

Enhancing Cohesion by Managing Employment Conflict Effectively

A shift in relationships in the modern working environment, together with increasing employment legislation, have spurred many organisations to look at more appropriate ways of resolving workplace disputes, writes Margaret Bouchier.

Conflict in the workplace was traditionally seen as destructive, with dissent and disagreement considered the hallmark of disgruntled employees and dissonance in teams, a symptom of failure. This view of conflict suited the traditional work environment where competitive advantage was based on low-skill, low-value work in the context of an autocratic, hierarchical system.

However, our world of work has changed. The modern work environment is dynamic and subject to a myriad of influencing factors, both external and internal. Globalisation, new technology, changing demographics and increased legislation have dramatically reshaped the modern, industrialised labour market. In the UK and Wales, the services industry – defined by The Economist as ‘anything sold in trade that could not be dropped on your foot’ – now employs over four-fifths of the working population.

Likewise, the Irish labour market is now dominated by intellectually-based services that require high-level employee involvement. The source of our competitive advantage no longer lies in a low-cost base but rather in our highly skilled, motivated and innovative workforce.

Managing for innovation and change

The move to high-performance, team-based work in recent years has necessitated a fundamental change in employment relationships. Also, increased employment legislation and the corresponding ‘legalisation’ of workplace conflict, particularly in the US, UK and Ireland, has spurred organisations to establish more appropriate mechanisms for resolving workplace disputes.

However, while alternative dispute resolution (ADR) processes – namely arbitration and mediation – have been widely adopted by organisations and incorporated into their policies and procedures, there is a lack of empirical research into the effectiveness of these processes and their impact on organisational strategies.

To go some way to addressing this lack of examination, in 2013 I conducted research – approved by Queen’s University Belfast - into the effectiveness of external mediation as a conflict management process in employment disputes in the Irish context. Through the use of an anonymous questionnaire to individuals who have directly engaged in external mediation to address employment conflict, and structured interviews with HR managers who have contracted external mediators, the research examined the quality of outcome from the perspectives of the individuals and the organisations.

The data indicates a high settlement rate in external mediation; however, the quality of outcomes in relation to improved work relationships, enhanced cohesion and new

learning suggest that mediation is particularly suited to the demands of the modern work environment.

The findings

The results from the anonymous questionnaire indicated a high level of satisfaction on the part of the parties who directly engaged in mediation: 87.5pc confirmed that the mediation resulted in a mediated agreement of which 75pc confirmed that the agreement was still standing at the time of response and one respondent confirmed that the agreement was no longer standing.

While the resolution of presenting conflict is, without doubt, important – enabling individuals and teams to return to the task in hand – it is the quality of satisfaction identified in the findings that is most interesting.

In mediation, the stakeholders are supported in discussing contentious issues constructively; examining different perspectives and broadening understanding so that sustainable outcomes that deliver in light of individual needs and common interests can be achieved. And so it is not surprising that the most frequently cited comments by the respondents were in relation to gaining new insights and understanding.

Meanwhile, the HR managers who engaged in semi-structured interviews identified organisational benefits from the use of external mediation that also exceed the simple resolution of the disputes.

Two recurring factors noted by the respondents deserve particular mention: firstly the procedural strengths of mediation, particularly its voluntary and confidential nature which allows for a different type of dialogue to other dispute resolution processes; and secondly, the role of a skilled mediator in enabling resolution.

The modern work environment requires teams and individuals that are motivated and adaptable. We spend more time with those we work with than those we choose to live with, so it is reasonable to expect that sometimes, competing needs, differing styles and contextual issues will combine in a perfect storm. Mediation is an effective and flexible process that allows for sustainable outcomes and enables long-term learning – a perfect fit for the particular challenges of the modern work environment.

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