

Case Study

Investigating the source of conflict in a work place using mediation skills

Background

It was noticed that a particular team's output had decreased. Morale was at a low and absenteeism had increased. The manager was reluctant to admit to any problems but other departments that were interdependent were complaining about the impact on their work. The HR manager called the Mediation Service with a simple request to mediate between the manager and 2 of his team members.

What we did

We consulted with the HR manager and heard more of the background. Having reflected on this we asked if, instead of mediating between identified parties, we could consult with the whole team. We believed that reducing the problem to specific people might actually miss the real problem. We were given approval to do a conflict audit.

The Audit

We arranged to interview each team member confidentially. Using the Dialogue Road Map (a tool for engagement developed by Maria Arpa) we were able to go beyond the surface issues and get to the heart of the matter. The consultation pointed to 2 major problems. The first was that a different person entirely in the organisation had targeted specific people in this team for bullying and harassment. The incidents described in the accounts given were consistent and also widespread. The second was their manager's failure to recognise and deal with the problem.

Reporting The consultation was confidential and this presented an issue. Disclosure on our part would mean breach of confidentiality. We consulted with the people who had given specific provable accounts and addressed the issue of confidentiality. We asked how the situation could be resolved without disclosure. Each one said that they were afraid of reprisals.

They did not believe any action would be taken if they spoke up. We went back to HR and asked how such matters would be handled. It was agreed that if a serious issue was brought up it would be handled swiftly and with a duty of care to the staff involved. We arranged for a senior manager to be available at a specific time and location with no expected outcome.

The staff

We went back to the staff and gave them a time when the senior manager would be available and asked them to consider whether they wanted the situation to change. We were clear that it was their choice to disclose. All of the staff concerned made the choice to turn up at the allotted time and the matter was dealt with swiftly. The team manager was also one of the people being bullied hence his reluctance and fear to act.

Follow up

After the immediate problem was sorted out, we recommended some team building. We facilitated an Awayday and we delivered training in group facilitation.

Our observations

It was clear that something unhealthy was affecting people in the workplace. People often jump to conclusions about conflict but it is our experience that the place of manifestation is not necessarily the source. Bullying can be subtle and go unnoticed making it difficult for people to speak up.

As independent facilitators we were able to create the conditions in which change could take place. When people find it hard to speak the suppressed conflict will create stress and the tension will leak out as negative behaviour. We work collaboratively using mediation skills to build trust, overcome fear and manage change.