

Forbes

When No Answer Is The Best Answer: Using Non-Directiveness In Conflict

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 30 October 2025

We live in a society where most people expect those in authority to have all the answers. In childhood, parents tell children what to do and when to say sorry. In education, teachers determine who has met the grade or fallen short. In the world of work, this tendency often continues: when workplace conflict arises, employees usually look to managers or HR to step in and resolve issues.

Whilst this instinct to lead with solutions might feel helpful, it's often counterproductive. What's most needed is often precisely the opposite: not to give an opinion or judgment. In mediation terms, this is known as non-directiveness.

Why non-directiveness is powerful in conflict resolution

Non-directiveness is the ability to withhold personal views and opinions, and to respect the autonomy of others, even when the answer appears obvious to you. It does not mean avoiding issues, but rather empowering others to find their own way forward.

In recent conflict management research by Consensio, non-directiveness was found to be one of the three most valuable skills acquired through workplace mediation training, alongside the better-known skills of connected listening and perspective-taking. There are a few key reasons why non-directiveness is such a powerful skill:

1. Non-directiveness encourages buy-in

Workplace mediators will tell you that the people who experience conflict are the best at coming up with a solution. The parties involved are living the situation, so they will know best what will work for them. When parties have to come up with their own solution, they are far more likely to commit to it.

2. Non-directiveness promotes accountability

In many organizations, costly top-down management approaches have been replaced by a drive to empower staff with more autonomy. Promoting accountability works well in conflict situations too. As a colleague recently reflected, a mediator is responsible *to* the parties but not *for* the parties. In the same way, a manager's role is to help create a team culture of accountability for managing conflict, but not to resolve all the issues that their team members are encountering.

3. Non-directiveness builds better relationships

A manager who encourages and supports team members to navigate their own disputes will likely forge more open and trusting relationships. When colleagues are given the time and space to work through issues together, they learn more about themselves and each other, and this helps to rebuild trust. This allows relationships to evolve from a dispute being not only repaired, but also stronger

and more resilient. It is these connections and high trust levels that are cornerstones of high-performing teams.

4. Non-directiveness fosters innovation

When a manager or HR empowers parties to come up with their own solutions, this often leads to more creative solutions. It also reduces the time a manager spends dealing with team issues that team members can sort out effectively themselves.

Non-directiveness in conflict management

There are wider opportunities to use non-directiveness in conflict management. New ideas, new ways of working, and product or service innovations can all emerge from situations of conflict. A manager who harnesses conflict constructively can therefore benefit from greater productivity and team performance. So the next time one of your team members seeks your input on a challenging issue, ask yourself whether you are imposing a solution or enabling resolution.