

PER 2292: Rethinking Workplace Conflicts and How to Respond to Them

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Learning Objectives

In this session, we will:

- Review how unresolved conflicts and traditional responses to them adversely affect productivity, morale, performance, wellbeing, etc.
- Consider a framework for building conflict capability, including strategies for:
 - Maintaining a conflict-capable environment
 - Building capacity to respond to conflict
 - Providing third-party support
- Explore how and why these strategies offer better opportunities for authentic conflict resolution than traditional grievance processes
- Engage in brief experiential learning activities for building conflict capability

Questions to Ponder

With a few other colleagues, discuss:

- How are workplace conflicts addressed within your institution?
- When are they addressed effectively? How and why? What is occurring?
- When are they addressed ineffectively? How and why? What is occurring?

Share examples to illustrate



Impacts of Unresolved Conflict

The Human Toll of Unresolved Conflict

- Report: 56% of employees experiencing conflict also report anxiety, stress, and depression
- U.S. Workers spend 2.5 hours/week attempting to resolve disagreements
- Managers devote 20% of their time addressing conflict
- Consequences:
 - Loss of trust in management & co-workers
 - Negative impacts on physical & mental health
 - Decreases in retention, engagement with work tasks, and efficiency.

Source: References cited in Griffith, D., [Managing Conflict to Support Employee Engagement and Wellbeing](#)
(Blog: HigherEdJobs.com, August 16, 2023)

The Toll of Unresolved Conflict on Health



- The associated stress of unresolved conflict can:
 - lead to decreased sleep, changes in eating habits, increased alcohol use and smoking
 - impact the cardiovascular system, leading to strokes, heart attacks, chronic disease
- Studies of workplace conflict have shown prevalence of:
 - psychosomatic complaints
 - feelings of burnout
 - psychiatric morbidity
 - other psychosocial health problems.

Source: References cited in Griffith, D., [Managing Conflict to Support Employee Engagement and Wellbeing](#) (Blog: HigherEdJobs.com, August 16, 2023)

But When We Address Conflicts as They Arise . . .

- Difficult conversations training can improve teamwork, productivity, and employee satisfaction.
- Resolution more likely when employees have “voice,” i.e., they can:
 - communicate concerns directly
 - participate directly in conflict resolution processes affecting them
 - express concerns indirectly through employee representatives
- When engaged in discussion to resolve conflict, employees less likely to report:
 - Stress
 - Poor health
 - Exhaustion
 - Absences due to health(compared to no attempts made to discuss concerns)

Source: References cited in Griffith, D., [Managing Conflict to Support Employee Engagement and Wellbeing](#) (Blog: HigherEdJobs.com, August 16, 2023)

Leadership Matters



Meta-analysis: Two leadership styles found strongest predictors of overall and negative aspects of mental health:

1. “Destructive”: Leader is aggressive and potentially harmful to employees (negative impact)
2. “Transformational”: Leader inspires and engages employees in creative thinking, and considers each person's needs (positive impact)

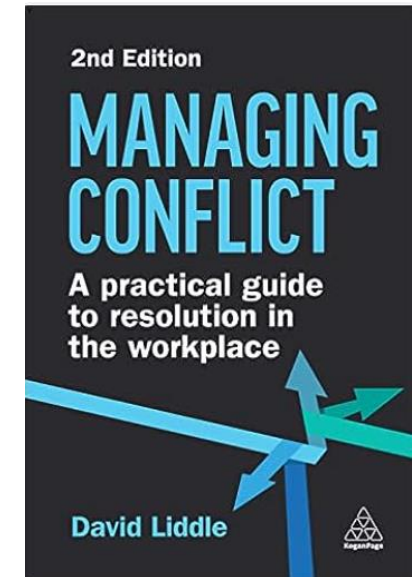
(Relations-oriented and task-oriented styles also associated with positive mental health)

(Montano, D., Schleu, J. E., & Hüffmeier, J. (2023). A Meta-Analysis of the Relative Contribution of Leadership Styles to Followers' Mental Health. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 30(1), 90–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15480518221114854>)

Rethinking How We Respond to Conflict: A Disconnect Between What We Say and What We Do

“A lot of the systems are **reactive and retributive**, particularly [those for] handling performance grievances, complaints, and disciplinary issues. . .

While the outward message might be around positive environment, common purpose, collaboration, welcoming diversity, creating an inclusive workplace . . . **the felt experience** of many [when involved with a grievance, etc.] [is] **the organization actually destroys their relationships and, in many cases, destroys them in terms of their mental health and well being.”**



The Recruitment Network, Podcast, [Managing Conflict with David Liddle](#)

A Needed Change in HR's Role

HR “needs to think and act like a disruptor, not an extension of management [and] evolve into a truly independent people and culture function.”

