

Employee Conflict is Inevitable: Mediation Skills to Uncover Causation

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How much time do you think leaders invest in trying to resolve workplace conflict? A recent study showed that between 30-42% of a manager’s time is spent attempting to mediate disputes between co-workers (Rapid Learning Institute-October 2021). It is exhausting, frustrating, and often unsuccessful. After spending years in HR—and even more years supervising, coaching, and working with people in conflict, I have come to realize that as leaders we need to learn to dig much deeper in order to ensure we are addressing the underlying issues causing workplace conflict. I have also discovered that without the necessary training, managers are ill-equipped to try and resolve long-standing issues. For years, I had no idea how to effectively address conflict. I would try to simply hear the arguments, offer solutions, and hope for the best. Inevitably the conflict, or new issues, would soon arise and I would be trying to deal with the issues all over again. It wasn’t until I took my interest-based mediation training that I realized what I was missing.

Despite our best efforts, we are often just scratching the surface of the issues. Interpersonal conflict amongst employees often has very deeply rooted issues linked to past behaviour and interactions, and they are not easily resolved. However, our typical managerial way of dealing with them tends to be solution-based rather than interest-based. Hence the “solutions” are often short-term, cause more resentment, and the issues keep coming up time and time again. That’s why

you will hear people say, “he’s always been an issue.”

As a HR Manager, I often had supervisors and managers call to say, “Can we chat about an issue I am having?” We would start by discussing what they have tried so far, what they can do, and how to ensure their efforts are documented to protect both themselves and the organization should the issues become bigger. Then I would move into demonstrating how small disputes over work assignments, personality clashes, respectful behaviour, and gossiping can be resolved using key mediation tools. Often the issues are less about the “issue at hand” and more about *who* the people are they were dealing with. When asked about the employees involved, managers often didn’t really know enough about their employees to figure out what the underlying issues were. Or if they did know them, they weren’t sure how to share this information in a beneficial and respectful way.

Using Interest-Based Mediation Skills

Let me give you an example. Debbie rushes into your office after a team meeting. She is visibly shaken and angry with Mike for bringing up new project ideas. She wants you to tell Mike to stop suggesting new ideas or she wants off the team. Rather than just dismissing her request or telling her “well, we need to be innovative and try new things”, try asking Jan *why* she is upset.

When Jan is asked what is upsetting her, she divulges, “I need Mike to share his ideas on new processes with some detail and then give me time to think about them and research whether they will work in our current processes. His excited way of talking about big ideas with little detail makes me really anxious. I just need to make sure we are not compromising detail or are potentially at risk of causing more errors by implementing new processes.” This gives you needed information. Jan needs detailed responses so she can feel

qualified and comfortable making risk-free decisions.

Next, we need to also speak with Mike to learn about his needs. Why does he like to always bring up new ideas, challenge status quo, and push for innovation? He shares that in his previous place of employment he felt silenced, unappreciated for his skills and stagnant in his work. Sharing new ideas helps to fulfill his need to feel valued and appreciated for his skills.

The final step is to bring both employees together, to hear each other's needs. Using methods taught in interest-based mediation, a safe and respectful conversation can take place. Information shared will help to develop an understanding for *why* they react the way they do. Together they can generate new ways to move forward and help to meet each other's needs. As a supervisor this creates a win-win outcome for both parties. You have one employee who will bring forward innovative ideas, and another who will ensure they are detailed and less risky. Using the right skills, you can create a highly functional team, built on mutual respect and increased productivity.

If you are interested in learning more about how to instill interest-based mediation skills into your leadership, please contact Integrity Management Consulting Services.

Carrie-Lynn Hotson recently authored "**Knowing Who You Lead**" and her book can be ordered at the following link - <https://www.knowingwhoyoulead.com>. She can also be reached at hotson@integrityconsultation.com.