

## 3 Mediation Skills To Help Navigate Conflict In Times Of Uncertainty

Anna Shields, Consensio 15 October 2020

Organizations are facing turbulent times ahead. Not only are the U.K., U.S., and many other economies in recession, but there is no end in sight for the Covid-19 pandemic. As the continued uncertainty affects morale and well-being, minor irritations between colleagues can escalate and intensify to all-out conflict.

It can be challenging for leaders to know how to support staff experiencing workplace conflict. With so many competing pressures brought on by the pandemic, it can be tempting to look the other way. However, leaving workplace conflict to fester impacts an individual's mental and physical health. Conflict also affects the wider team and ultimately, the organization too. By applying the following three mediation skills, leaders can help their employees to navigate conflict in the uncharted waters ahead.

### 1. Create a safe environment

A mediator's role is to create an environment in which parties feel safe to discuss their issues and concerns. For leaders, this means that it's important to think about the physical environment which will allow their team members to speak about difficult issues relating to conflict, whether in person or online. For example, where should conversations take place, and who should be present? At a deeper level, the mediator builds trust by cultivating a space where individuals can talk freely, without fear of judgment. This 'psychologically-safe' space builds trust and enables parties to express their feelings. Whilst it can feel uncomfortable for leaders to listen to strong emotions, feelings are at the core of all difficult conversations. And unexpressed feelings obstruct the ability to listen to one another.

### 2. Allow people to feel heard

A core desire of those in conflict is to be listened to and to have their viewpoints considered. Although many staff members have been on communication skills training where they have been taught active-listening skills, it can be hard to put these skills into practice when the default expectation is to find a solution or give an opinion.

Instead, try to listen like a mediator. Listen to understand, rather than to give advice. Listen in silence rather than interrupting. And listen with an open mind, rather than with judgment or evaluation. This will allow staff members to make sense of their situation, process their emotions, and work out how they can best resolve their situation.

In an organizational context, allowing employees to discuss their views, concerns, and feelings, can help them to cope with change and uncertainty. There are many ways to do this, for example, through structured feedback processes, facilitated sessions, or team meetings. Developing a team conflict charter can help a group define how it wants to discuss issues and provide a safe space for views to be aired.

### **3. Move away from positions and focus on needs**

People in conflict often arrive with fixed positions or mindsets, for example, 'My boss is a bully so I want to be moved to another team.' In this scenario, individuals can become so fixated on their demand that they don't explain what's beneath the demand. It often results in a lose-lose outcome for the staff members and their organizations, as positions become entrenched and relationships are irreparably damaged.

However, the initial position is like the tip of an iceberg. When you dig beneath the surface, there are underlying needs to explore. In the workplace, these needs often show up in tangible ways, such as earning a living, promotion, and a safe working environment. But there are psychological needs that are also present, such as a need for respect, to be treated fairly, or to be valued. Mediators are always listening for the unmet needs – it's often where the conflict can be thawed.

By using these three mediation techniques, leaders have an opportunity to manage workplace conflicts more effectively and promote informal conflict resolution throughout the organization. Helping employees to make sense of their issues and providing open and safe forums for concerns to be aired, will help organizations navigate the stormy seas ahead.