To do this, HR must:

- **“rid the workplace of the corrosive, destructive, damaging, adversarial and reductive HR processes** that have undermined working relations for too long [and]
- **throw off the shackles of retribution and embrace a transformative model of justice** which brings people together and engenders dialogue, compassion, respect, and resolution.”

David Liddle, CEO, TCM Group, LinkedIn post, ["The Resolution Framework: Welcome to the resolution revolution."](#) (Feb. 2, 2023)

Traditional Diversity Programs Don't Work

Study: Filing discrimination and harassment claims:

- is often counterproductive
- subjects complainers to retaliation
- leaves them worse off with respect to career options and mental health challenges
- results in limited punitive consequences for offenders

(Frank Dobbin, Alexandra Kalev, cited in Arlene S. Hirsch, SHRM, [Alternative Complaint Systems for Harassment and Discrimination Disputes](#), Feb. 2, 2022)

“The most popular diversity programs blame managers for slow progress. These include diversity and harassment training, discrimination and harassment grievance procedures, and HR rules to quash bias. They don't just fail; they reduce workforce diversity by alienating managers.”

(Dobbin, Kalev, [Getting to Diversity: What Works and What Doesn't](#), Jan. 7, 2023)

Some Alternatives to Blend, Reduce or Eliminate Traditional Responses

- Employee Relations partnerships within and outside HR structure - e.g., OD, training, institutional equity, etc.
- Ombuds
- Mediation and Conflict Resolution Office
 - Early intervention
 - Coaching
 - Training
- DEI Offices
- Employee Assistance Programs

Goals:

- Confidential, informal, independent, impartial assistance through dispute resolution and problem solving
- Reduce possibility for retaliation
- Resolve problems rather than exacerbate them



Building Conflict Capability

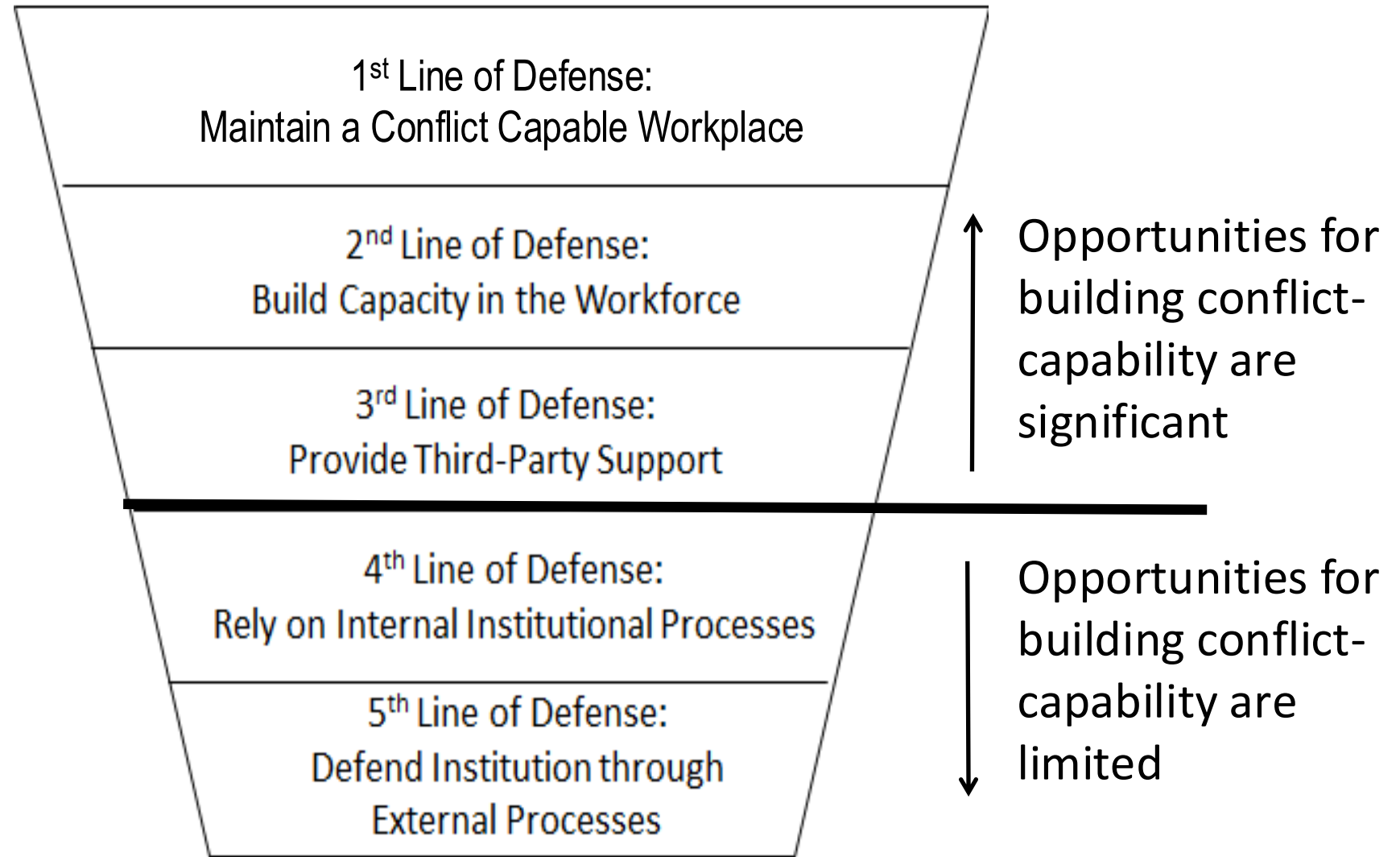
Building Conflict Capability (Definition)

