



March 6, 2009

Reaching Consensus: Mediating Conflict

by Deborah Zarsky

I have been tasked with mediating conflicts that arise within the business lines that I support. I often find myself caught in the middle with both parties treating me as their confidant, and have trouble identifying and implementing a good resolution. Any advice?

The key to mediating is remaining impartial. Since the substantive problem and its potential solution “belong to” the parties involved, your role is simply to facilitate the process and help them reach agreement.

To be most effective, avoid becoming invested in specific outcomes. Sometimes mediators think they see the solution, and then push the parties in that direction. A problem with this approach is that when people feel pushed, they often resist. Similarly, since it is their dispute, the parties have more information than you have about the situation; accordingly, they are generally better equipped to identify creative solutions. By insisting on a particular solution and steering the conversation accordingly, you could inhibit that creativity.

Instead, implement “active listening” skills to shepherd the process forward. Uncover the subtext to each side’s statements. Determine their underlying needs. Figure out what systemic elements are at play. What about the situation is not working for them? What has the other party done that is contributing to the stalemate? Are there external pressures that should be considered? Ask open-ended questions that elicit the information you seek. And, when you obtain the information, summarize what the person has said – this will help them feel heard, ensure you correctly understood what they meant, and create an opportunity for the other party to hear the substance of the message tempered through an impartial voice (which can have a profound effect and help move things forward). Try to be empathetic to each party’s viewpoint, or, at the very least, suspend judgment. Be sure to do this in equal measure with both parties.

Ideally, conduct the entire mediation with all parties present. Unlike shuttle diplomacy (in which the mediator would convene separately with each party over a series of meetings), facilitating a meeting attended by everyone generally yields better ideas, increased buy-in, improved long-term relationships, and efficiency. At the same time, it requires more skill on the part of the mediator—the conversation could go from bad to worse if not handled appropriately.

Nevertheless, assuming the parties are not hostile, and that you are comfortable with conflict, you should try to start the process in the group setting. If things heat up, you can end the session and revert to shuttle diplomacy or to involving a third-party. More likely than not, though, by giving each person the opportunity to express themselves without interruption followed by your repetition (and clarification) of what was said, the parties will better understand each other’s perspective, and will be poised for problem-solving and reconciliation.

You might want to explore the many wonderful books, workshops, organizations, and coaching options that can help prepare you for this role. They range from specific (e.g. active listening) to general (e.g. mediating), and, collectively, should provide skills and techniques that can be applied to a wide variety of contexts.

At the same time, if you ever feel you are in over your head, you should consider turning to others for help. Company ombudspersons, mentors, supervisors, and third-party mediators and consultants could be great resources in those situations. Should you exercise this option, try to find someone who can get involved sooner rather than later. “Time heals all wounds” doesn’t always ring true in conflict situations—left unaddressed, conflicts tend to resurface with greater severity and complexity over time.

Through effective mediation, workplace conflict can be not only resolved, but a valuable source of information that leads to organizational improvement.

Deborah Zarsky, Esq. is an Assoc. Principal and Senior Mediator with Consensus. Consensus (www.consensusgroup.com) is a negotiation and conflict resolution firm that offers consulting, training and development, and international peace building services to private and public sector clients throughout the world. If you have questions that you would like answered, please contact Consensus at (212) 391-8100 or inquiry@consensusgroup.com