

Basic Steps for Mediating Interpersonal Conflict

Sometimes a conflict is best resolved by having a neutral third party guide and structure discussions in order to support finding a resolution. This process, also known as mediation, entails helping the parties directly communicate to compromise, negotiate, and hopefully come to an agreement or solution together.

Not all conflicts will be resolvable, even with mediation. That does not mean the process was useless, however. Mediation can be an opportunity for the parties to gain insight and understanding about each other. It can also help everyone to root into and advance their communication skills.

Though there are many forms of mediation, **this resource is a tool for mediating *entrenched but relatively low-level conflicts between individuals***. Those are conflicts rooted in misunderstanding, miscommunication, personality differences, or active disagreement. This process is best used *after* other efforts such as direct feedback, supportive coaching, and courageous conversations have been unsuccessful. Mediation requires the consent and willing participation of all parties.

This resource is **not** designed for mediation related to harassment, discrimination, threats to individual safety, or any other activities that could fall under your organization's Human Resource's complaint or grievance processes.

Mediation is a consent-based, time intensive process that requires several meetings--often over a series of weeks. Mediation also draws on the psychological resources of everyone involved, as it asks them to sit with, communicate about, and reflect on an active conflict. Because of this reality, the most successful mediations are spacious--not condensed and urgent--while having a clear end.

Is mediation appropriate for this situation?

Use the list below to determine if mediation is a good option for this situation. If you check more than 4, then mediation could be helpful.

The parties in the conflict

- Have a long history of disagreeing or being in conflict
- Have low ability to communicate directly with each other
- Are unable to find a solution / Want support to resolve the situation
- **Required:** Consent to and agree to mediation
- **Required:** Sees the facilitator as a neutral agent

Who should facilitate this process?

Use the questions below to determine if someone is a good candidate to facilitate this process. If they are unsure or say no to any of these questions, they may not be the right person for this role. No facilitator is perfectly skilled, but these traits are essential.

Are you...

- Impartial to the substance of the conflict and any possible outcomes that may result from this process?
- Willing and able to gently interrupt or disrupt discussions if parties stray from or violate agreements related to content, timelines, and conduct?
- Willing and able to drive a process forward through consistent and persistent communication and coordination?
- Open to having the conflict parties feel upset with *you* at various points during or after this process? Sometimes facilitators become scapegoats for parties who are in conflict.
- Available for numerous conversations, meetings, and check-ins over the course of at least a few weeks or even months?
- Able and committed to maintaining strict confidentiality about these discussions?

Facilitator skills and activities for the mediation process

An effective mediator needs to have competence, confidence, and the willingness to improve on the skills listed below. This list can help you reflect on the role and prepare to act as a mediator.

- Identifying the core *needs* behind each parties' requests and helping to clarify those to both parties—e.g. feeling respected, supported, understood, heard, having space to reflect and process before responding, etc.
- Supporting useful brainstorming towards a resolution
- Addressing barriers to resolution
- Fostering a sense of momentum: identifying small successes as progress, especially when things are sticky or slow
- Holding individual check-ins or one-to-one communication with each party as needed
- Setting dates for discussions and benchmarks for decisions/check-ins to move the process forward
- Guiding parties as needed (reframing things for them; addressing emotions as needed)
- Holding all parties accountable to the mediation agreements

The Process

Before Mediation

- Determine each party's needs
- Determine each party's conflict resolution skills (ability to listen, remain balanced, hear other points of view)
- Determine communication and participation agreements that everyone can agree to
- Gain full consent from each part to move forward and begin

Setting the Stage: The first meeting with the parties and moving forward

- Set the tone—be solution & future focused; help everyone let go of blame
- Outline the process and goals
- Clarify the facilitator's role
 - Holding the parties to their agreements for content and conduct
 - Establishing timelines
 - Moving the discussions forward
 - Clarifying communication between the parties
 - Helping to brainstorm solutions
 - Supporting a check in after the mediation is complete or has ended
- Set expectations: what resolution may mean for each of them and when to end this process
- Confirm a shared understanding of the conflict
 - Steer clear of assigning blame
 - Don't get mired down in details
 - Focus on experiences and impacts
 - Collectively work to identify and name root causes (e.g. Communication patterns, faulty assumptions about each other, a structural problem related to the project such as ambiguity about decision making)

Discussion and Negotiation

- Host meetings, other direct communication between parties, and check ins as needed
- Support listening for understanding between both parties—encourage the practice of reflective listening
- Identify the core needs of each party
- Interrupt and correct evaluative or judgmental language ("you always," "you never," or "you are this type of person")
- Transform demands for certain actions into requests to meet core needs
- Negotiate requests, agreements, or activities that support meeting those needs
- Develop an agreement

Concluding the Process

- Create and share the agreement
 - Set a date for a follow-up check in to see how the agreement is working for the parties
- **OR** identify why this process is not working and why it is ending; identify what options remain for the parties
- Host a closing discussion