Putting into the hands of employees the skills, tools and strategies to address their own conflict situations and communication challenges

In order to:

- Support early intervention to address conflict & avoid escalation
- Minimize reliance on formal internal resources (HR, etc.) which:
 - often involve policy responses (investigation, adjudication, etc.)
 - limit opportunities to address relationship issues

Building Conflict Capability – “Lines of Defense”



Building Conflict Capability – “Lines of Defense”

<u>1st Line of Defense:</u> Maintain a Conflict Capable Workplace Culture Civility DEI Recruitment & retention Leadership development Team development	<u>2nd Line of Defense:</u> Build Capacity in the Workforce Training: Conflict resolution Compliance Supervisory Coaching & Mentoring Conflict Coaching	<u>3rd Line of Defense:</u> Provide Third-Party Facilitation Support Facilitated conversations Mediation Group facilitation Dialogue processes	<u>4th Line of Defense:</u> Rely on Internal Institutional Processes Grievances Investigations Formal hearings	<u>5th Line of Defense:</u> Defend Institution through External Processes External agency action Litigation
• <u>Significant</u> Opportunities to build conflict capability • <u>More</u> ownership and empowerment • <u>Greater</u> possibilities for win-win outcomes • <u>Early resolution</u> of conflict, before it escalates • <u>Parties decide for themselves</u>			• <u>Limited</u> Opportunities to build conflict capability • <u>Less</u> ownership and empowerment • <u>Fewer</u> possibilities for win-win outcomes • <u>Late resolution</u> of conflict, after it has escalated • <u>Third-party decides for parties</u>	



Maintain a Conflict Capable Workplace

Maintain a Conflict Capable Workplace

The organization contemplates conflict capability as integral to its general policies and practices for:

- Organizational Culture (vision, values, mission, etc.)
 - **Civility**
 - DEI
 - Recruitment & retention
 - Leadership development
 - Team development
 - Etc.

Uncivil Workplace Behaviors

One definition:

- Low-intensity
- Deviant behaviors
- With ambiguous intent to harm the target
- In violation of workplace norms for mutual respect

Source: Anderson, Lynne M.; Pearson, Christine M. 1999. "Tit for Tat? The Spiraling Effect of Incivility in the Workplace." *Academy of Management Review* 24, no. 3, 452-471.

Uncivil Behaviors (examples)

- What we don't do/say (don't open a door, say "Good Morning," etc.)
- Subtle disrespect (non-verbal messages)
- Breaches of etiquette, common courtesy
- Pet peeves (microwave/copy machine issues, etc.)
- Gossip (talk about absent third-party, etc.)
- General rudeness (noisiness, disruption, condescension, arguing, etc.)
- Inappropriate electronic communication (email, texting, etc.)
- Verbally abusive behaviors (foul language, labels, accusations, harsh tone, hostile demeanor, etc.)
- Privacy and ethical violations
- Culturally insensitive behaviors and remarks
- Bullying and general harassment

Typical Responses to Bad Behavior

- Implement policy, procedures to address specific offenses
- Progressive discipline
- Negative ratings/remarks in performance reviews
- Impose sanctions as outcome of formal investigatory and adjudicatory processes

Theme:

- Reliance on policy and procedure
- “Enforcement” mentality

Is Civility “Enforceable?”

