

MANAGING WORKPLACE CONFLICT:

Supporting your workforce
through Covid-19



MANAGING WORKPLACE CONFLICT

As many organisations begin to settle in to a new way of working the potential for conflict in the workplace increases. There is a perfect storm of change, fear, anxiety and an upheaval of the work/life balance that is impacting mental health and emotional resilience like never before. Managing conflict in the workplace in this environment requires skilled mediation underpinned by an understanding of mental health and resilience.

This guide outlines how Covid-19 has impacted the nature of workplace conflict and provides some insight into how to support conflict resolution.



THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUR WORKFORCE

The blurring of professional and personal lives

In the move to remote working some employees will have managed to separate their work and their personal life whilst for others they will have found this distinction simply eroded with the Covid-19 lockdown. For the latter, tension can build providing the potential to lead to changes in their working relationship with colleagues. One of the hardest parts of their new work routine will be the lack of communication in their everyday formal and informal conversations and receiving feedback.

Living in a 'virtual' communication bubble

During Covid-19 lockdown, working lives and the way in which we communicated in our business world changed almost overnight. Gone were the times of meetings taking place face-to-face, these were replaced with Skype and conference calls and colleagues meeting informally over coffee or lunch were replaced with 'virtual coffee meet-ups.' It may have led to discussions not always being fully understood, misunderstanding comments or generally what was said. When working remotely, it's easier to miss the warning signs of inter-personal conflict.

Whilst it was essential this took place, it just wasn't the same as physically meeting your colleagues was it? Informal face-to-face work interactions provide understanding of issues, context, clarity and a personal connection between work colleagues as well as embedding comradeship and connection.

Digital communications make remote working feasible, but creates barriers when it comes to mutual understanding and rapport nuances. Reliance on email and messaging in particular has the potential to encourage quick turn-around of communication resulting in text which is poorly expressed, ambiguous (open to interpretation) and we cannot hear the tone in which the individual would be speaking. In other words, they're channels that can encourage anxiety, confusion and/or lead to workplace conflict.

The psychological impact of getting back to work post Covid-19

Returning to work after several weeks under the Covid-19 lockdown is new territory for us all and can cause a differing range of emotions (disbelief, fear, anger) amongst your employees.

Whilst some employees will be glad to be heading back to their workplace, for others, they will do so fearfully. Each employee in their own way has been affected directly and indirectly by Covid-19 and will need empathy and understanding whilst navigating the process.

Coupled with this, early research indicates Covid-19, lockdown and social distancing measures are likely to have had a significant impact upon employees' wellbeing and mental health. The extent of this impact is somewhat unknown at this current time.

When we combine all the above factors together, the nature of workplace conflict may have changed in these Covid-19 times and the reality is that for many employees, they will continue to work from home as their workplace adapts and changes to new ways of working.



PREVENTING AND RESOLVING WORKPLACE CONFLICT

The 'virtual bubble'

Engage in communication

When working remotely, it's easier to avoid 'that difficult' conversation than when you are in the workplace environment. However if it's important, that conversation still needs to take place.

Where workplace conflict existed between employees prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst remote working may have facilitated 'being able to avoid each other,' the conflict is unlikely to have gone away and may even have festered and grown. It therefore needs to be addressed and workplace mediation is a positive and safe environment in which this can take place.

Returning to the workplace

Respect the necessity for your employees to have safe spaces

As we ease back to the workplace, there are likely to be new sources of workplace conflict. Individual attitudes may have changed, there may be concerns and/or fears about social distancing and the way it should be approached. Individuals who have been furloughed may feel resentful towards their colleagues who were not and for some, they may be facing potential redundancy whilst others are not.

It's crucial therefore that your leaders and managers facilitate open discussions about any of these issues and that your employees know to whom they should speak and seek guidance.

Take control of change in challenging times

Irrespective of how the workplace conflict has arisen, whether it be a new or existing issue, dealing with workplace conflict can't be put on hold.

It is crucial to communicate well with employees, in times of change and especially as we emerge from the Covid-19 lockdown, but conflicts do still arise when parties don't see eye to eye.

Mediation can assist in resolving conflict and achieve goodwill 'win-win' solutions outside of a company's grievance procedure or, where relationships have more seriously broken down, as an alternative to going to tribunal.





WHAT IS MEDIATION?

Mediation is a way of resolving conflict outside of a company's grievance procedure or, where relationships have more seriously broken down, as an alternative to going to tribunal.

Mediation is an informal, non-adversarial procedure that allows the parties in conflict to come to their own solution with the aid of a skilled mediator.

The goal for mediation is to help people achieve a goodwill 'win-win' solution, one that all can live with, so that they can continue working together and get on with their lives.

