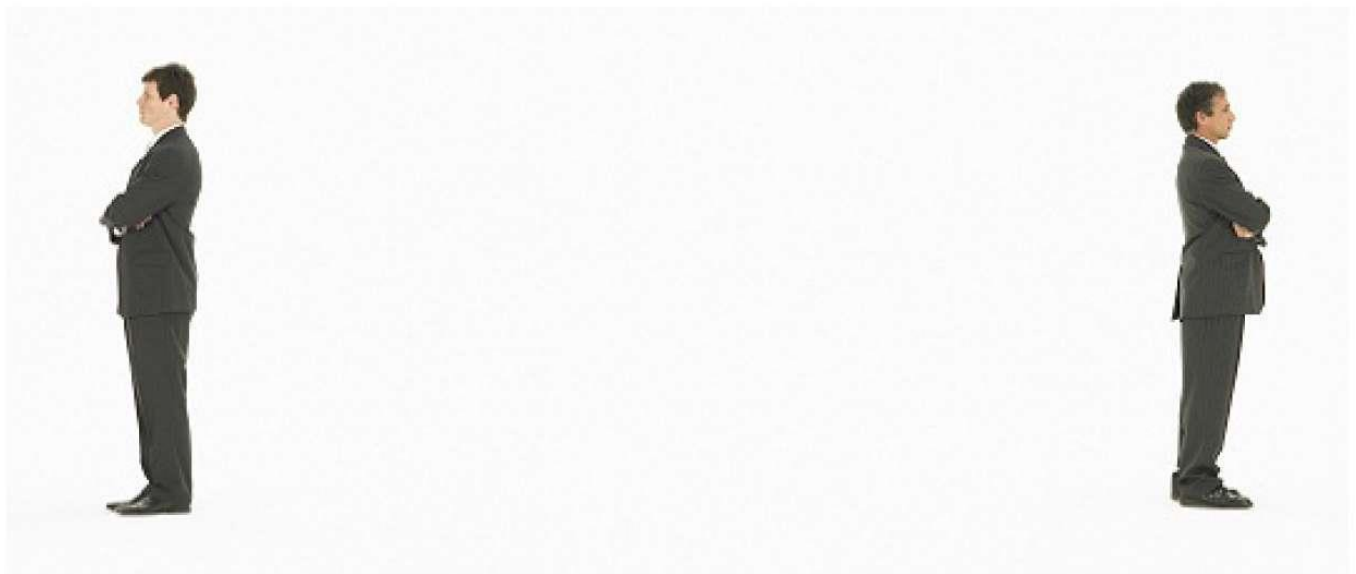


Conflict and wellbeing: How one impacts the other



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Anna Shields believes that effective conflict management will create healthier workplaces and workforces.

Conflict management is now often a standard component of HR's training portfolio. But conflict can be managed in very different ways, so how should one choose between the alternatives available when designing your training programmes? The customary way to assess conflict management approaches is to consider their effectiveness in resolving disputes. But resolution is not the only measure of success in mediation. There is also the psychological impact on the parties involved, as discussed in [my previous article for Training Zone](#). Following on from that article, in this piece we explore how your choice of conflict management training might impact employee wellbeing.

There are currently two predominant models of conflict management training. The first is arbitration, in which a third party, having listened to all parties to the dispute, decides an outcome on their behalf. Formal processes such as disciplinary and grievance procedures and employee tribunals are all based on arbitration. At the other end of the spectrum lies mediation in which a mediator facilitates direct communication between the parties and supports them in finding their own outcomes.

So how do these two models – arbitration and mediation – impact on the wellbeing of employees involved? Let's consider both models from the point of view of the disputing parties. In both cases, we can identify three stages of the process: pre, during and post.

Pre

In arbitration-based approaches, the pre-stage takes the form of information gathering; interviews with witnesses and preparation of written reports on each of the disputing parties. This stage is typically characterised by suspicion and mistrust, since information is not being openly shared. It is often accompanied by faction-building as parties try to recruit colleagues to their side. This stage can be protracted over a number of weeks during which parties become increasingly entrenched in their positions and mistrusting of one another.

