

CONFLICT SOLUTIONS

Expert Advice to Resolve Workplace Discord

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The Hazards of Preconditions

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Workplace relationship mediators adore cases that go well, and we become especially enamored when they end with agreements, a friendly handshake, and even the rare hug between parties. Yet, as we know from life in general, we learn a lot from failure. Here's a case that didn't end well. Actually, it didn't start well, either, which is the point of this tale.

HR referred Michael (employee) and Tyler (supervisor) to mediation due to their derailed relationship and history of failed communication. For Michael, the culminating moment was when Tyler called him out during an all-team meeting for missing a deadline. When Michael confronted Tyler after the meeting, he was rebuffed with an emphatic "There are consequences. You missed the deadline, not me." While this was their most overtly tense moment, their log of woes held a dozen other entries describing soured interactions. Michael arrived at the meeting with a folder of concerns while Tyler carried a blank notepad and conveyed imperturbability.

Up to this point, it was a regular day at our office. Then, the situation lurched from merely difficult to impossible when Michael declared in his opening that Tyler had to admit he'd been intentionally belittling him. I instantly realized I'd failed to spend the necessary time during pre-mediation preparations to ensure that both parties

were ready and able to engage in a meaningful resolution effort. Now, seeing the brick wall toward which they were headed, I began an elaborate mediation dance to avert an impasse. But even after my best puppet show, waving of semaphore flags, and firing of pyrotechnics, nothing worked and the mediation session died on the table.

What had gone awry? Mostly, the fault was mine. I had failed to engage in the necessary preparatory work of testing their readiness to participate in an open, meaningful dialogue. I've learned many times over not to prematurely bring parties together when there's a known, lurking landmine guaranteed to wreck the process. But, let's imagine I'd done my part more artfully and discovered Michael's precondition. First, we'll praise his clarity because every negotiator should reflect on what they want from the process and from the other person. Skilled participants in relationship-building-let's-get-back-to-work sessions are encouraged to advocate for what they need and how they would like to be treated. However,

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since this was clearly a case of mutual culpability, the flaw in Michael's approach was that of holding dialogue hostage by demanding that the other side capitulate at the start. Michael's position (i.e. "Admit you're belittling me") meant that to begin discussions, Tyler must accept Michael's version of the conflict. However, the goal of facilitated workplace resolution is to create an exchange in which people can understand each other, learn how the other party experiences the situation, and even evoke shared empathy for the mutual harm it has caused.

Michael's insistence on Tyler's admission of guilt precluded the possibility that they might engage in a mediated conversation that should have had - statistically speaking - a high likelihood of leading to resolution. Compare a coerced, likely false mea culpa that Tyler might have offered at the beginning of the discussion to what he might have said at the culmination of an honest two-way dialogue. If their case unfolded like most, they would have shared sentiments such as "I'm sorry for X" or "I wish we'd talked about this sooner" or "I'm glad we've heard each other's points of view." Such outcomes would have carried more heft and value for Michael than if Tyler had falsely taken on all the blame at the start. In

most cases (that is, ones in which there are no heroes or villains), parties are better off earning apologies and recognition from one another by working together to restore the relationship.

Insisting on preconditions to avert negotiation might make sense when you don't really want to work it out, when lives are in jeopardy, or if you're posturing for political gain. But, if you hope to heal a fractured working relationship with a colleague with whom you share interdependencies and a coffee pot in the break room, then preconditions are usually counterproductive. You might win a skirmish but lose the peace.

