

Benefits of Resolving Conflict Through Mediation

by Carol J. Sutton Cert.ConRes., Senior Consultant, Einblau & Associates

Mediation is a process in which an impartial third party facilitates a constructive dialogue among individuals in dispute, the purpose of which is a mutually agreeable resolution. The use of a neutral person – the mediator – is advantageous when people are not able to challenge each others' ideas and opinions effectively, without being antagonistic or confrontational.

Participants in a mediation do not fear repercussions from the mediator – as they might from an internal manager – because he/she is not part of the ongoing situation. Also, mediators do not have a vested interest in the specific solutions to the problems needing resolution.

Mediation requires a mutual willingness between or among the participants to suspend judgements and engage in the process in good faith. Even the step of initiating mediation signals an openness to resolution that can begin the rebuilding process. As a result, successful mediation:

- frees up energy for the organization's work per se, rather than diverting it into coping with the conflict.
- focuses creativity on excellence, instead of survival.
- enables people to cooperate to achieve mutual goals, instead of competing to advance a personal agenda.
- boosts trust and tolerance; reduces anger and fear.
- provides a shared experience on which to manage future conflict well.

Mediation encompasses a four-stage process in which

1. The Mediator sets the tone, context and communication style for the proceedings.
2. The Mediator assists the participants to engage in a structured conversation about the issues as they see them. The Mediator frames the information neutrally.
3. The Mediator uses a range of conflict resolution techniques to assist the participants' exploration of their conflict and understanding of each others' points of view. The Mediator balances discussion of the facts of the situation, preserves the emotional climate between the parties, and maintains the communication process during the mediation.
4. The Mediator facilitates the generation of options and alternatives that enable the participants to develop a way to move out of the conflict and solve their problems.

Mediators enable participants to focus on issues, rather than personalities, while basing discussion on current, factual information. They establish a sense of fairness and equity in the process, in part by maintaining a balanced power structure. Through the mediation process the disputing parties develop a range of alternatives to achieve the best possible solutions and resolve issues without forcing consensus.

Current statistics show that some 20 to 30 per cent of a manager's time is spent dealing with conflict. The direct cost of lost time, plus the value of plans not created and opportunities not pursued, is vast. Resolving conflict through mediation allows managers and employees to develop new ideas, solve ongoing problems, and expand their capabilities. Together, we are better than any one of us can be alone.