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Manage conflict

Conflict at work can be distracting, damaging and destructive.

Therese Ryan is Ireland's leading Stress Management and wellbeing expert. She is director of Renewal Consultants and the head of the International Stress Management Association in Ireland.

She believes mediation is the key to resolving conflict and can help accelerate team performance.



The Irish economy's future depends on harnessing creative minds and maintaining team performance.

However, to develop and sustain such a workforce, issues that can undermine your teams' synergy must be managed or, better yet, prevented.

The downturn in the economy means that budgets are tighter. Squandering those limited budgets on legal fees fighting court cases over things that could have been resolved in the office is a waste.

Going to court when you don't need to benefits no-one but the lawyers.

That doesn't mean that problems don't exist and won't have to be managed. What it does mean is that managers must find better ways to resolve employee conflicts undermining their team's synergy, creativity and performance.

One answer is mediation.

This conflict management process aims to prevent the conflict deepening and resolve it by agreement before it degenerates to the stage where the lawyers are called in.

Organisations such as The Irish Labour Relations Commission and The Law Society of Ireland are advising parties to disputes to enter into mediation. They're doing so because people can see it works better than fighting court cases.

A court case is a straight fight, one side against the other. There is no incentive to see the other side's case, or to see where they're coming from; rather the opposite. In a court case, one side loses, and the other side wins. For every bit one side wins, the other side loses the same amount; the problem is, with the costs and delays involved, everyone loses.

There is no win-win in litigation. There can be in mediation.

The aim of mediation is to get the parties to a dispute to agree a solution to the dispute between themselves, rather than having it imposed from outside. It gives an incentive to the parties to sort out a deal between themselves. What this means in a work environment is that disputes can be solved in-house, with all involved working to the same goal.

It doesn't have the delays of court cases, it doesn't have the same built-in antagonism that means that the two sides end up fighting each other instead of trying to work together in the future, it doesn't spell the end of any relationship in the workplace that a court case can and, best of all – it's usually a lot quicker and cheaper.

When, instead of having to litigate, you can have a cheaper, quicker, alternative that keeps everyone on board and committed to the cause, it's easy to see why mediation is an option that more businesses might do well to check out as a way of solving the inevitable disagreements that will crop up in the workplace.

However many people that I meet have a misunderstanding about what the mediation process entails; perhaps unsurprisingly, as mediation-room dramas aren't quite the stuff of prime-time television.

Hopefully the following commonly-asked questions will provide you with the relevant information to decide how mediation can support your business and enable you resolve work place conflicts.

So what exactly is mediation?

Mediation is an 'Alternative Dispute Resolution Model' (ADR) that allows the parties in conflict to meet with a trained neutral Mediator who will provide them with the opportunity to find a resolution that is agreeable to both parties.

The Mediators' Institute of Ireland (the MII) define mediation as 'a process in which an impartial and independent third party facilitates communication and negotiation and promotes voluntary decision making by the parties to a dispute to assist them to reach a mutually acceptable solution'.

The contrast with litigation is clear; mediation is about getting the two sides to talk to each other, to see where each other is coming from, and to work to a middle ground that they can both stand together on.

What is the role of the Mediator?

A Mediator is defined as: "a trained professional who facilitates the process of mediation whilst acting at all times in accordance with the principles of impartiality, integrity, fairness and confidentiality, with respect for all parties to the dispute and in accordance with the Code of Ethics". (MII Code of Ethics, 2006).

The Mediator acts as a neutral chairman, clarifying arguments, focusing the participants on the REAL issues, and guiding those in dispute to a mutually acceptable solution.

Because the Mediator can look at the dispute from outside, he or she can help the parties to cut through to the heart of the dispute. Rather than fighting their side's corner over every issue, the way that a lawyer will, the Mediator helps both sides get back to the bigger picture, and can flag potential paths to their shared common ground.

The Mediator won't impose a solution, the way that a court's decision is imposed; rather, the Mediator helps the parties themselves to get to a position that they can both live with happily. A Mediator is like WD40 for disputes; when the two sides are stuck, or grinding each other down, he or she helps it unstick, and helps the two sides to start moving smoothly together again.

Where can I find out more about mediation?

The Mediators' Institute of Ireland website (www.themii.ie) is a great resource tool for organisations and managers as it provides information the mediation process, accreditation and training opportunities and a directory of accredited Mediators.

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About the author: Therese Ryan is Ireland leading Stress Management and wellbeing expert, director of Renewal Consultants and Head of the International Stress Management Association in Ireland. She is consulted regularly by both press and media for her advice and opinion on the issue, one such show has been, RTE 1 Health Show 'How long will you Live? 2007 /2008. She works with individuals and Organisations to enhance performance by creating positive change.

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