

CONFLICT SOLUTIONS

Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

Expert Advice to Resolve Workplace Discord

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Conflict Resolver

Preventing the Past from Derailing Resolution Efforts

Michael and Beth are entangled in a workplace conflict. Each has created their own narrative and is eager to share their version. The three-way, face to face meeting with their manager-mediator provides an irresistible opportunity for them to recite their descriptions of history. As the process unfolds, Michael and Beth repeatedly wade into their complicated past. Imagine you are sitting between them to help resolve the dispute, develop agreements and improve their working relationship. You rightly want to shine a spotlight on a better future, but they continue to tug the conversation back into the past. In such moments, less-experienced conflict resolvers tend to flounder among these ineffective tactics:

- 1) Forward shove:** With this approach the resolver attempts to quickly strong arm people away from the past. It may sound something like, "This is a chance to hit the reset button. Let's look ahead to what you can do differently, rather than focusing on the last year." Hearing this negation of the past, the antagonists can feel that their well-rehearsed stories (i.e. realities) are being discounted.
- 2) Whitewash:** As in "to gloss over or cover up". Here the mediator's early, artificial emphasis is on small slivers

of agreement or commonality between the employees while ignoring all the animosity and vast acres of disagreement. It may come out as, "You clearly want to work things out and already have some basic agreements, such as..." This approach quashes the need to share their histories of suffering. That peculiar look on Beth's face is her thinking, "Agreements?! Michael's a jerk and this mediator doesn't understand any of this."

- 3) Whirlpooling:** An opposite quagmire to shoving and whitewashing is when the mediator endlessly reiterates (e.g. summarizes, validates, clarifies) every nuance of the problem. The resolver becomes mired in the employees' explanations of who-did-what-to-whom-when and other minutia. Encouraging endless airtime for the backstory to reawaken and parade around the room can leave employees even more entangled in their dispute.

Solutions

Despite each of the problems underscored by the preceding tactics, mediators are encouraged to a) focus on a constructive future, (*continued*)

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(continued)

b) highlight points of agreement, and c) summarize what people say. Introductory mediation training teaches these crucial skills – which is likely why these methods are often overused or mangled. The solution for each pitfall is moderation and nuanced timing.

To avoid shoving parties into the future, first create space for them to share concerns about previous harms. This opportunity will allow them to feel that their versions are heard and understood. From this foundation you can encourage individuals to think of ways to work toward a better future. Deeper into the resolution process it's fine to say, "You have mentioned several times that the other person was disruptive in the April staff meeting. What you have heard today that will ensure it won't happen again?" Acknowledge the past, but focus on the future.

What you say in service to conflict resolution should feel authentic to the participants. So, to avoid whitewashing, balance how you echo both good and bad information without a lopsided emphasis. In our case, we might say, "Michael and Beth, you are really stuck on the argument that happened in front of your co-workers and continue to feel the other person was mostly responsible. Yet, it also seems clear you wish it hadn't happened and you have made some proposals about how to fix the negative pattern into which you've fallen." Recognize reality, but offer hope.

Free Q&A Conference Call with Chris Sheesley

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