

The Workplace Mediator's Toolkit

A lot of workplace conflict can be sorted out by people just talking things through. However, people can sometimes struggle with such conversations, and may need third-party support to have a more productive dialogue. In you are in a position of facilitating others to have a better conversation, the following mediation tools may help:

1. Walk towards situations of conflict

Most unaddressed conflict worsens and deepens with time. Intervene early to try and nip conflict situations in the bud. Don't suppose that it will blow over if you ignore it. It won't.

2. Build people's commitment to seeking a resolution

Don't try and mediate a conflict that you are involved in: you have to be outside the conflict. Check that the people involved are happy for you to intervene or to offer support.

3. Choose the right time, place, and conditions to address the conflict

Speak to people individually first, and assure them of the privacy of your conversations. Avoid note-taking.

4. Listen

Listen actively and don't jump to solutions. Be careful not to treat the first person's story as the true version of events. Use your private meetings to empathise with each person's (usually very different) perspective. Build rapport and allow them to offload without making any judgement.

5. Encourage them to come together

Empathise if they are reticent or nervous about you facilitating a joint meeting. Pick a neutral venue, and ideally let the people have input into how the meeting might be run.

6. Get them talking

In a joint meeting allow them each some uninterrupted talking time. Encourage them to listen to each other, and to respond actively. Tease out the key issues that could be resolved. Have them speak in turn about those issues. Acknowledge their responses to each other. Keep it informal.

7. Unlock positional thinking

Gently question to establish what they really want or need to happen, rather than letting them each argue for a different preferred solution: 'What would you like to come out from this talk?', 'How would you like your colleague to behave differently?'. 'What do you want from him/her?' 'What will (*your proposed solution*) achieve?'

8. Stay neutral and objective

Don't give **any** opinion. Give equal time and attention to both people. Mutualise your questions or challenges: 'Fred, I need to ask you to let Mary finish, and when it's your turn to speak, I'll ask Mary to do the same for you', 'Mary, can you be specific about what you want from Fred, ...and I'll be asking Fred to be specific about what he wants from you as well'.

9. Support, encourage, praise their efforts

Affirm them for making conciliatory gestures, for focussing on the future more than the past, for proposing solutions, or for trying to improve their understanding of one another. If they make any agreement or resolution, be clear what that is, and what each person will contribute to it.

10. Know when you have done all you can

Know when to quit. If they cannot reach any agreement, if you cannot remain impartial, or if the issues are too big for a facilitated meeting like this, then enlist support from others: HR, trained mediators, another manager. This is not a failure.