Mediation – Where prevention meets cure.

My story of conflict and how it was resolved through mediation.



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I've been a manager and led teams for over 25 years, though I'm still learning. I work part-time, but still spend over 30 hours each week at work. There are times, such as last summer, when conflict at work spilled over into my personal life, leaving me exhausted and lacking in self-confidence. Friends commented that I wasn't my normal positive self. My mental and physical health were affected. It was not enough for me to recognise this – I knew I had to act.

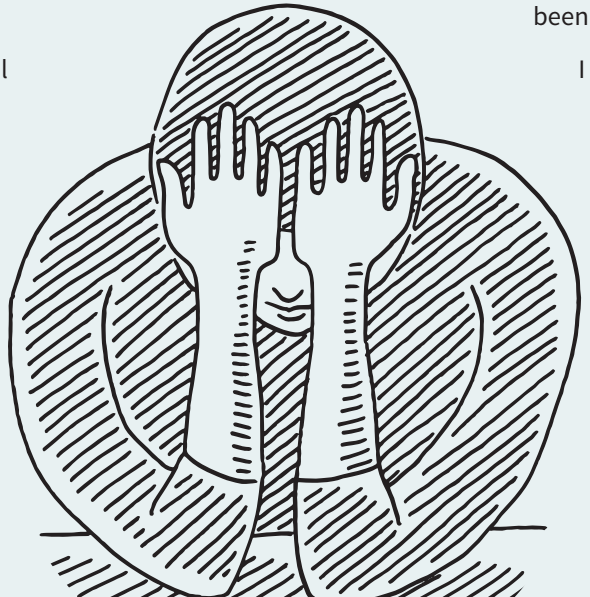
A senior manager working in the field of mental health

How did it start?

In early July, we were four months into the pandemic, working from home and spending hours in online meetings. We were also recovering from a major project and people were overwhelmed.

I received an email, which led to a phone call, and finally, after several weeks, I was informed that a complaint had been made against me.

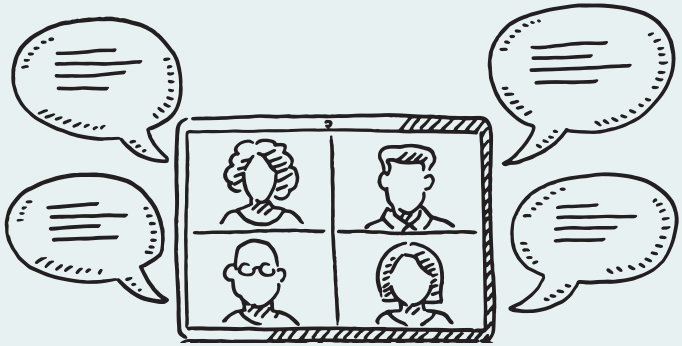
I felt confused, upset and physically sick. Serious allegations had been made, but there was little detail regarding the actual alleged events for me to answer to.



I continued to work, do my job and support my team, but I felt unsafe and unsupported. A formal investigation cleared me, and maybe it should have ended there. But I still felt angry with how this had been handled.

I wasn't sleeping. I felt anxious and struggled to remain professional when meeting with my boss, who was one of the people who'd dealt with the complaint. This was impacting my personal life and, most importantly, my work life and the decisions I was making.

And so, to mediation.



I knew this couldn't go on, so when my boss suggested mediation, I was grateful for the opportunity to discuss things in the open.

From the moment I met the mediator, I felt she was standing by me, with her team, leading me through the mediation process. From the very first email, where I signed an agreement that made me feel safe, and completed a questionnaire that enabled me – even though I was shaking – to our first mediation meeting, where I was able to express myself calmly and in a considered way.

We had two joint mediation sessions, separated by a week because the pandemic meant we were meeting via Zoom, which can be tiring for long periods. The space held by the mediator during the meetings felt safe. My boss and I both had time to think, and importantly, because we knew our turn would come, we listened to each other and asked questions to clarify our understanding of what the other was saying.

