

Mediation – Getting relationships back on track

The Cost of Falling Out at Work

Many of us spend more time with our work colleagues than with our families yet we pay scant attention to the consequences of failed relationships at work. Yes, we've counted the cost of Employee Tribunal cases but this, as a polar bear can tell you, is only the tip of the iceberg.

Although last year UK businesses paid out £1.6 billion in fees, awards and out-of-court settlements, not a mean sum, there are other costs to be taken into account. Suppose there is only one relationship difficulty in your organisation, that could be two people spending two hours a week worrying and complaining to one other person in the company. Based on 48 working weeks, that totals nearly 400 hours lost productivity each year. And there are other costs. Negativity is contagious, it pulls down morale and can induce a culture of passive aggression as colleagues take sides and withhold their collaboration. Consider also that creativity and innovation can only thrive in an organisation when people feel emotionally safe, where their ideas are valued and not undermined. Then you can see that even low-level conflict can result in lost opportunities as well as a serious level of inefficiency and underperformance.

That's the commercial case for considering mediation. Now add the sheer unhappiness and emotional cost for individuals caught up in this kind of stress, some of which they might take home to their families, and you have multiple reasons to take professional workplace mediation seriously.

What is Mediation?

Mediation is a structured process to resolve disputes between people who work together. A neutral, qualified mediator works with each of the people involved, separately and then together, to enable them to identify their interests, concerns and points of view. The mediator coaches the parties involved so they can articulate these openly to each other in a way that is most likely to support rather than destroy their future relationship.

The critical factors for mediation to be a success are:

- it must be entered into voluntarily by all parties.
- it must be a confidential process.
- it is facilitated by neutral third parties, i.e. the mediators.

A successful mediation empowers conflicting parties to form a mutually acceptable agreement on how they can work together in the future.

How does it work?

The mediation process is highly structured, a factor that enables the conflicting parties to feel safer and willing to discuss difficult matters, and it

works as follows:

1. Two or more people agree there is a problem and volunteer to resolve their dispute via mediation.
2. The mediator sees each person separately.
3. Each person is encouraged to consider what they need from the process before they enter the joint meeting.
4. The mediator facilitates a joint meeting, enabling each person to articulate all they want to say and feel about their conflict.
5. An acceptable written or verbal agreement is formed. This must be something they can commit to and will put into practice.
6. The process, from steps 2-5, can take a whole day.
7. The mediators contact the individuals concerned after an agreed period to check that the agreement is working.

When is mediation helpful?

- When a grievance is first raised.
- Post grievance or formal investigation.
- Where there is any escalation of conflict.
- When someone returns to work after long-term absence due to stress/conflict.
- To improve delivery, output or productivity where conflict is affecting performance.
- Where changing roles, personnel or practices are causing conflict.
- To restore team and all work relationships during and after a period of low morale and conflict.

So you can see that there doesn't have to be a full-scale falling out before using mediation. Indeed it is better to invest in some help at the earliest signs of a relationship going awry.

What else can help?

Sometimes relationship difficulties at work are a symptom of other issues in the organisation such as under-resourcing, weak leadership or lack of role clarity. Many mediators are also organisation development professionals who, at the outset, can help you clarify whether these systemic issues need to be tackled as well. This work would be done outside the mediation process, protecting the confidentiality that successful mediation requires.

It is still true today that the only sustainable source of competitive advantage is your people. It follows we must consider them as an investment rather than a cost.

For more information contact Alison Sweeney via this website contact form.