How mediation works

Mediation is often employed following a grievance being raised or as a result of a manager or several members of staff identifying an issue with employee working relationships. The role of the mediator is as an independent facilitator, able to assess each person and their grievance and facilitate a process of meeting in the middle.

Mediators must be independent to the situation, can be internal or external to the company, essential is that they are non-judgemental, confidential and exceptional listeners. Mediators are obliged to declare an interest. For example, they may have prior knowledge of the case, not uncommon within an organisation, which might result in prejudice against one or other of the parties.

All parties must agree to the mediator and can reject them if they feel they could not be impartial. This may arise for a number of reasons – if the mediator is appointed from within the company, the parties may feel he or she lacks impartiality or they may fear the mediator may not adequately protect confidentiality. If the mediator is appointed from an external source, they may feel intuitively, that they are not right. In such circumstances, another mediator will be found. >>



STEP 1

Examine:

- a) Issues
- b) Facts
- c) Emotions

STEP 2

Acknowledge and appreciate other's feelings and views

STEP 3

Decide:

- a) Solutions
- b) Best solution for all involved

STEP 4

Gain agreement to way forward

STEP 5

Evaluate the conversation

What kind of disputes can be mediated?

All kinds of disputes can be mediated, but in the employment context, mediation is useful in dealing with conflict at an early stage thereby saving the employer significant time, energy and money. It can also be used to help parties achieve a settlement after a claim has been made to an employment tribunal without the need of engaging the services of ACAS or of awaiting a judgment.

Where issues arise in the workplace which are difficult to resolve through the grievance process, or where there is a breakdown in personal relationships between employees and/or teams of employees, it can be used as a means of rebuilding working relations.

Some examples might be where relationships have been fragmented as a result of the grievance procedure having been implemented, or in cases of stress where an employee has been out of the workplace for some time and needs to be re-integrated, or where allegations of bullying and harassment have resulted in tensions that need to be resolved.

Benefits of mediation

The main advantages of mediation to an employer are its capacity to save time, money and management resources. To the parties, it represents an opportunity to be heard in a confidential setting by someone who is impartial, non-judgmental and skilled in listening.

It offers a speedy and effective way of settling disputes because it is quicker and less disruptive than using a grievance procedure or going to tribunal. A dispute that might have stretched over weeks or months and involved a great deal of management time and resource can be settled in a day or two of skilled mediation.

The process is voluntary and is conducted in private on a without prejudice basis. This means that concessions and/or admissions can be made privately that, in a more formal setting, might be discouraged, and this can lead to the resolution of the dispute.

Parties who agree to participate in mediation do not give up their legal rights nor do they lose the right to use their employer's grievance procedure. Mediation can be arranged at any time - either before a formal grievance is raised, after one has been raised but before a formal hearing, or after a grievance has been heard and determined, the decision as and when to use the process is one made by the parties, usually in conjunction with the employer.

MEDIATION SUPPORT FROM MAKE UK

Our mediators are highly trained, skilled in conflict resolution and experienced facilitating the process of reaching mutually agreed resolution. They are excellent listeners, are non-judgmental in their approach, and are able to help parties to move from an entrenched position to a co-operative approach. Their role is not to make decisions, arbitrate or negotiate the dispute, but rather, is one that guides the parties to find their own solution that satisfies all parties.

Telephone & face to face mediation

Our mediation interventions are tailored to suit the circumstances of each case and the wishes of the parties, the process is built around three core components:

- Separate, confidential discussions with all parties to understand the different sides of the conflict and the needs each party has for resolution
- Joint session with all parties, relying on the skills and experience of the mediator to facilitate a constructive conversation
- An action plan, agreed and signed by all parties

To find out more call 0808 168 5874
or email enquiries@makeuk.org

MEDIATION TRAINING FOR MANAGERS

HOW TO MANAGE CONFLICT ELEARNING APPROXIMATELY 1 HOUR

£30 + VAT per license

This course has been developed to provide learners with the knowledge and skills required to deal with and manage conflict within a workplace. Learners will gain knowledge around constructive responses to conflict, how to defuse tensions and ways to find productive solutions to difficult problems. The aim of the course is to achieve increased awareness of the causes of conflict at work, its effects and how it can be managed and prevented.

[Find out more](#) ▶

WORKPLACE MEDIATION SKILLS TRAINING CLASSROOM/VIRTUAL CLASSROOM 2 DAYS

POA

This practical course gives supervisors, managers and HR managers an understanding the principles of mediation and the benefits of this approach in the workplace. The workshop provides an opportunity to practice key skills of effective mediation in a safe role play environment. Delegates will develop confidence in managing everyday workplace conflicts and be able to reduce grievances and disputes.

[Find out more](#) ▶

For more information please contact:

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