

# CONFLICT SOLUTIONS

## Fixing Interpersonal Conflict at Work

### Expert Advice to Resolve Workplace Discord

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### How to Keep Agreements on Track

After two mediated sessions with Liam and Kyla, everything seemed hunky-dory. They'd had a tough, but progressively amicable and even poignant conversation. Ultimately, they emerged with a written and signed set of eight commitments which they developed. But then came the email that occasionally arrives in my inbox at this stage of evident resolution. It said, "In thinking about this over the last few days I'm alarmed at some of the comments Liam made during our meetings with you. There are several things he claims I said or did that that are either inaccurate or completely out of context...". It goes on to claim that

Liam must not have been there in good faith and expresses her skepticism about Liam's ability to follow their joint agreements.

Kyla convinced herself that the few moments of inevitable friction during the facilitated meetings outweighed the overall positive exchange and outcome. She concluded that the rapport and solutions must be illusory because Liam shared some contrarian opinions and points of view. Just days after détente, Kyla was slipping back into conflict patterns and destructive ways of thinking. What is a conflict resolver supposed to do?

*(continued)*

### More About Mark:

Before beginning his work with In-Accord ten years ago, Mark served in government for three decades. For 16 of those years he specialized in workplace conflict resolution for the Bonneville Power Administration where he founded and directed the agency's mediation program. Mark also helped establish, and was the first Chair, of the Oregon Federal Executive Board's "Shared Neutrals" program, through which he coordinated resolution services for an array of agencies. His resume includes five years as a dispute resolution ombudsman, as well as resolving Equal Employment Opportunity complaints. Mark is a former board President of the Oregon Mediation Association and has trained aspiring mediators at universities, colleges and other venues. When you meet Mark, ask about his remarkable quests to Japan, Sierra Leone or Portland's homeless camps.



## THINGS TANGLED UP?

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(continued)

Kyla had a form of buyer's remorse—a belief that perhaps it was a mistake to reach resolution with a former nemesis. People can be so embedded in the dynamic of interpersonal conflict that they become habituated to seeing the worst in the other person. From this quagmire of negativity, it is difficult to imagine a new era ahead. It is easier to rely on the old instinct that the other person should not be trusted. Maybe, in fact, it is easier to fixate on negative comments that were made during the path to resolution than it is to move forward with resolution.

Here are the points I shared with Kyla and the strategies I recommend to leaders who help people emerge from a history of discord:

- **Affirm the concern:** “It sounds like you were stung by some things Liam said during the meetings which were discouraging because...”
- **Normalize second thoughts:** “It can be challenging to move beyond a history of conflict and we all know that trust is hard to re-establish.”
- **Underscore progress:** “It must have been especially hard to hear those comments because most of your interactions during mediation were constructive and you worked through a lot.”
- **Focus on the future:** “You have an opportunity to start anew with each other, and you developed some meaningful guidelines for working together.”

• **Seek recommitment:** “It’s great that you are trying out some of the agreements despite being uncertain about a long-term resolution. The best way to prevent the agreements from falling apart is to practice them. If your current concern is important enough, you might begin by asking him - in the spirit of the new atmosphere - about the things he said that concerned you. Practice your new communications commitments.”

• **Offer a safety net:** “If you can’t work it out together, then come back to me [or the mediator] and I can help you refine things to keep on the path.”

The dramatic shift that happens when colleagues resolve their conflicts can be profound. But, that dramatic moment of resolution must be followed by maintenance work—implementing the agreements and continually reinforcing the new spirit of rapport. Leaders who oversee resolution initiatives serve participants well when they follow the five tips above and, most of all, point participants back to their agreements to make them into a living document.

People get over buyer's remorse when they end up loving the antique garden gnome they won on eBay. Similarly, coworkers will move past their resolution remorse when they successfully put an upsetting workplace conflict behind them, make lasting peace, and gain a colleague with whom they can work.



### Perspective:

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