

EAP MATTERS

The magic art of mediation Timmy Kurtuldum

Have you ever wondered whether mediation is for you? I describe it as a magic art, because over the last eight years, I've seen the power of mediation in hundreds of organisations and witnessed its potential to transform deeply entrenched workplace conflicts. I'll share some of my learning, which I hope you'll find helpful if you're considering developing skills in this field.

I joined my current employer, employee assistance programme CiC, at a time when workplace mediation was just gaining traction among HR professionals. I had the opportunity to establish a partnership with the Buon Consultancy to train workplace mediators on a Civil Mediation Council accredited course. Fast forward to today, and I'm an experienced mediator and team facilitator working across all business sectors and sometimes participating in as many as six mediations per week. Alongside this, an important element of my role as Training Manager is the recruitment of affiliate counsellors to work with us as workplace mediators.

The core skillset we look for in prospective workplace mediators includes having strong interpersonal dynamics and a sensitivity to potentially underlying mental health conditions in those you're working with. Effective workplace mediators are calm and good communicators, who can easily establish a rapport with 'strangers'. They are active and reflective listeners, who are well-versed in accurately paraphrasing information from several different parties. Mediators often have a background in family therapy, and they are assertive and willing to confront a complex situation and contrasting opinions – something that, in my experience, is rather different to the general character of a workplace counsellor.

Skilled mediators also tend not to be too analytical – instead it's vital that their focus remains on the outcome and achieving a

practical solution that can be accepted and implemented by all parties. Recently, two affiliates approached me because they'd recognised that a mediation they were working on was becoming blocked up with too much empathy and emotion. They needed to take a step back, look at the needs of those involved and focus on the facts, not the feelings.

Alongside these core skills and competencies, affiliates who are hoping to develop their portfolio of work in the field of mediation, will also need a recognised qualification in workplace mediation. It's also worth considering some additional training in couples' therapy, as the skills required here are complementary to mediating in the workplace. Mediators need to have experience of what it means to work day to day and to understand the culture of work. This will help with empathising and understanding how conflicts can emerge, escalate and potentially get out of control in the workplace. Alongside this, some experience of working in a particular sector, such as the NHS, will help potential mediators to appreciate the policies and procedures of this type of work environment, as well as the nuances and quirks of the sector.

It's too easy to think that mediation in a workplace context is the same as, for example, family mediation or mediation of parties going through a divorce. In these types of mediation, there is much more of a focus on the past and factors contributing to the issues being discussed. I can't emphasise enough that this is a marked contrast to workplace mediation, where we're purely focused on the 'now'. There's no need to know the details of what happened leading up to the mediation. We can work our magic with minimal information and an acceptance from all parties involved that we can move forward.

If you're thinking of incorporating workplace mediation into your skillset, it's important to consider how mediation differs from counselling. Of the 100 or more

workplace counsellors who have undergone workplace mediation training with me, at least 40 per cent have decided not to take up work in this area, despite completing the course. It's just not right for them and too much of a contrast to 'regular' workplace counselling.

Time is another key factor in workplace mediation that needs to be acknowledged, and being under pressure to deliver a 'result' within a certain period of time is too restrictive for many affiliate counsellors considering working in this area. There just isn't the luxury to extend the number of sessions; you have to stay with it until an agreement is in sight, something which can be exhausting, physically and mentally.

Mediation in the workplace has earned a strong reputation among HR professionals for delivering results and as such there is a steady stream of work in this area. However, as I've highlighted here, workplace mediation is highly specialised, and to be successful you need to be objective about your background, your skills and the nature of the role. If, having fully considered your potential to successfully work in this field, you feel it's right for you, there's nothing stopping you from making the magic of mediation happen.



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