Lennox Morrison BBC online

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“People say to me, ‘She’s dishonest, She’s scheming, He’s feathering his own nest, He’s a chauvinist’. They swear,” says Felicity Steadman, a UK-based mediator who has been untangling messy workplace wars for more than 26 years.

“They’re often very apologetic. They say, ‘I’m sorry I don’t know what’s happened to me, I’m not this kind of person, I don’t usually behave like this’.”

This is a white-collar warzone where the weapons are insults, tears and aggrieved silence. The combatants are colleagues who can’t stand each other. Hostilities escalate and the damage amounts to billions of dollars in absenteeism, sick leave, litigation and decreased productivity.

Workplace conflict was estimated to cost companies $359 billion a year in the US alone in 2008, according to global **research** by human resources specialist CPP, Inc. This was based on American employees spending an average of 2.8 hours a week in dealing with conflict. In Germany and Ireland the average weekly time was even higher – 3.3 hours. Which is why, increasingly, companies call in professional mediators.
The trigger was comments made by the older lawyer about the younger one’s attitude to work, her timekeeping and dress

Steadman brokered peace at a law firm where two lawyers – each crucial to the practice and required to collaborate – hadn’t spoken to each other for six months. One was in her late 20s, the other in her 50s.

“Usually relationships deteriorate slowly and then there’s a flashpoint. It might be a sharp instruction in front of other staff, or simply forgetting to say ‘happy birthday’”, says Steadman, who, like all the mediators interviewed, removed or changed identifying details of specific cases to guard confidentiality

Workplace conflict was estimated to cost companies $359 billion a year in the US in 2008, according to global research by human resources specialist CPP, Inc. (Credit: Alamy)

In this case, the trigger was comments made by the older lawyer about the younger one's attitude to work, her timekeeping and dress. To try to resolve the conflict, three meeting rooms were booked at a hotel so that Steadman could move between separate and joint conversations. At first "there was a lot of blame, generalising language, then tears and a lot of negativity," says Steadman.

They identified common ground – they were both perfectionists, committed to their jobs

The two women had different views of what had happened between them but eventually they agreed to disagree on the facts, and move on to focusing on feelings. They identified common ground – they were both perfectionists, committed to their jobs. With Steadman's help they then committed to new ways of communicating with each other, right down to how they greeted each other in the office the next morning.

Dog-eat-dog

Toronto-based mediator Jeanette Bicknell was called in after trouble flared at an interior design firm. Two warring partners had broken off communications.

"They would vent to a third person, the accountant, who was trusted by both of them," says Bicknell, of Principled Dispute Resolution and Consulting. After individual coaching and then a meeting with all three, harmony was restored.

One person was less on board with the dog

However, 18 months later, without consultation, one of them started bringing their dog to work every day. "One person was less on board with the dog," says Bicknell. They eventually negotiated a timetable of days when the pet could come to the office.

Tricks of the trade

Mediators draw from psychology and philosophy to get people back on speaking terms.

One is the game theory concept that instead of there having to be a winner and a loser, it's possible to have two winners. "If you show them that a co-operative mode can create better games for both parties, win-win mindset versus win-lose, then you can really make much more progress," says Steadman.

Felicity Steadman is a mediator based in Oxford specialising in employment disputes she sits on the panel of mediators for the UK's Court of Appeal. (Credit: Felicity Steadman)

From psychology, mediators draw on the theory of transactional analysis — a widely recognised way of understanding behaviour based on the idea that everyone has three ego states: adult, parent and child. Mediators use it to identify when people are acting as a 'parent' or 'child' and then try to pull them back to having an adult conversation.

Mediators are happy to use shock tactics to grab attention. One took a recently declassified WW2 document from 1944 prepared by the US secret service, 'How to sabotage a workplace', to illustrate to staff just how disruptive their behaviour can be.

Lunchtime as crunch time

There are some surprising strategies that they use to break deadlock. For instance, they often start off a day's negotiations by *not* negotiating. Rather than bargaining, they examine people's concerns and motivations. After a morning of this, both parties might be asked over lunch to think about what they want the other side to do, and how they themselves can help improve the situation.

"Invariably when people come back together and present their response to these questions you find a huge amount of overlap," says Steadman.

Contrary to what many people expect, a successful outcome rarely means meeting halfway

Contrary to what many people expect, a successful outcome rarely means meeting 'halfway' – often one party has to go further than the other to rebuild the relationship. Before a

meeting, each side is coached in what to say but also in how to listen properly – right down to making sure that their body language says, ‘I’m listening’.

In a long-running dispute, the most disarming opening gambit can be to concede immediately a point you’ve fought hard for in the past — thus signalling absolute commitment to finding resolution *today*.

Elizabeth Stokoe, professor of social interaction at Loughborough University where she studies conversation (Credit: Elizabeth Stokoe)

Culture Clash

Danny McFadden LLB based in Hong Kong mediator and trainer for World Bank and United Nations CEDR Representative in Asia. Adjunct Professor Kobe University Japan.

As mediator for the World Bank and United Nations in Asia and managing director of the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution Asia Pacific, Danny McFadden has seen a considerable increase in mediation in the region over the last decade, especially in Singapore and in Hong Kong, where he is based. A Mandarin speaker, he regularly defuses difficulties within international teams. “Cultural aspects amplify the problem,” he says.

Sometimes the solution can be relatively simple even in heightened circumstances. In Taiwan, at a computer parts manufacturer, he found an American boss was holding meetings with the local Taiwanese office manager in a glass-partitioned office. The whole office could see the New Yorker talking energetically and repeatedly tapping two fingers on the desk top. It looked like the Taiwanese manager was being told off.

“The office manager felt browbeaten and bullied and the local staff had rallied around him,” McFadden says. These types of conflicts can have a significant impact on productivity. Tension among workers ratcheted so high that the plant began missing its financial targets.

The answer lay partly in persuading the New Yorker to leave his office door open, so that although his gestures appeared angry everyone could hear his tone of voice was calm and understood it was a conversation between two professionals.

Language matters

Research by mediation expert Elizabeth Stokoe, professor of social interaction at Loughborough University, suggests careful selection of language is crucial.

She analysed phone conversations with potential participants. When asked ‘Would you be *willing* to take part?’ the answer was always ‘yes’.“As soon as the ‘willing’ word popped out the callers changed their position from resistance to enthusiastic uptake. To say ‘no’ to ‘willing’ would be to say ‘I’m not going to engage with this process’ and callers wanted to be seen as the good party,” explains Stokoe.

One word to avoid when apologising is ‘but’ – Steadman says placing conditions on an apology removes the positives.

Stokoe’s strategy for deflecting strife? “A first mover is the prickly colleague who says something outrageous. But if you call them out then suddenly they are the victim of you calling them out. My solution is to be super-nice, take the wind out of their sails.”

But if friction leads to feud, then it’s time to call in the peacemakers.

Says Steadman: “Mediation is very much about helping people have a conversation they’ve just not been able to have because it’s too difficult, too emotional and would get completely out of control.”

For professional feud-breakers, job satisfaction lies in following up weeks or months later to hear that former enemies are now working together calmly. Says Steadman, “Conflict turns people into someone they don’t recognise and mediation can restore them to themselves.”