

Facilitating constructive conflict

Handled well, workplace conflict can salvage important relationships and improve an organisation's collaborative spirit. The key is finding a mediator you can rely on.

Workplace conflict is a delicate web of connecting factors, not the least of which is that employees' diverse identities are shaped in part by their jobs. Given this, it's no wonder disagreements that are not intended personally often feel very personal. This can result in defensiveness, and can lead to dysfunction within teams and workplaces.

That being said, even conflict that seems destined to become destructive can, if managed well and early, lead to a constructive situation. For example, an argument between a critical employee and their team leader over the scope and authority of the employee's role could lead to one of them wanting to leave the team or the organisation. However, if handled correctly, it has the potential to lead to a greater understanding of career objectives, interests, and support needs. This can result in more effective collaboration. The differentiator is often conflict management.



Too often disputes are left to fester between people until the relationship is broken beyond repair. Sides are chosen, bridges are burned, and the original source of the conflict is all but forgotten. An experienced outside mediator, brought on board in a timely fashion, can help those involved to remedy that.

This intervention has become even more important in our increasingly virtual workplaces. Without the tone and subtext of in-person communications, there is increased scope for misinterpretation and misunderstanding, and assumptions may trump intentions.

"Mediation can be the most appropriate support for both in-person and online workplace issues," says Bianca Keys, Chairperson of the Mediator Standards Board (MSB).

"It is an incredibly powerful process for a workplace, particularly where preserving, maintaining and improving relationships are key goals," she says.

"It's also one that allows for the human side of any conflict to be resolved in alignment with practical aspects – both of which are required to move forward."

Because of the sensitivities involved in workplace conflict, it is vital that internal roles such as HR Managers, Organisational Psychologists and in-house Counsel consider engaging external assistance early.

"A quality mediation process, facilitated by an experienced and independent practitioner, can ensure the process is free from conflicts of interest and can reduce employee concerns about whether participation will impact their employment," says Keys. "This can lead to increased participation in the mediation process, as well as in the implementation of the outcomes it reaches."

Finding assistance

So how do you ensure a 'quality' mediation process? Thankfully, the market for mediators is established and robust. When selecting a mediator, the MSB recommends verifying that your external mediator is nationally accredited.

You can do this by checking the National Register at msb.org.au/mediators and looking for the National Mediator Accreditation System (NMAS) logo.

Engaging a Nationally Accredited Mediator ensures your mediator has:

- ✔ Been trained to the national standard (NMAS)
- ✔ Been assessed as having demonstrated appropriate skills and process competencies
- ✔ Met the requisite professional development and experience criteria for ongoing accreditation
- ✔ Current and relevant professional indemnity insurance and an independent complaint handling process

Workplace conflict can have far-reaching impacts, so it makes sense to find a professional who is well equipped to manage the complexities and sensitivities at play.



Mediator Standards Board is the peak body for accredited mediators in Australia.
Learn more at www.msb.org.au