www.hrmagazine.co.uk

Four ways to strengthen leadership through mediation skills

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 20 November 2026

Workplace conflict is on the rise, and organisations are struggling to keep pace. According to Acas, 44% of working-age adults in Great Britain experienced conflict at work in 2025, the highest level ever recorded in a survey of British workers. Earlier Acas research estimated that conflict costs UK employers £28.5bn per year.

Helping managers address disagreements quickly and informally has a central role in building a healthy workplace culture. Yet a promotion to management does not always come with an instruction manual for handling complex working relationships.

This is where the principles that underpin workplace mediation can help. While managers have different responsibilities from mediators, they can draw on four core mediation principles: impartiality, confidentiality, voluntariness and self-determination. These principles help managers navigate difficult conversations, build trust and encourage employees to take greater responsibility for resolving the conflicts they experience. They also offer valuable lessons for developing leadership capabilities.

1. Be impartial

Mediators do not take sides or decide who is right and wrong. Instead, they facilitate conversations in which all parties can explain their perspectives and feel heard.

Personal experiences, assumptions and unconscious biases influence how managers interpret events, which has the potential to lead employees to perceive favouritism or unfair treatment.

Although managers cannot always remain neutral, they can learn to approach disagreements in a more open-minded way. When managers learn to listen without judgement, check their assumptions and reflect back what has been said, this will help them better understand different perspectives and clarify misunderstandings that could escalate conflict.

2. Remain confidential

Confidentiality is key to the mediation process as it allows participants the confidence to speak openly without fearing that sensitive information will be shared or used against them.

While managers cannot promise absolute confidentiality in every workplace situation, they can learn to handle sensitive issues with discretion and explain when they may need to share concerns with others.

Respecting confidentiality also contributes to psychological safety. When employees trust that sensitive issues will be handled appropriately, they are more likely to feel comfortable admitting mistakes and raising difficult issues. This gives managers a better opportunity to identify problems early, before they escalate.

3. Allow choice and voice

When parties attend mediation voluntarily, they are more likely to engage with the process in a meaningful way.

In the workplace, managers cannot make every discussion or decision about a conflict optional. However, they can invite employees to have their say in how problems should be addressed, and give them meaningful opportunities to shape the way forward.

Language plays a part. Professor Elizabeth Stokoe has analysed how the wording of questions shapes conversations. Her research into mediation enquiries found that asking whether someone would be willing to participate was more effective than asking whether they might be interested in attending mediation.

The wider lesson for managers is to consider how they invite participation, what questions they ask and how they distinguish between fixed decisions they impose and outcomes where parties have a say.

4. Encourage self-determination

Self-determination means that the people involved in a conflict shape the outcome of their conversation and the resolution of their conflict. This is a powerful mediation principle because those closest to a conflict are often best placed to understand the issues and identify what might work.

For managers, this requires a shift away from the expectation that leadership means having all the answers. When a manager steps in to resolve every disagreement with a quick fix, employees may not develop their own problem-solving skills or take accountability for the outcome.

Managers can adopt a more coaching-led approach by asking questions that help employees explore options, consider consequences and agree on practical next steps.

The aim is not to leave employees to resolve every issue themselves, but to help managers recognise when to support others in finding a solution. Direct intervention may be necessary in some cases but, if managers get involved all the time, they may get in the way of people finding their own way forward.

How to embed mediation principles in management development

The principles outlined can help HR strengthen management capability while supporting a more constructive approach to workplace conflict. The challenge is translating them into everyday management behaviours, rather than simply teaching managers about mediation.

Rather than training all managers to become mediators, they need different skills training. Scenario-based exercises, peer discussions and facilitated practice can help managers navigate difficult

conversations and recognise how their own behaviour affects others. This type of training will help managers become more self-aware and confident in supporting people in conflict.

Combining practical learning with coaching, ongoing bite-size sessions and consistent expectations for managers will help to embed these behaviours into practice. Mediation principles are not only relevant for resolving conflict. They can also help managers build stronger working relationships, make better decisions, and develop more engaged teams.