- Traditional policy and procedural remedies are not always effective to address uncivil behaviors
- Uncivil behaviors involve matters of degree
- In some instances, intent is less clear, and impact is less intense
- Many matters can be addressed before they escalate (i.e., learning opportunities, counseling, etc.)

Addressing Uncivil Behavior Before it Escalates

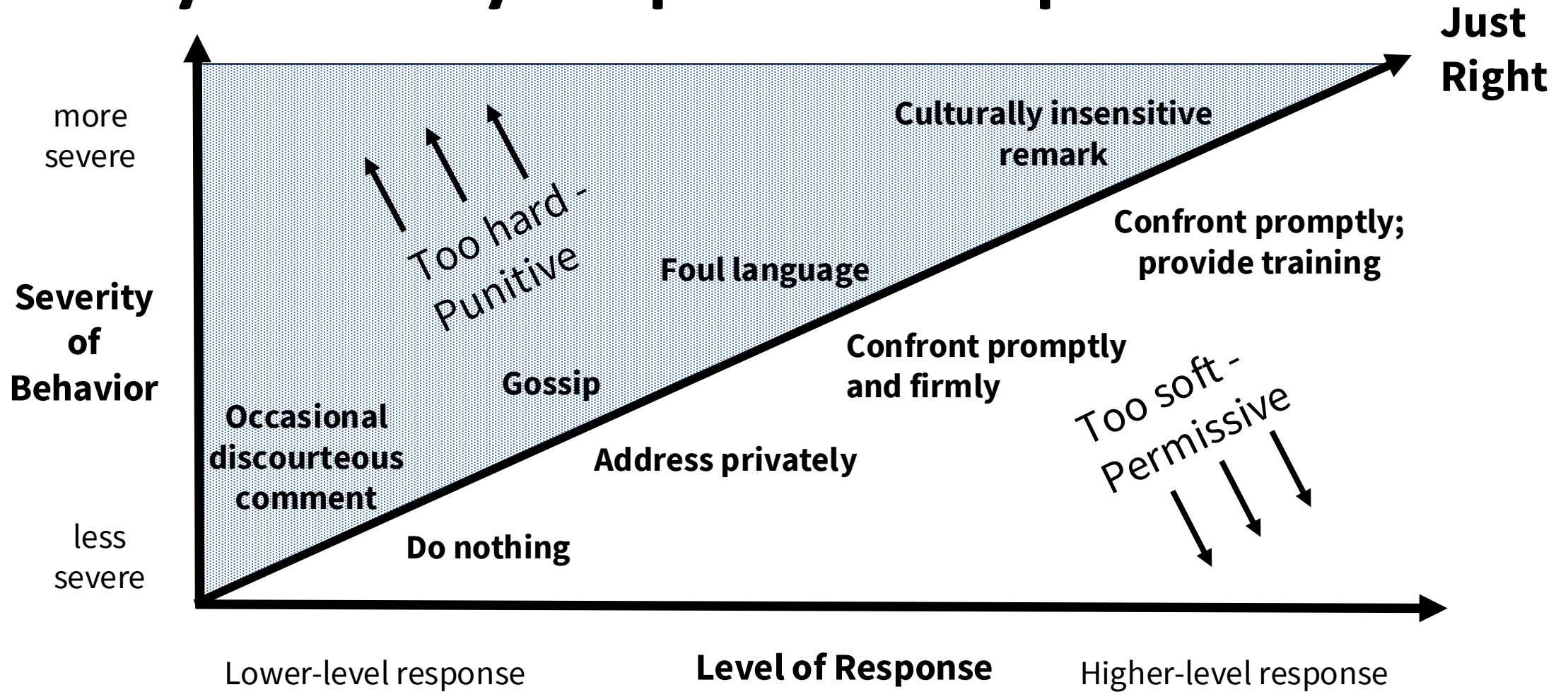
Some Possible responses

- Do nothing (when parties seem to be working matters out)
- Establish team norms or “house rules”
- Social consequences (ignore a bad joke, don’t respond to gossip, etc.)
- Support and counsel to help correct behavior
- Confront firmly, but supportively – insist on change
- Provide more intensive coaching
- Mediate

The Goldilocks Theory for “Enforcing” Civility



Every Incivility Requires a Response



Scenario Discussion

Review the scenarios of uncivil conduct described in the next slide

With a few colleagues, discuss responses to each situation that would be:

- Too punitive
- Too permissive
- “Just right”

We’ll debrief as a full group

Scenario #1

Jack has a reputation for intimidating co-workers and, on occasion, yelling at them. Yet he isolates his behavior to situations where only he and the “target” of his intimidation are alone in a room. Thus, when employees complained, the previous manager informed them that nothing could be done because there is no way to verify their complaints. Many employees have complained.

