

A Little Friendliness Can Go A Long Way - Workplace Mediation with Teams

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Mediating inside companies and organizations with teams involves a number of challenges. It can also be very rewarding. Much of my work in this field is in the public sector, which has its own particular parameters too. Here are some thoughts.

It Is Usually Late in the Day

Team mediation is usually asked for when conflicts have become hardened and the team has reached the point where working together well is no longer possible. Often, conflicts have been ongoing for years. There are old and new wounds. I wish team leaders and human resources managers would take more timely action ... but mostly they do not.

Co-Mediate

As soon as the team reaches a certain size, I work with one or more co-mediators. That size is anything above eight to ten people. The co-mediator has to be someone I trust and someone who trusts me. Someone I will allow to try out something spontaneous, someone who will give me the same freedom. Co-mediation is a way to keep the energy flowing by sharing the moderation and methods, and to give the participants variety - just allowing them to hear two voices matters. Four ears are better than two. Co-mediators discuss methods and process design together and reflect on the work they have done. If the mediators are also experienced trainers, methods used will include a diverse range of small-group constellations. It is important that the team can see the co-mediators working together smoothly, and deciding together flexibly on what to do next. And sometimes disagreeing with each other - but disagreeing well.

A Process that Does not End with Settlement

Teams may come together for a day or two to try to resolve their differences. Often that is all that the organization will provide. The end of the process is not "settlement" (and measuring the success of workplace mediation in terms of settlement rates does not work). The result might be a better understanding of problems, a new perspective, a resolution for change, or small-scale agreements on working processes and dealing with conflict. A wise organization will provide for follow-up meetings and may offer further bilateral or smaller-group mediation. It is important to explain to clients what they can achieve with team mediation and that it takes time.

Relationships Matter

When I ask teams to define what they want to talk about in mediation, they nearly always include “trust” or something like “how we treat each other” as a high priority in the list of issues. Conflict in teams is about relationships between people that have often gone very sour. It pays to talk about these relationships, particularly as the people concerned are expected to continue to work together – in the public sector there is little flexibility on this matter. The difficulty lies in finding a way to talk about relationships when there are twenty or more people in the team and time is short. One way is solutions focused – asking people how they would like to be working together rather than what has gone wrong.

There is not usually time to allow participants to tell different sides of stories of damaged relationships, broken trust and emotional distress in great detail, and sometimes that might seem counter-productive too. But not talking about emotions can seem like avoiding the issue. One idea is to invite team members to focus on just one specific moment or incident that they can share with the team. The mediators can elicit how they felt at that particular moment, without any need for the other side of the story coming from other participants. We can all argue at length about facts and about what happened, but emotions are always true. This way of working can sensitize everyone to the harm that can be done – usually unintentionally.

Processes, Responsibilities, Systems

To focus team mediation only on understanding and negotiating relationships would be too narrow a frame. Often, disputes arise because processes are not well-defined, responsibilities and decision-making powers overlap and conflict with each other, organizations have changed without adapting team structures, or organizational systems do not match the needs of the job to be done. Understanding this can be liberating for participants. What seemed to be personal has structural causes. Sometimes, processes and systems can be changed for the better, and team mediation can help achieve that. Even when it looks as if the system cannot be easily changed, team mediation can help people to understand that the problem is partly caused by factors they cannot influence – and to separate the people from the problem.

A Little Friendliness Can Go a Long Way

I am often struck in team mediation by a paradox. When I see and talk to individuals, I see perfectly friendly people capable of showing all the respect and civility they would expect of themselves and others. I see smiling faces and humour. I also see the human side of people in distress. And – here the paradox – yet these people have reached a stage of escalated conflict that is making it impossible for them to be friendly and civil to other members of the team – who themselves are also perfectly friendly and civil to me. Empathy is a long way off. Helping people to talk about how they want to be treated and how they wish to treat others can work wonders. A little friendliness can go a long way. I am not shy of making this appeal in mediation.