

Successful Supervisor Part 66

Playing the Mediator Role

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Every supervisor is called upon to play the role of mediator between two parties who are having agreement problems. The severity of the problem will vary based on the specific circumstances and the people involved. If we think about the extremes, a mild situation might be helping resolve an argument about a machine cleaning process between individuals working on a team, while a severe situation may involve physical threats where one or both of the parties may be in real danger or are facing termination.

For inexperienced supervisors, it is always best to err on the side of caution and have additional resources ready to assist if needed. It may not be appropriate to have a security person in the room with the people who are arguing, but it might be wise to have one in an adjacent room on call in the event of escalating rancor.

In the interest of transparency, I am not a professional mediator, so my homespun advice below may be in some ways only a primer leading you to more study on the topic. I have been in many situations where I was the mediator, and I still have all my fingers and toes. What I will share below are some ideas on how to expand the conventional approach to one that can have a more permanent impact on the entire organization.

Typical Approach to Mediation

The process of mediation almost always involves getting the two parties together for a discussion, or a series of discussions, with an objective. The primary objective is to restore order and come up with a fair settlement. The methodology is to get both parties to talk, make sure both parties are heard, look for areas of agreement, agree to disagree on some things if necessary, look for win-win solutions, seek cooperation, and document actions.

The overarching role of the mediator is to maintain safety for all parties as the discussion continues and guide the dialog toward a resolution. The typical discussions have several parts that may be handled in different order depending on the nature of the disagreement. In general, it is best to start with establishing a safe environment where each party can hear the other. Next comes a fact finding approach where the perceived facts are given. Third is a search for potential resolutions, and finally there is an action phase where the parties agree on some steps to resolve the conflict.

What the Parts Look Like in More Detail

1. Create a set of ground rules that both parties can accept

The idea here is to review how the discussion will proceed and how to maintain order so both parties can make their points in safety. If the parties are especially hostile, it helps to have a brief list of rules for the specific situation. For example, some points might include:

- Talk only when it is your turn
- Be respectful in the language you use – no profanity
- Listen carefully when the other person is speaking
- No electronic devices should be used
- No weapons are allowed in the room
- Respect the role of the mediator

2. Establish what happened in the opinion of both parties

Often the problem is that the parties do not have the same understanding of exactly what happened, and this clarification phase obviates the need for further work. Once both parties can agree on what happened and the confusion is over, often they can shake hands and the incident is over. If they agree on what happened but are still at odds over the fairness or equity, then further analysis is needed.

3. If possible, try to identify areas of agreement

It is a chancy to begin with who is right and who is wrong because it presupposes there is a right and wrong way to articulate what people are thinking. Both individuals will have a deep feeling that their way is the correct interpretation. That is why the better approach is to look for areas where the parties already agree. Perhaps they can agree on a major objective for the group but are at odds over how to achieve that.

4. Look for peace in the valley

Of course, an objective is to end hostilities, but that is not the only consideration. A key area to pursue is how to modify conditions so the problem is not only solved but the culture has changed so it will not come back in a different form. A short term peace is good, but the objective should be long term accord.

Explore options with the individuals by asking open ended questions like, “What would have to happen for the situation to be acceptable to you?” Always seek to find win-win solutions so that both parties are satisfied. Often a solution that satisfies one party will be totally unacceptable to the other party. In this case, keep looking for other options that can be acceptable to both parties.

5. Try to reach a fair settlement

Crafting a “fair” settlement is high on the agenda, but this can be myopic. The focus should shift from what will suffice to calm things down now to how the environment can be modified to attack the **root cause** of the acrimony.

For example, if two administrative people are at odds over the formatting of a critical report, you may be able to get them to agree on one common format. Unfortunately, if the root cause is that their managers have differing views on what they want the reports to emphasize, then the agreed-upon solution will be short lived.

6. Maintain your authority

You go into the discussion as the authority figure, and it is important not to lose that position. That requires being as objective and neutral as possible, which in some cases is difficult to do.

These are some of the typical steps to achieve a resolution of a specific problem between two people, but the real mediation requires more than just getting the two people to get along. You need to extend the thinking beyond the two individuals so that you consider the culture these individuals are working in to accomplish a lasting solution.

Extend the Focus

The approaches above are not total long term solutions. If you can factor the things below into the conversation, your thinking process, and your leadership, you will emerge with more robust and lasting solutions.

1. Train people how to resolve future conflicts

Part of the human condition is that we all see things from our own perspective. It is natural that there will be differences of opinion from time to time. You want to focus your coaching remarks on processes that will allow people to get along even though they do not always agree. The key skill is for people to learn to disagree without being disagreeable.

2. Creating a preventive rather than reactive culture

Often the entire culture can become supportive of ways to get along amid the turmoil of daily stresses. The idea is to stress that the entire team shares a common goal at a higher level. We all want the group to be successful, and we know that fighting always detracts from performance.

Teambuilding exercises are very helpful for teaching groups to work better together with less acrimony. Building a culture of higher trust will obviate the future need for a mediator to sort out the issues.

3. Engaging the entire community

Working with the whole team to create a set of mutual values and agreed upon behaviors can go a long way to preventing the flare ups between two edgy people.

When operating in the role of a mediator, it is often tempting to focus on resolving the issues at hand, but that process does not prevent recurrence. Take a longer view and work on your entire culture and you will find less need to play the mediator role in the future.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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