Scenario #2

On an early, crisp fall morning, Lucy comes to you and says she had a strange, yet brief encounter in the parking lot with Alexis, an employee in another department. Alexis said, “Whatever happened to those Mexicans that used to work on grounds and parking lots? This place is a mess.” Lucy found these comments offensive and felt something should be done about it. You know Alexis’ supervisor.

For each scenario, what response would be:

- Too punitive?
- Too permissive?
- “Just right”?

What “civility conversations” are needed? With whom? About what?
Any additional information needed before responding?

Additional Strategies for a Civil Workplace

- Recruit a civil workforce
 - Evaluate selection criteria for leadership, citizenship, character (not just technical proficiency)
 - Interview accordingly, including behavior-based questions
 - Expand search committee beyond internal members
- Incorporate civility content in training
 - Compliance training beyond policy review and “command & control”
 - Scenario discussion and problem-solving
- Discuss crucial civility issues with team
 - Before, during and after incidents
- Manage or exit “jerks”
- Watch for “command and control” procedural traps

Rethinking Workplace Conflicts and How to Respond to Them

Welcome Back for Day 2!



Build Capacity in the Workforce

Build Capacity in the Workforce

Provide support so employees can address their conflicts and communication challenges for themselves

- Training:
 - Conflict resolution
 - Compliance
 - Supervisory
- Coaching & Mentoring
- **Conflict Coaching**
 - Etc.

Coaching Employees through Conflict - Definition

The process of providing support and guidance to employees to:

- build their capacity to address workplace conflict situations directly
- rather than rely on:
 - third-party interveners to facilitate resolution, or
 - decision makers to dictate outcomes

Conflict Coaching Contrasted with . . .

- Performance coaching
 - Helping others reach full potential in an area (personal, professional, physical, spiritual, etc.); used in life/career planning, making fundamental changes to performance or behavior, dealing with major life setbacks, etc.
- Executive coaching
 - One-on-one professional development in an organizational context to support professional advancement, adjusting to change and/or addressing performance issues
- Developmental coaching
 - Coach makes concerted effort to assess where the coached is developmentally and builds program of improvement accordingly. Often used to help coached gain deeper insight and make meaning of personal and organizational experiences.

Who Can Be a Conflict Coach?

- Managers and leaders
- Professionals with responsibility for assisting employees with conflict situations (HR, institutional equity, faculty affairs, DEI, etc.)
- Conflict specialists (Ombuds, employee relations, counselors, etc.)
- Peers and team leads

Limitations: Role may limit extent of support that individual can provide

- Examples:
 - When manager is source of conflict
 - When HR professional may ultimately be decision-maker

Coaching Process (Before Employee Attempts to Respond to the Situation)

- Uncover the story (what is going on?)
- Analyze causes & relative contribution by employee vs. “other”
- Identify possible responses
- Select the most viable response
- Identify skills and strategies to implement the response
- Identify confidence level and capability to use skills and/or implement strategy
- Support skill/strategy development and implementation

Spectrum of Coaching Options

More optimal

- Listen and affirm
- Guide through process of identifying possible solutions

Less optimal

- Present possible solutions for consideration

Least optimal (avoid if possible)

- Give advice on how to solve the problem
- Solve the problem by stepping in

Coach is least involved;
person coached most in
control of decisions

Coach is most involved;
person coached least in
control of decisions

Advice:

Do more of this . . .
. . . and less of this

Typical Approaches Upon Receiving Coaching

- Do nothing, but monitor situation (keep coach updated)
- Receive advice to think about, return later for more coaching before acting
- Continue coaching to develop skills and coping mechanisms
- Confront individual on own (coaching relationship remains confidential and unknown to other person in conflict)
- Suggest third-party assistance with HR and/or coach support
- Request coach to intervene in an informal ombuds capacity and/or set up mediation process
- File grievance/pursue discipline to raise awareness and provide more formal forum for addressing the matter

Best advice (usually): Individual confronts situation directly

Applications

- Assistance with specific interpersonal issues
- Having difficult conversations (peer-peer, employee-manager, manager-employee)
- Guidance as employee pursues mediation, grievance or arbitration process (coach must not be involved in process)
- Referral from manager as outcome of discipline or performance review
- Helping to identify resources – mediation, training, EAP, etc.
- Multi-party/team coaching

