

The Manager as Mediator

There may be times when intense conflict among employees may require the participation of a third party. Simply telling staff to work out their problems on their own, rarely works. A better approach is to allow workers to meet with you to assist them in their own resolution of the conflict. This is the role of the mediator.

However, there may come a point when you have to go beyond being a listener and facilitator, and need to make a decision or judgement favouring one position or the other. Your role then shifts to that of an arbiter.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIATOR.

A successful mediator must always remember that the solution to the problem must be accepted by all participating employees. The mediator can help this happen by doing the following:

1. Listening to each participant's perspective.

The mediator begins his/her role by arranging separate meetings with each participant to emphasise the importance of confidentiality.

During these meetings, the mediator must attempt to understand the source of the conflict, by actively listening to what each participant has to say.

2. Emphasising the importance of conflict resolution.

The mediator should try to show ways in which the participants could stand to gain from resolving the conflict. Furthermore, they should help participants see how solving the problem at the mediation level would be preferable to finding a solution through arbitration.

3. Establishing ground rules for improved communication.

When the participants are brought together in the mediation meeting, the mediator should not allow individuals to exchange cynical remarks, insults or threats to each other. Instead, employees should be coached to speak specifically of their own feelings about the problem - thus encouraging them to move from a condemning 'You should not have' style of communication, to a more enlightening 'I felt upset when you' style.

Only one person should speak at a time, while the other makes every effort to listen and understand what is being said.

Another important role for the mediator is to seek clarification on major issues: "So what you're saying James, is that".

4. Encouraging participants to focus on the future.

Helping employees to focus on future behaviours, rather than past injuries, will increase the chances of successful resolution. A discussion of past behaviours, may nevertheless be required in order to analyse patterns of conflict and enable participants to find constructive ways of handling future disagreements.

5. Using an effective seating arrangement during the mediation meeting.

One of the most powerful seating arrangements is to have the contenders facing each other, but leaving enough space between them so their personal space is not violated. By having the participants face each other, you are encouraging eye contact between them - one of the most powerful ways of communicating.

The mediator should sit beyond the peripheral vision of the participants, so that they have to turn their heads to establish eye contact. By doing this, the mediator discourages the participants from turning to them for support. Thus, the participants soon begin to realise that they are there to talk to each other.

6. Encouraging negotiation.

The mediator must help dissipate the contentious feelings of the participants by helping them find creative, synergistic ways to meet both parties needs - possibly through a brainstorming session. Participants should be discouraged from reaching solutions where they no longer have to interact with each other, as this is not addressing the need for positive communication within the company as a whole.

If the negotiation process fails, then there is a clear need for resolving the dispute through arbitration.

ARBITRATION.

The arbiter does everything that a mediator does, but at the end of the meeting, has to make a decision that both parties are expected to follow.

As an arbiter, try to avoid making both parties happy with the decision that you make. For the majority of the time, this is simply not possible. As long as the decision is both impartial and fair, both parties will have to accept your judgement. It is more important to be fair than to try to please all participants involved.