In mediation, on the other hand, there is no information-gathering from outside witnesses. Instead, the pre-stage takes the form of private meetings between the mediator and each of the parties separately. The purpose of these meetings is for the parties to talk through the situation in order for them to gain clarity on their own perspective and prepare themselves for the joint meeting. The parties are typically feeling anxious at the prospect of meeting the other party face-to-face, but the experience of being listened to by the mediator can help ease that anxiety. It is usually the first time since the conflict began that the party has been able to speak to someone without being judged (whether as right or wrong) or being given an opinion. As a result, this meeting typically has a positive effect on employees' wellbeing, through the healing effect of being listened to.

During

The second stage, in the case of arbitration, is the hearing or investigation. This is a tightly-controlled process led by the arbitrator. At this stage, the parties are likely to feel a sense of powerlessness since the process and the decision-making is out of their hands. Moreover, the parties generally have no chance to communicate directly with one another. As an adversarial process, arbitration tends to reinforce hostilities between parties and solidify victim/victor mindsets.

In the case of mediation, the second stage is the joint meeting between the parties. This can be a highly challenging experience for the parties because they are exposing themselves directly to one another and sharing in the responsibility for addressing the conflict. And yet those who choose to accept the challenge often find that the discomfort gives way to a sense of greater self-empowerment. By expressing themselves to one another directly - and listening to one another - they can get a far clearer grasp of the situation, increase their sense of autonomy and begin to salvage their battered dignity.

Post

Arbitration's aim is to address the facts, not the feelings involved in conflict. There is typically no opportunity for the parties to express their feelings verbally to one another – whether positive or negative. As a result, in the aftermath of arbitration, parties often carry many unresolved feelings including guilt, regret and hurt pride. Whatever the outcome of the procedure – even if the ruling is vindicating – these psychological scars fade slowly.

By contrast, the post-mediation period is often characterised by deeper understanding of the self and of others as a result of direct communication with the other party. This deeper understanding often makes the situation easier to bear, even if no concrete solution has been identified. In fact, in mediation the parties are far more likely to reach satisfactory outcomes because they design these outcomes themselves. In addition, parties often come away from mediation with a better idea of how to handle conflict in the future by virtue of having participated in mediation and shared in the responsibility for resolving their dispute.

So far we have considered conflict from the point of view of the disputing parties. But those parties are not the only ones affected by conflict. We also need to consider the wellbeing of the people brought in to handle the conflict – the arbitrators and mediators. In fact, this is highly relevant from a training perspective as they are the ones receiving the conflict management training. The arbitrator's responsibility of making decisions on behalf of parties can bring significant stress. By handing over the decision-making responsibility to the involved parties, the mediator avoids this particular stress. One of the key stresses for the mediator is the frequent sense of being 'out of control' and the obligation to refrain from expressing opinions or suggesting solutions. However, the role of mediator can also bring deep rewards – in particular those precious moments when disputing parties find glimmers of mutual understanding.

There are many other stakeholders in any dispute, including the HR staff involved, the witnesses, as well as the 'bystanders' to conflict – the team members, managers and other colleagues who will often suffer from the atmosphere of hostility and the pressure to take sides or find solutions. For these people, having the dispute handled through mediation will often be in their best interest since it is a faster

process (typically lasting one day) and because mediation promotes transparency, collaboration and personal dignity.

By comparing the psychology of arbitration and mediation we see a clear pattern. Arbitration can create antagonistic relationships between the parties instead of an environment in which parties, if they wish, can begin to build bridges. Arbitration often reinforces parties' sense of helplessness whilst mediation can offer parties the opportunity to take control of the crisis to find their own solutions. And arbitration often leaves bitter memories whilst mediation has the potential to transform the bitterness of conflict into the possibility of new understanding of self and other. Those who have been effectively trained to help deliver this new understanding will be playing a key role in helping to create and maintain healthy workforces and workplaces.

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