



Workplace Mediation

How to Mediate Conflict without Getting Caught in the Crossfire

When you are called upon to mediate a conflict in the workplace, you are entering a potential danger zone because if there isn't a successful outcome, the parties may end up blaming you. Because your reputation and credibility are at risk, use these guidelines to ensure that you have a successful resolution by uncovering a true win/win solution.

Make sure that you are invited

Make sure that you are invited by everyone involved and that they have given you authority to help them resolve the problem. Anyone who has ever stepped into a dispute after being invited by only one party knows how easy it is to get caught up in the argument and end up with everyone united against you.

As part of your conditions for getting involved, insist that everyone recognizes that you have the authority to set ground rules of behavior and enforce them if necessary. Getting this authority before the mediation starts will provide you with a much needed source of power if people begin to exhibit inappropriate behaviors after the process begins.

Be careful about non verbal communication

Non verbal communication includes voice tones, facial expressions, seating positions, and everything other than words. Proper use and control of the non verbal portion of the communication will make sure that the message is kept clean. Here are three things to watch out for:

Seating. Make sure that opposing parties are seated at a one hundred and twenty degree angle and not directly across from each other. Some situations are so hot that just looking at the other person(s) can eliminate any hope of reason.

Watch yourself. As the mediator, you have a special responsibility to make sure that you don't accidentally interject your emotions or opinions into the process by silently with your voice tones or facial expressions.

Don't allow negative voice tones and facial expressions. If someone makes a face or a dismissive sound, call them on it, but be very factual when you do. For example you might say "Mary, you are rolling your eyes every time Angelo talks. I need you to stop doing that." The authority that was given to you when you agreed to mediate allows you to make this kind of control statement without creating hard feelings.

Use a structured three step process

Step #1 - Gather information. Professional mediators will tell you that they invest 80% of their mediation time gathering information before they ever bring the parties together. Use this time to make sure that you thoroughly understand the interests and positions of all of the parties as well as the complete



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history of the dispute and the personalities involved. You should also use the preparation time to formulate some potential solutions that you can suggest if the mediation process gets stuck.

Step #2 - Let everyone vent and validate. The venting process allows everyone to express their interests and positions in a safe environment free from fear of judgment. After one party has completely expressed them self (vented), have the other participants give their interpretation of what was said.

The objective is not to have agreement, but rather to have each party understand the others and accept that while they may disagree, each person's position is valid for them.

Repeat the venting and validation process until everyone has completely explained themselves and everyone else understands. Many times you will find that once people truly understand each other, they see the areas of agreement and quickly resolve the problem.

Step #3 – Brainstorm for success. If the dispute still exists after the venting process, have each participant tell what is most important to them in the context of the dispute and have them suggest a possible solution that meets everybody's needs. In most situations, you will find that once the hard feelings and misunderstandings are defused by the venting process, people will do their best to find a true win/win solution. Use a flip chart or white board to track all of the suggestions and agreements as they arise.

You will find that practicing and using these three steps will create successful win/win outcomes and earn you the respect of all of the parties involved.