



Director's Guides

The top 10 ways to manage conflict in the workplace





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Businesses must minimise exposure to conflict, both from within the company and from outside if they want to maximise success. Dealing with issues quickly and effectively is vital.

Focus on these 10 areas for better mediation...

1. Management.

Do any of your directors or managers have a combative style that interferes with measured conflict management? This is a crucial area if you want to reduce strife at its source.

2. Relationships.

Consider how your key relationships work – those involving staff, board members, shareholders, customers, business partners and other stakeholders. Are the people involved looked upon as human beings with legitimate needs? Are they regularly engaged and communicated with in a meaningful way? Poor handling can result in simmering discontent.

3. Procedures and resources.

Are clear agreements, contracts and procedures in place? Do systems and equipment support or hinder your efforts? Lack of clarity and poor resourcing can lead to trouble.

4. Old remedies.

Disciplinary procedures and tribunals are often deployed to tackle issues with the aim of 'winning'. They have their place, yet these processes can take a long time to conclude; soak up too much management time; create high anxiety; cost a lot of money; and destroy relationships along the way. Even a victory can prove hollow. This is not ideal, so mediation often proves an attractive option.

In the UK, mediation has a success rate of 93%. East Sussex County Council reported productivity savings of £500,000 in just one year after introducing its in-house mediation scheme.

5. Better procedures.

An impartial mediator can tailor procedures without breaking rules. Mediation is flexible, confidential, consensual and focused on the future, so the parties involved are allowed to have their say in a safe environment. Consider a wide range of settlement options, decide possible outcomes and assess how they can be enforced.

6. Cost benefits.

The speed of mediation enables the costs in resolving issues to be "significantly lower" than traditional remedies, said a recent Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development survey. The government wants more mediation in civil, family and employment cases to save money for those involved.

7. Help for managers.

Mediation can reduce sickness absence, staff turnover, loss of key staff, and lost management time. It can also help to protect reputation, retain customers and boost productivity.

8. Improving the culture.

The key people benefits of mediation include: easing the burden of formal procedures; improving relationships; and helping morale, creativity and productivity as part of a strong people management culture.

9. Mediation on steroids.

A blended service, involving mediation, executive coaching and enablement, together with organisational stress management techniques, is a powerful way to cope with conflict. It's especially useful for teams and boards, or when changing company culture.

10. Want to cash in?

Mediation is growing in popularity. It's good value, speedy and effective, with a success rate of between 80 and 90%, and can be applied to a wide range of business and personal contexts. Take a moment to think how your organisation could benefit.

Advice from ACAS (www.acas.org.uk)

There are some key steps an employer can take to help ensure disputes and conflict don't arise too often, and to enable them to be dealt with when they do:

- train managers to handle difficult conversations with employees
- encourage open expression of opinions
- recognise the importance of feelings
- listen to what people have to say
- focus on interests not positions and personalities
- have clear discipline, grievance and dispute procedures for dealing with conflict
- disciplinary and grievance procedures
- consider outside help where necessary, for example, using a third party by way of mediation: see ACAS' advice on mediation and our mediation services.

Having one-to-one conversations about issues requires a great deal of sensitivity and empathy. You must try to:

- listen to what individuals are saying and try to recognise any underlying causes of unhappiness or stress
- ask questions in a calm and measured way to put the other person at ease and let them speak freely
- rephrase or reinterpret what's been said so that problems can be seen in a different light
- lead by example and set the right tone

Sources:

- http://www.director.co.uk/ONLINE/2009/07_09_mediation.html
- http://www.director.co.uk/MAGAZINE/2011/5_May/10-tips-mediation_64_09.html
- <http://www.acas.org.uk>