

Meltdown or mediation?

Conflict resolution specialists offered the last chance alternative for a business that seemed hell-bent on self-destruction

An unacknowledged power struggle between two local directors in the UK office of an international group had split the 20 staff into two angry and frustrated factions. The situation deteriorated over several months until the office was virtually paralysed and people were starting to hand in their notice. The nominal boss, a director from the overseas parent company, had tried to solve the problems, but the main players just seemed to dig themselves in even deeper.

The Challenge

With the breakdown of trust and communication and a serious clash of management styles, there were major issues at stake in this small, high-pressure workplace. Apparently irreconcilable differences threatened to ruin the UK operation, and there was no obvious way out of the mess.

In this context, mediation was seen as offering a last hope, though, as in most organisations, there was no-one there who had previous direct experience of this kind of approach.

The aims were simple enough

- to get the office working again
- to keep the skills and expertise of both UK directors
- to encourage the employees who were leaving to stay with the company.

But it was also important that any solution had to be generated by those involved, so that they could own it and make it work. All 20 staff needed to play a part in finding the answers, because they all had their own opinions and ideas about the situation.

The Process

For the two mediators, the first aim of the three-day intervention was to identify the underlying causes and get everyone to recognise the emotions entwined in the issues. It turned out that there were many smaller worries, some fairly trivial, that could be handled quite easily. As these were unravelled, a basis of trust emerged that allowed the bigger problems to be tackled.

The mediators' first day was spent interviewing every member of staff to explore individuals' perspectives and ideas for resolving some of the issues.

Mediation Day 2 was spent mainly with the three directors, sorting out what was going on and trying to pin down the structural factors that contributed to the problems. It quickly became clear that the business had no real reporting lines and no accepted division of responsibilities. In fact, even the directors did not know what their own job descriptions were. This led to confusion and conflict, made worse by a lack of proper office procedures and effective channels for communication with either staff or the parent company. In this fertile soil, Chinese Whispers and misunderstandings ran wild. Yet, when they were given the opportunity to stand back and look at the situation, all three directors were able to identify the nature of the problems.

Armed with this new clarity, the directors worked to develop a series of plans over the next two weeks. But the crunch, inevitably, came on Mediation Day 3, when the mediators returned to work with directors and staff to integrate the new insights and ideas and plot the way forward. Would the changes that had been discussed be enough to get the workforce operating as a team again and put the office back on its feet?



The Outcome

In the event, Mediation Day 3 proved to be a decisive turning point, as theory and insight were translated into concrete proposals. A detailed six-month action plan was drawn up, covering everything from a complete rethink of the office layout to a fresh set of operating procedures, backed up by a new code of behaviour for all employees and a monitoring process to make sure future areas of conflict were not ignored or brushed aside.

Clear job descriptions were drawn up for the directors and senior staff and new reporting lines were put in place. The overseas director made a commitment to spend more time in the UK and one of the UK directors agreed to go on a management skills course, funded by the company.

Alongside all the practical changes, the overwhelming feeling was one of relief, among both directors and staff, that so many issues had been brought out into the open, coupled with delight that everyone could now move on with a clearer structure and purpose. Everyone had been listened to, and everyone had been involved in the eventual solution.

The office started working again and the directors chose to carry on. One member of staff decided to leave, but the threat of an exodus vanished as the atmosphere improved and productivity returned to levels that had not been seen for years.

Aransa is a specialist conflict resolution, negotiation and mediation consultancy, working with corporations to cut the cost of conflict

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