

Leading Ways: MEDIATING CONFLICTS

Invariably the best of managers and leaders find themselves in a position of having to mediate issues between two direct reports that have gone sideways. It is important not to get in a series of separate conversations with the parties. You will wind up in the middle of the conflict. This is a no-win situation.

It is always best to avoid these situations by making sure that goals, roles and key processes -communication, decision making and accountabilities- are clear, consistent and continually reinforced. My experience is that while leaders believe that all of these matters are clear, they often are not and touchy concerns like roles, decision authority, and accommodation of other's needs are often glossed over or ignored.

But even with these preventative matters well in place, things can go off track.

It will be inevitable that the conflict will come to your attention in a one-on-one conversation with one of the parties. Do your best to listen, ask questions for clarification, pass no judgment and indicate that you would like to discuss the situation one-on-one with the other person involved. Again, in this second conversation you are there to ask, listen and learn.

Then it is time to convene the two parties. This will be a challenging meeting, but here are some things that can help.

First send out a set of rules prior to the meeting. Here are some that I like to go out ahead of time as a way of setting the stage for a productive discussion:

- I want us to have a chance for an open and honest exchange that is [safe](#) for all of us. This means listening to each other, focusing on the problems and issues not each other, withholding judgment and maintaining civility.
- I would like us to be able to identify, agree and focus on one problem at a time, if multiple problems are related, we can identify them and still focus on one particular problem or issue at a time. It may help to think through issues that are important to you beforehand and write them down.
- I will go into our meeting assuming that all of us are motivated by good intentions and invite you to do the same.

- My goal at the meeting will be for us to have a shared understanding of the problem or issue and for us to come up with ideas of how we can address these as we go forward. If it is possible, I would like to leave the meeting with a better appreciation of each other's positions and understandings. As well, my aim will be to help us get to some specific, positive next steps that we can all take and support of improving this situation.
- I hope we can all come to the meeting with some genuine curiosity and seek to improve your understanding of the dynamics that have gotten us to where we are.

At the meeting, try to maintain complete neutrality and to model the kind of curiosity that you have suggested they bring. You will need to actively moderate the discussion, not allow personal attacks and be sure to call out all judgments for what they are. Try to keep them focused on facts, not how they interpret the facts.

If things do get too emotional, and they can, you may need to suggest that the discussion stop for the day and reconvene, but make sure you summarize what progress they have made and also offer some thoughts about next steps.

If you do get some progress on having them understand each other and the problems better, make sure you reserve 15 minutes or so at the close of the meeting to focus on practical action steps that all parties, including you, can take to make sure this works well as we go forward. A commitment to a small test of changed behavior is much better than a promise to "change everything." I would suggest that you offer to draft a summary of the conclusion, share this in an email and ask them for their input. This should then be the basis for the next meeting.

The next steps are rinse and repeat until there are clear and accepted rules for behavior, hopefully some acceptance and understanding and a lowering of tensions. It is important that all future discussions of these issues need to involve all of the concerned individuals or you will be back in the middle. You can use the same approach if you find yourself mediating between two peers on a team. It just requires that you alter your role a bit to be more collegial.