Conflict Coaching Practice Activity



- Pair up. Decide who will be A and who will be B. Party A will be coached. Party B will be the coach. (If time permits, you will have the chance to switch roles).
- When you are being coached:
 - Choose a situation in which you are facing a conflict or potential conflict. Or consider a recent situation in which you experienced conflict that did not go well.
 - Please be sure it is something you are comfortable discussing.
 - Share your story and concerns
- When you are the coach:
 - Emphasize listening, affirming, and guiding over telling, directing, and prescribing
 - Help your colleague evaluate possible options for addressing their concern
 - Note: You won't have time to identify an ultimate response; focus on helping the person decide for themselves



Provide Third Party Facilitation Support



Provide Third Party Facilitation Support

Assist employees in conflict work through their concerns on their terms through informal, collaborative, non-adjudicatory processes

- Facilitated conversations
 - **Mediation**
 - Group facilitation
 - Dialogue processes

Mediation - Definition

A form of assisted negotiation in which a neutral third party helps individuals resolve their conflict.

The Mediator:

- Helps parties with the *process* of communicating and decision-making
- Helps resolve *substantive* matters (but not as evaluator, decision maker, or advocate)
- Provides opportunity for parties to understand the root causes of their dispute and heal their relationship



Benefits

Employees

- Voluntary process
- Objective, trained 3rd party assists
- Fosters commitment because it:
 - Allows parties to decide
 - Encourages problem solving
 - Improves communication and relationships
- Protects participants' privacy



Professionals as Mediators

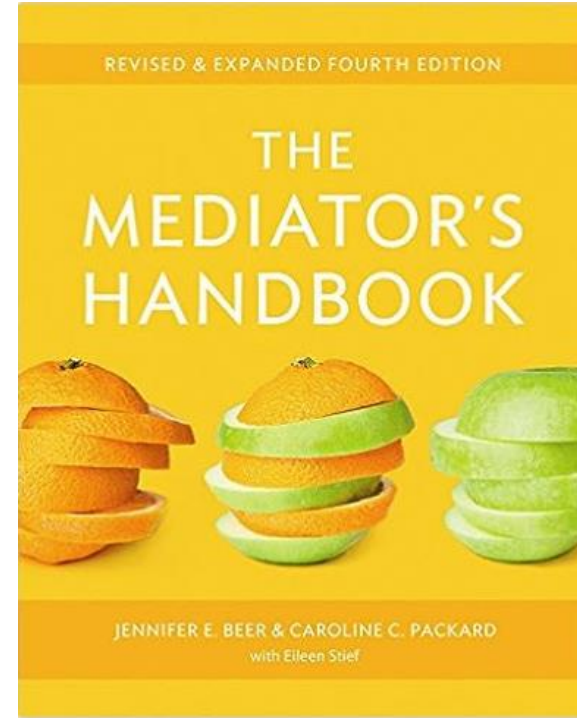
- Different tool in the toolkit
- Advances our reputation
- Enhances our effectiveness in the midst of ambiguity
- Provides meaningful alternative to traditional approaches
- Broadens our perspective about how people experience conflict
- Minimizes repeat business



Who Can Be a Mediator?

- “Mediation isn’t esoteric.”
- “[P]eople from **all walks of life and with all types of education can learn to be effective mediators:** coaches, clergy, managers and supervisors, politicians, social workers, principals, crew leaders, parents, police, teachers, board members, therapists, teenagers, small business owners, elders, barbers – **anyone who helps settle conflicts in their own corner of the world.**”

(Jennifer Beer and Caroline Packard, *The Mediator’s Handbook* (2012))

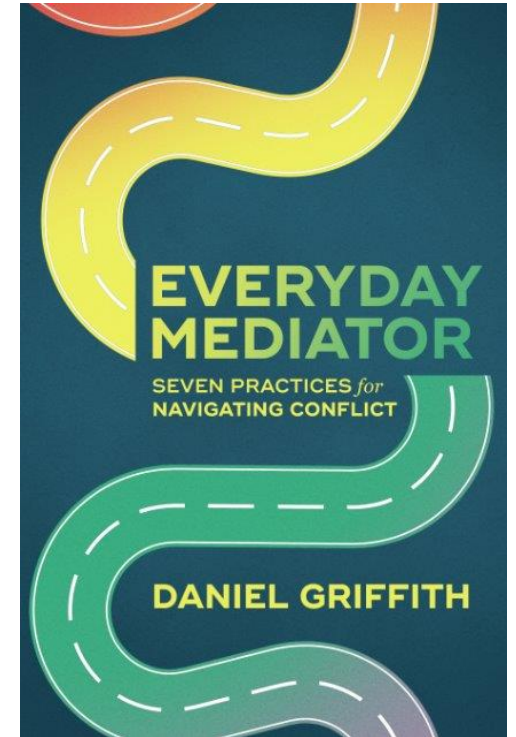


(Additional Reference: Griffith, D., [Professionals Who Mediate \(4 part series\)](#), Mediate.com, June 29, 2023)

