

CONFLICT SOLUTIONS

Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

Expert Advice to Resolve Workplace Discord

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Chris Sheesley, MA
Conflict Resolver



Debbie Nelson
Associate Mediator

IN ACCORD
Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work
1327 SE Tacoma St. #132
Portland, OR 97202
503-723-9982
info@inaccordnw.com

You Can't Take It Back

Below are some masterpieces from the Hall of Cringeworthy Comments, all of which were made during In-Accord-facilitated meetings:

- Blair blurted, "You're arrogant and obsessive."
- William infamously declared, "You're the worst leader I've ever seen."
- Dawn [and many others nowadays] proclaimed, "You're a bully!"

Each statement was directed at a coworker or manager during a conflict resolution session. Perhaps these folks felt they could let it all out because they were finally dealing with long-held concerns. However, it's faulty to believe that sharing every frustration is constructively cathartic. Do people really believe their insults will be interpreted as insights that lead to self-improvement? As a mediator, I've never heard someone reply to this type of criticism by saying, "Thank you for sharing that. I didn't realize I was coming across as obtuse and completely unprofessional. I'll have to work on that." Even the most talented mediator will have trouble repairing the resulting damage.

The following tips are for participants who enter into a conflict resolution effort. They will also be useful for leaders who help employees solve disputes.

It's called conflict resolution. Conflict can't be fixed without stirring up discord. Participants should expect that an authentic effort to work through problems and delve into challenging topics will inevitably unearth historical concerns and arouse emotions. However, the people quoted above veered from the resolution-centered goal when they purged their frustrations. Once participants commit to sitting down with each other and resolving concerns, the central focus should be on outcomes such as how to restore the relationship, establish trust, and craft guidelines for working together. It's impossible to move forward together while brandishing ugly criticisms.

(continued)

“
“I JUST WANTED TO SAY THANK
YOU FOR GETTING US TO THIS
POINT. IT'S BEEN A GOOD PROCESS
AND I APPRECIATE WHAT YOU'VE
DONE FOR US.”

PETER MCGARRY, VICE PRESIDENT
PROVIDER NETWORK
PACIFICSOURCE HEALTH PLANS

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(continued)

Being real [kind]. If we were to ask the people who say outlandish things why they say them, a common answer would be that they are being “real.” As mediators who push people to have genuine conversations about tough topics, we applaud authenticity. But it’s a mistake to believe that being real is synonymous with being harsh or hurtful. Take William’s comment about leadership. Couldn’t he have expressed his concerns about his manager’s deficits by describing the qualities he would like to see in a leader? Or perhaps he could have provided specific examples of missed leadership opportunities. It’s possible to be real in a way that is constructive.

Labels are sticky. Every label hurled during conflict resolution should come with a warning that reads, “Caution: Very sticky. Be careful when applying.” Labels like “bully,” “worst,” and “obsessive” don’t come off easily and linger indefinitely. I’ve witnessed hundreds of examples from mediation sessions. I often check back with parties after a seemingly successful mediation process and am surprised to hear that the lowest moments are remembered most vividly. Most often, these unpleasant reflections are of the nasty comments which were exchanged.

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Conclusion

When participants agree to conflict resolution and intend to work toward solutions, it’s best if they ask for what they want using candor, but not cruelty. Their shared situation can improve without sharing every negative feeling. No matter how ferociously participants unleash their opinions, it won’t “fix” the other person, nor will it convert them into someone new. In fact, labels and insults derail problem-solving and relationship-building processes. Participants should be careful what they say because they can’t take it back.

Perspective:

70% of the Earth is covered by water...

BUT IT ONLY ADDS UP TO 0.02% OF THE PLANET'S MASS.