



Why workplace mediation is so important

I was chatting the other day with a colleague about the successful conclusion of a workplace mediation he had been involved with and why it had taken so long for the individuals to be offered mediation as a possible solution to their issues.

It caused me to reflect again on the lack of success that organisations using only 'formal' routes to resolve relationship issues have.

Having spent many years as an HR Director in large organisations, I struggle to think of any grievances I was involved with where the individuals came out of the process feeling more positive than when they started and, indeed, I can recall many cases where a damaged relationship broke down beyond repair as a result of a prolonged grievance process.

Very often, relationship issues that should have been aired, explored and improved got worse over the time it took to hear the grievance and any trust that remained was sadly destroyed as 'the process' took over and typically lawyers letters were exchanged between the parties.

Is this fair to employees who wish to use the channels available to seek resolution? Managers, too, find the process frustrating and time consuming. Very often a manager would want to reach out directly to an employee in a grievance process. *'If I could just talk to them directly over a cup of coffee perhaps we could make progress'* was something I heard often but, sadly, this was usually actively discouraged for fear of not following due process and potentially making things worse. This in turn then caused the managers to withdraw and hide behind the process for fear of breaching the rules.

Mediation in my experience was generally only considered at the end of the process if things hadn't gone well and the employee was negotiating their departure terms. However, if mediation was part of the formal process and actively encouraged at an early stage then I believe this would lead to better, deeper, conversations and result in an experience which feels fairer and more balanced than a grievance process ever can. It can also be much quicker and less expensive.

Why then do so few organisations have mediation as an early option to resolve grievances/complaints? Those that do would certainly say they reap the benefits and I can think of many damaged relationships that may well have been saved if a mediation approach had been taken.

I would urge all HR teams to review their grievance/complaint policies and incorporate mediation as an early option for resolving relationship issues.

I certainly wish I had done so many years ago.

Louise Dunlop, July 2020