It's Not Just for the "Experts"

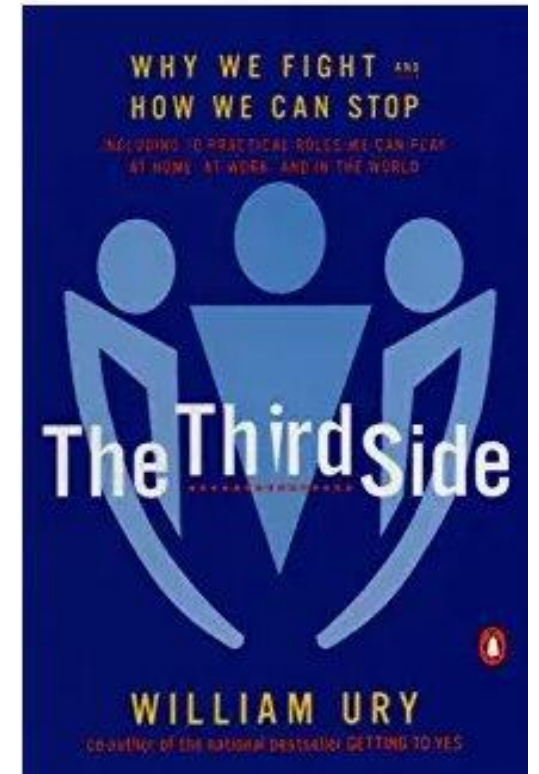
"Though mediation is often seen as something only the experts can do, such as lawyer-mediators helping parties avoid protracted lawsuits, we all have the skills, aptitude, expertise, and gravitas – right now – to be the mediator others need."

Daniel Griffith, *Everyday Mediator: Seven Practices for Navigating Conflict* (Amazon, 2025)



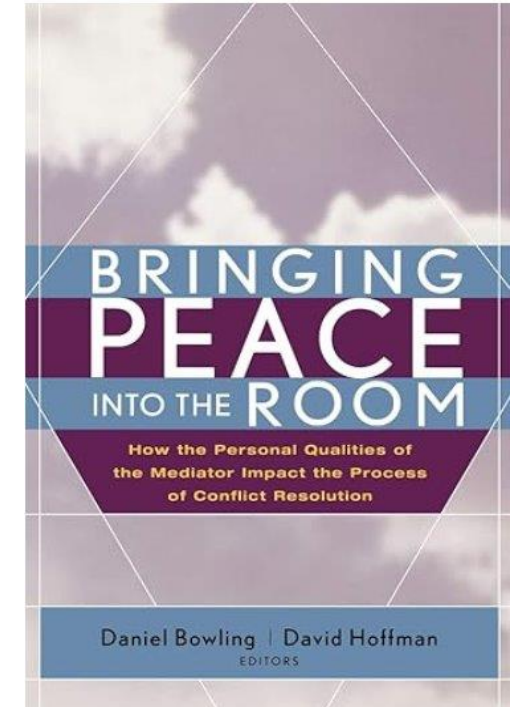
We Mediate Every Day

- *“We may not think of it as mediation, but that is what we are doing whenever we listen attentively to people in dispute, when we ask them about what they really want, when we suggest possible approaches, and when we urge them to think hard about the costs of not reaching agreement.”*
- William Ury, *The Third Side: Why We Fight and How We Can Stop*



"Nearly everyone can learn to mediate . . .

- *. . . from nursery school children to juvenile offenders, violent prisoners, illiterate peasants, political radicals, and corporate executives, all of whom I have seen mediate successfully. Mediation is a life skill and a social art in which everyone ought to be trained."*
- Kenneth Cloke, in Hoffman, Bowling (eds.), *Bringing Peace Into the Room*



What Do Mediators Do?

