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HR 101: The Fine Art of Mediating Workplace Conflicts

by [Dianna Booher](#) on Oct 31, 2014, 10:05 AM | Comments Off

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When co-workers [are caught in conflict](#), do you know how to re-open the lines of communication without getting trapped in the conflict?

Do you care — or do you just stay clear?

As a leader, here's what you can do to help minimize the grumbling, reduce the stress, [and resolve the issue](#):

1. Avoid taking sides

Work with both individuals from the very beginning. You may decide to meet with both people together or separately.

If you meet with them separately, make sure both understand that what they share with you may not necessarily be withheld from the other person. You may need to use that information to verify and clarify with the other person.

If you don't warn them upfront, they may think you're "breaking their confidence."

2. Interview the bystanders

You can only make sense of someone else's conflict when armed with unbiased versions of



events and circumstances.

Casually observe how “innocent bystanders” react to the situation. What do they have to say about the issues?

Be careful, of course, that you don’t just collect the data that was passed on to them from the other people directly involved. Just probe for what they’ve observed first-hand.

Identify facts, assumptions, and feelings. They all count.

3. Handle the PR

If you can pass on complimentary remarks from one person to the other, do so. If not, you may have to dig into the past to find these gems. *“Jerry, Antonio does respect your work. If you recall, last quarter he asked to be assigned to your team on the Bilcox project.”*

The purpose is to help them recall their past good relationship (if that’s been the case.) Sharing positive remarks adds credence to other things the person says.

If someone is willing to confirm the good, chances are they’ll likely be honest — as they see it — about the current problem.

4. Offer to coach

“Omar, you’re concerned with cutting costs in this division this quarter. Bianca, you have the same mindset — get the bottom-line back in the black.”

They need constant reminders of where they’re going — the finish line. This step is particularly important if the mediation has taken several days or even weeks.

If either person balks during the process, then as a last resort, assume a more official mediator role:

1. **Share your conclusions about where you believe both have miscommunicated in the past.** Point out their invalid assumptions and perceptions about each other’s intentions, actions, and communication. This will be the toughest part of your task. At the least, ask each person to paraphrase to you how he or she thinks the other views things and how he or she feels about those events or circumstances.
2. **Advocate “no-fault” resolution.** When you are involved as mediator, the people in conflict have an added investment in maintaining their self-esteem. It’s bad enough to admit error or fault to one person; it’s doubly difficult to admit fault to two people—especially if one of them is your boss. So downplay any effort to place blame. Say it loudly, clearly, and frequently: “Conflict is inevitable. No one has to be at fault. Conflict just is. Let’s focus on working out a resolution.” And then make sure your phrasing supports that premise and forget cause and effect.

3. **Ask them to suggest resolutions.** They'll more likely follow through on their ideas—not yours. If necessary, reiterate their criteria and reasons for coming to resolution. As suggestions meet the criteria, record them, and ask for reaction from the other person. Accept. Check for agreement. Accept. Check for agreement.
4. **Ensure that the solution is acceptable to both** — not a “win” for one and a “withdrawal” for the other. Your presence ensures that one person does not overpower the other.

When you've been successful in helping others through a conflict crisis, they'll rely on you again and again. And you'll have the satisfaction of knowing you've deactivated a productivity problem and kept one more relationship intact.

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