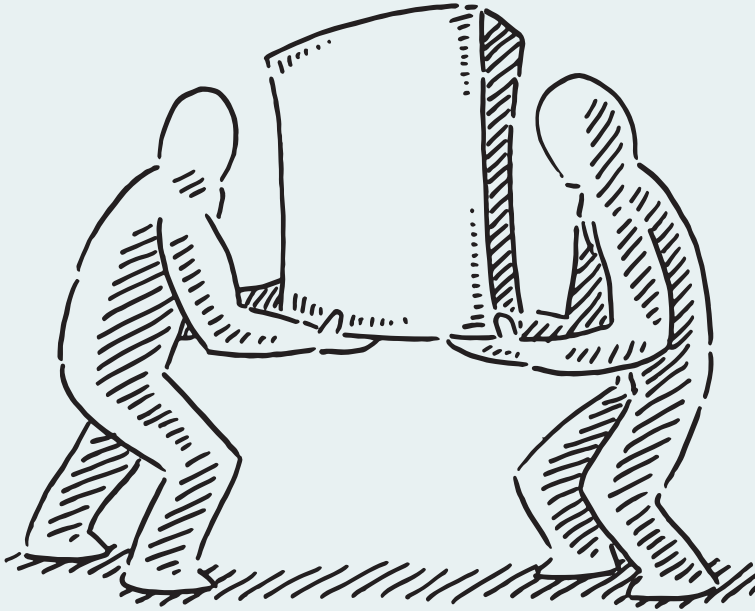
The mediator stopped us at times, kindly, to reflect back what she heard us say, which gave us the chance to consider if this was what we meant or if there was more to add. This encouraged us to say everything that was on our minds, and not to leave things unsaid.

I'm not saying it was easy. Emotions can feel physical. The mediation and counselling I was getting alongside it, meant I could recognise quickly when I responded physically and acknowledge this so that I could remain calm and in a place where I'd be able to discuss constructive solutions. And those solutions surfaced.

Left with a touchstone.

My boss and I are on a journey. Mediation has left us with what we call our ‘touchstone’. When one of us says something, or behaves in a way that the other finds upsetting or disrespectful, we go back to what we discussed in our mediation meetings – our ‘touchstone’ – and remind each other that this is what led to our conflict, and what we discussed at mediation. The difference now is that issues are raised quickly because it feels safe to do so, and we’re able to raise them with humour, and think before we act.

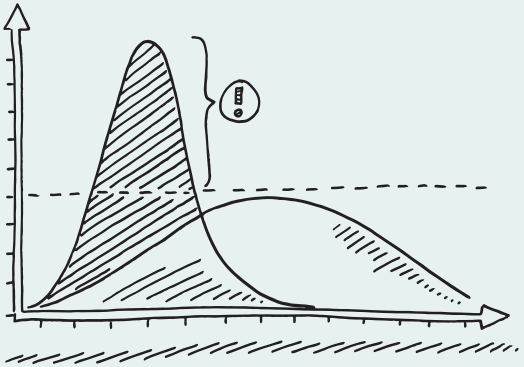
If there’s one change to come from what I’ve experienced, it’s this: I want employees to know that mediation is a good option, and that employers should make it easy to access. There’s such stigma to mediation, which is still seen as a ‘last resort’. From my experience, I can say that it should be the first, last and only resort. I’d like organisations and individuals who experience conflict at work to know that **mediation is where prevention meets cure**.



Addendum: My research into workplace conflict.

I work for an organisation whose work is informed by rigorous research. So, when I thought about how I wanted to share my mediation experience, it felt natural to look at the available research that helps to validate my feelings of anger, confusion and the impact of workplace conflict on my mental health.

In January 2020, the CIPD published a report, 'Managing conflict in the modern workplace', which suggests that conflict is very much a part of organisational life, and a common occurrence according to a significant proportion of both employees (26%) and employers (20%).[1]



Consensio's 2019 research highlights the significant link between workplace conflict and the worrying growth in mental health issues. An overwhelming 84% of those who took part in the research reported that workplace conflict had affected their overall health. Specifically, 75% said it had impacted their mental health, 65% their physical well-being, and 25% had to take time off work due to the negative impact of workplace conflict.[2]

The research I read highlights that more needs to be done by individuals and organisations to take conflict, people management skills and managing difficult conversations more seriously, and that we need to be braver in our approach.

[1]https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/disputes/managing-workplace-conflict-report [2]https://www.consensiopartners.co.uk/news/workplace-conflict-is-a-growing-mental-health-issue

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