- Facilitate discussions
- Support each party equally (neutral, objective, impartial)
- Uncover how's and why's of the dispute
- Defuse hostile situations; pause or stop a discussion when needed
- Show respect, concern, sensitivity to affected parties
- Manage differences in conflict styles
- Support parties' decision-making process
- Serve as institutional support outside normal reporting structures

Stages of the Mediation Process

1. Setting the Stage
2. Gathering Information
3. Framing Issues
4. Negotiating options/considering alternatives
5. Nailing down the agreement



Training Sample: Video Demonstration

- Role-Play Cast of Characters
 - Mediator
 - Randi Knue – Large Events Manager
 - Roberta Oldway – Assistant Director for Public Relations
 - Cindy Campbell – Director of Public Relations and Event Planning (their boss – not present in video)

Video Example: Setting the Stage – Opening Statement



https://iu.mediaspace.kaltura.com/media/t/1_zocp3nqk

Role-play Activity



Instructions

- Form groups of 3 and choose roles:
 - Party A: Administrative Assistant
 - Party B: Manager
 - Party C: Mediator
- HR has recommended the parties to pursue mediation.
- Role-play scripts on the next slide
- Mediator role:
 - Introductions
 - Ask each party to share their story
 - Mediate!
 - Help them problem-solve

Party A: Administrative Assistant

You have worked for the department five years. You handle administrative tasks (filing, spreadsheets, billing, etc.). You like your behind-the-scenes role. Your new boss wants you to attend meetings to take notes and share your "institutional knowledge." You hate public speaking and believe you have a "social phobia" (undiagnosed). You don't want to be promoted. You work to live, not live to work, and enjoy a rich family life. You want to keep it that way.

You've been avoiding your manager. If s/he persists, you may file a grievance.

Party B: Manager

You are new to your role (three months) and to higher education. You believe in developing employees and like to give "stretch" assignments. You really need the administrative assistant to step up and attend meetings to take notes and share what s/he knows, as it is a lot. But you can't seem to find him/her. Your predecessor did little to develop employees, and that is going to change. Plus, you expect employees to follow your direction. Otherwise, there could be consequences.

Mediator: Skills to Consider (Also, consult your "cheat sheet")

- Empathy: ***"You feel [emotion] about [a situation, circumstance, issue, etc.]"***
- Reframing: ***"[Party A], you are saying that . . ."*** ***"[Party B], you are saying that . . ."***
 - ***"You are both saying that . . ."***
- Seeking Clarification (gently): ***"Could you say more about that?"*** ***"Help me understand . . ."***
 - ***(Do not probe deeply at this point – Just get their basic story and clarify their concerns)***

Developing Mediators

- Mediation Training – Sample Agenda (40 hours)
- Days 1-3
 - Overview, mediator characteristics, role-play demonstration
 - Principles of interpersonal communication, negotiation, and conflict
 - Mediation Process
 - Mediation and Ethics
 - Organizational Context (panel of university administrators)
- Days 4-5 (approx. 2 weeks after Days 1-3)
 - More complex situations
 - Multi-party situations; co-mediation
 - Dialogue skills
 - Other contexts for using mediation and conflict resolution skills
- All days are highly interactive
 - Role-plays constitute approx. ½ of total training time
 - Case scenario discussion, exercises, debriefing, Q & A



The Case for Building Conflict Capability

Building Conflict Capability Avoids Punitive Measures (Whenever Possible)

- Human Nature
 - People want to amend their ways
 - Yet become guarded if acknowledging failings will result in penalties
- Formal discipline and other formal processes
 - Destroy trust, good will, positive relationships, especially if appealing to employees' desire to change is possible
 - Removes inclination to change
 - Sends message that “second changes” are not possible
 - Creates a “fight” which is stressful to both manager and employee

Pros and Cons for Building Conflict Capability in the Workforce

Cons	Pros
Organization relinquishes control of conflict resolution processes . . .	. . . to put control in hands of those most knowledgeable and equipped to respond.
Specialized training and expertise is required . . .	. . . for some issues, not others. Conflict is natural. Need to rely more on employees to resolve their own conflicts.
It becomes a free-for-all . . .	. . . unless you put appropriate controls (checks and balances) in place.
It's the responsibility of specific offices.	Maintaining positive, productive environments is everyone's responsibility. Need to change our organizational mindset.
We can't have just anybody try to resolve conflicts.	Employees will try anyway with or without the skills. Might as well provide the skills and support.

Final Takeaways

- Reliance on traditional HR approaches for addressing conflict are often ineffective and potentially detrimental
- The best approaches build capability in employees to address their own conflicts and in appropriate professionals to help them (training, coaching, mediation, etc.)
- Help your institution and leaders rethink how workplace conflict is managed and how you can assist (and develop yourself accordingly)



Thank You!

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