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Getting under the Skin of Workplace Conflict: *A Mediator's Perspective*

Introduction

Key workplace conflict survey findings provided in the April 2015 CIPD employment mediation report (CIPD 2015, 'Report') prompt the mediator perspectives explained in this Opinion. The CIPD report explores why one-on-one workplace relationships tend to negativity more readily than any other single circumstance. These perspectives are motivated by the proposition that conflict is inevitable in all human interactions (Callanan, 2007, 10). Report findings confirm mediation can be utilised more often, and at earlier workplace conflict stages than is current common practice.

1. Key survey findings

The key Report (2015) findings are summarised below.

(i)   The Report suggests 38 percent of UK employees experienced an interpersonal workplace conflict during 2014. These conflicts included isolated disputes and difficult ongoing relationships. Gender appears to play a minimal role in conflict occurrence (Report, 9). UK employee sensitivity to conflict is greater than previously observed (8). The Report also emphasises how understanding employee perception is essential to appreciating conflict cause and resolution (16).

(ii)   Survey respondents cited conflicts with line managers or people reporting to them as the most frequent interpersonal workplace conflict cause (Report, 10, 11).

(iii)   In most instances, conflict is attributable to personality differences or working styles (relational conflict), with secondary importance attached to issue-based conflict, such as those triggered by promotion or individual job performance issues (Report, 12).

(iv)   Public sector and voluntary organisation employees tend to identify workplace conflict as more prevalent than those employed in the private sector (Report, 9).

(v)   Small ('micro') organisations tend to more effectively informally resolve conflict than occurs in larger organisations (Report, 9, 25).

(vi)   The broad phrase, 'lack of respect', is the most commonly cited conflict cause, as opposed to specific descriptors such as bullying or harassment (Report, 13); actual or threatened violence is rare. The Report expression 'power dynamics' explains this particular survey finding, as indicative of root workplace conflict causes (14, 15).

(vii)   Reduced productivity, lesser motivation and commitment, and increased employee stress are the most common workplace conflict outcomes (Report, 17, 18). Conflict thus has technical employment contract and psychological impacts (19).

(viii)   Informal conflict resolution efforts are far more common (and more valued by survey respondents, (Report, 26)), than any resort to formal procedures (20). Where formal procedures are employed, the Report authors suggest the parties' conflict positions tend to be more entrenched, and effective resolution is made more difficult (21, 24).

(ix)   There is a powerful linkage observed between line manager team building effectiveness and conflict avoidance – resolution (Report, 23)

(x)   Mediation may be more effectively employed as complementary to more formal discipline – grievance procedures (27). This last finding has significant implications for the perspectives provided below.

2. Mediator perspectives

The various Report findings are easily distilled into practical mediator guidance. When mediation can be detached from other formal workplace conflict resolution procedures, there is a greater likelihood that conflict can be resolved (as also endorsed by Sweeney, 2013, 9). Given the Report finding that power dynamics play a crucial role in conflict occurrence (whether real or perceived (Report, 3), it is

understandable that an employee who feels their work or self is disrespected by another workplace colleague might be reluctant to directly approach the conflict source. The Report aptly notes that these employees often complain to family members or friends – a likely misplaced effort, as these persons may lend a sympathetic ear, but are unlikely to have the ability to give effective conflict resolution guidance (Report, 3; Callanan, 2007, 12).

On this basis, it is suggested that an organisation committed to effective conflict resolution might emulate what appears to frequently happen in micro-organisational settings. As workplace size is a key determining factor in having conflicts informally worked out, the closer any organisation can emulate how small organisation workplaces essentially compel its members to interact more closely, commonly occurring 'personality conflicts' will be more likely resolved informally at the earliest possible stage. This observation also fits neatly with the Report finding where manager team building effectiveness is strongly correlated to reduced workplace conflict.

For these reasons, there is merit in the following two-part proposition. Early stage, informal conflict resolution can be encouraged in any organisation where the persons are encouraged to discuss issues between them. If all workplace stakeholders knew that a dispute could be 'talked out' informally, either with or without a third party mediator, the prospect the situation will resolve seems much higher. For this reason, it is suggested that larger organisations benefit where the formal grievance procedures are supplemented by an early, informal, and entirely confidential mediation option (Stitt, 2008, 77, 78) Such options must be carefully constructed to ensure power dynamics effects are reduced (arguably as inevitable as conflict itself, as underscored in the Report). An employee must be secure in the knowledge that in requesting an informal mediation intervention, there is no threat that such requests are used to the employee's detriment in later promotional or other workplace decisions. As Suter (2012) suggests, mediation is a key 'dispute prevention' mechanism within the workplace, a precursor stage before dispute resolution (37, 38).

It is apparent from the Report findings that mediation has a positive reputation amongst employees, yet it equally appears to be under-utilised in UK workplace conflict resolution. Formal policies that stress this informal mediation availability at the earliest stage are an attractive option. It is emphasised that this mediation availability need not be restricted to employee requests. There may be instances where a manager might welcome approaching a difficult employee circumstance through these informal mechanisms. Both parties might feel far less pressure than where the manager waits for the employee to address issues that cannot be resolved between them. So long as the mediation does not oblige truly unwilling parties to refer their disputes to mediation (an unacceptable obstruction on their right to access to courts, contrary to *European Convention on Human Rights 1950* Article 6 (*Halsey v Milton Keynes NHS Trust* [2004], [9]), mediation ought to be vigorously promoted in every workplace. In the rare instances where mediation is unsuccessful, the mediation process ensures each party likely recognises strengths and weaknesses in their own and the opposing position – resolution may occur on the same basis, but at a later time (*Hirst v Leeming* [2001], 381).

Conclusions

The Report findings suggest that given the inter-personal, relational nature of most workplace conflict, effective resolution is predicated on findings means to overcome power dynamics and encourage early, informal exchanges between the involved parties. An informal mediation option will likely assist, particularly in larger organisations as a supplement to more formal grievance procedures.

References

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