



“MANY PEOPLE ARE HIGHLY SCEPTICAL ABOUT MEDIATION, SO MANAGERS MUST STRIKE THE RIGHT TONE TO ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION”

Disagreements and discord are facts of working life, but without appropriate management they can soon get out of hand. By remaining objective and taking a mediating approach to warring employees, managers can quickly get their teams back on track



WHENEVER PEOPLE WORK TOGETHER, there will always be the risk of conflict – it's an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of the pressure and personal proximity that most jobs bring. Generally these are minor problems but, if left unresolved, conflict can be extremely damaging to long-term working relationships. And any managers who want to maintain a happy, motivated and high-performing team need to learn to be skilled and confident mediators.

WHAT IS MEDIATION?

When it comes to managing conflict, mediation is a great way of resolving arguments and rebuilding working relationships. It is a process by which an impartial third party – in this case a manager – helps people in dispute work out an agreement. Essentially, mediation is about three things: content, interaction and process.

CONTENT

The content of any mediation is the issues that people are concerned about – the practical disagreements about work style, role and task. To get to the bottom of this, managers need two key mediation skills – the ability to listen reflectively and to explore options.

Listen reflectively

To encourage high levels of openness, managers need to:

- **Meet somewhere private and neutral** where conversations won't be interrupted
- **Ask questions to build up detail** and to understand what exactly the issue is and what is important for each person concerned. The funnel technique is a useful way of doing this, it involves moving steadily from open questions to more closed ones:
 - **Start with an open question** – 'So what's been happening?' or 'How has this affected you?'
 - **Probe with an open prompt** – 'Could you tell me more about ...?' or 'Give me an example of ...?'
 - **Focus down** with closed questions such as 'Where, when, who, how'
 - **Verify** 'So are you saying...?'

- **Demonstrate** understanding by summarising issues and feelings back to the parties
- **Stay impartial**, be encouraging and avoid judging or responding too early

Explore options

People in workplace conflicts often need help thinking about the future. Managers can assist resolution by:

- **Asking people what they need from the other parties** involved, rather than what they think of them
- **Asking them to think in detail** about how they might get these needs met
- **Planning how to handle the hurdles that might get in the way** – eg, how cultural and personal factors could hinder the chance of resolution
- **Encouraging them to come up** with win/win options where appropriate

INTERACTION

The interaction between people in a conflict is usually what prevents it being resolved. Taking a mediation approach should solve these problems, rebuilding working interactions between staff.

Build rapport and a safe environment

Having held separate sessions, it's vital to build rapport in joint mediation meetings. To do this:

- **Make sure** that you are equally welcoming and positive to all parties
- **Maintain a calm**, confident approach
- **Remain non-judgmental** throughout
- **Acknowledge feelings** without taking sides

Manage difficult behaviour in joint meetings

You cannot realistically expect people to always behave calmly. When behaviour becomes difficult the mediator's job is to:

- **Interrupt** when one or both parties' behaviour seems to be blocking understanding, mutual recognition, or forward movement
- **Encourage understanding** of feelings by asking each party what they appreciate about how the other is feeling. When feelings are running high, use neutral language to transmit feelings in a non-blaming way – eg, Jean says, 'Bill has no idea how I feel – what a cheek,' the mediator says, 'so

do you want to tell Bill how you feel?'

- **Redirect people** by encouraging dialogue, questions and exchange of opinions rather than point scoring
- **Challenge difficult behaviour** without blame – 'When you shout, it's hard to listen. I am getting the message about how you feel, but not what you want, so could you concentrate on that?'

Facilitate forward movement

People often get stuck in disputes. To ensure you avoid this:

- **Remain positive and encourage** people to see what they have achieved
- **Summarise where people have got to** so far, and signpost where to go next
- **Reflect on the result of not settling** the dispute – what it could cost everyone
- **Break big problems down** into smaller ones which can then be tackled

PROCESS

Process is about how conflicts get handled – the rules of engagement and roles of third parties. Many people enter into mediation sceptically, others just want to get someone else to solve their problem for them. Managers need to strike the right tone to encourage participation in the mediation process.

Pitch it right

The mediation process must be structured, but its conduct and tone should remain informal and conversational. Take care to always:

- **Use language** which is light on jargon and easy to understand
- **Explore** any concerns people have about a mediation-style approach
- **Explain** how mediation works

Encourage participation

As mediation progresses the parties have to put more and more effort in. Mediators can help by:

- **Sequencing activity** – making sure that people take turns
- **Shepherding** – gently prodding people forward
- **Balancing** – aiming to give all parties the attention and time they need
- **Signposting** – giving people a sense of direction and progress
- **Making sure** that agreements are understood and committed to by all

THE STRUCTURE OF MEDIATION

A manager seeking to resolve a work-based conflict should firstly hold separate sessions with each of the parties to reflect on issues, emotions and possible ways forward. It's then time to move on to a series of four joint sessions which cover the following points:

- 1) Setting the scene, hearing the issues** – here the mediator introduces the session and the parties speak separately, in turn, about their key issues. The mediator then summarises what has emerged so far
- 2) Exploring the issues and building the interaction** – the parties start to exchange views on the issues, ask questions, explore differences and start shaping options
- 3) Moving forward on the issues and the interaction** – the mediator helps the parties to build mutual trust and understanding and agree solutions where appropriate
- 4) Closure** – the parties summarise key decisions and actions, agree ground rules for future interactions, identify work still to be done, and clarify what they have learned.

Depending on your personality and management style, you may or may not find that mediation comes easily to you. Not all managers make great mediators, but an ability to mediate will make all managers better. So, next time you're faced with a potentially volatile interpersonal conflict, resist any urge to criticise or control. By following the above steps, you should soon find yourself at the head of a stronger, more understanding and harmonious team.

Mediation for Managers by John Crawley and K Graham (NB Books, price £14.99) is available from CMP Ltd on 01763 852225 or at www.conflictmanagementplus.com