

# Managing the Personal in Workplace Conflict

by R. Fenimore Fisher

**K**eeping people and personal issues separate from solving conflict in the workplace is one of the most challenging skills needed as a manager of people. As the saying goes, “wherever you go there you are.” People bring more than just their Blackberrys to work: agitation with co-workers, frustration with missed performance goals, un-ease with changing leadership direction, fear of losing their jobs, and certainly conflict from home. As an employer how you manage conflict makes all the difference in whether the dispute will be resolved equitably, professionally, and objectively. Let’s explore the benefits of mediation in the workplace.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission provides multiple reasons for using mediation to resolve workplace conflicts. An independent survey showed 96% of all respondents and 91% of all charging parties who used mediation would use it again. Parties have an equal say in the process and they, not the mediator, decide the terms of the settlement. There is no determination of guilt or innocence. Mediation saves time and money avoiding litigation. Mediation works to discover the true problem, fostering a problem-solving approach to complaints ultimately reducing workplace disruptions.

Here you have a uninvolved third party seeking to understand each side’s point of view to subsequently present a working solution that: a) addresses the conflict head on; b) communicates to each party the other’s point of view; c) identifies options for closure; and d) ultimately returns each party back to the workplace with a sense of being heard with issues addressed and

resolved. Whether you have a workforce of 100,000 or 100 relationships and how people interact with each other can be exceptionally complex. The size of your business will dictate what mediation model you use. For larger companies, in-house is the most efficient option. For smaller businesses, outsourcing will enhance the perception of impartiality. Also, outsourcing allows businesses with no mediation experience to learn the craft of dispute resolution from professionals. Each business has a culture and communication style which can bring out great teamwork as well as personal tensions.



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In consensus-building, tensions can fester and when finally addressed the tone is often adversarial. People don’t leave companies, they leave people. The foundation of employees’ interactions with each other is personal baggage. Such interactions place a strain on human resources personnel, create perceptions concerning the equity of the process, and lengthen closure.

Many companies still grapple with how to integrate mediation into their existing conflict review protocol. The question must be asked whether your protocol is perceived as adversarial. If there is a perception that there is a bias towards either the complaining party or the

responding party, you’ve got issues. If there is a perception that only one party gets to design a solution, you’ve got issues. Here is where mediation provides perhaps the ultimate benefit. When integrated into your grievance process, mediation gives you a tool, a protocol, a format that actually has its origins in dispute resolution. Anything else will eventually sour how your employees and supervisors ultimately feel about your conflict review process.

Professionals wear masks in the workplace. As those masks start to fall during intense personal conflict there is a tradeoff between using mediation versus a traditional intake and investigation. Using the wrong tool(s) to resolve conflict can create a price far greater than litigation. The loss of group cohesion and lack of trust can have a sustaining long term impact on culture, engagement and subsequently productivity. Mediation ultimately creates faith that the review of disputes will be equitable, solution oriented, and impartial. These serve as truly sustaining benefits.

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