

# Mediating Conflict at a Public Agency

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The director of a non-profit agency asked me to help him with a problem. He had 13 employees who were supposed to work as a team to deliver services to clients. However, the director felt, based on comments that individual team members made to him, there were a lot of interpersonal issues occurring that were causing the employees to be unhappy and not do a good job of serving the needs of their clients. The problem was so bad that many employees were not even speaking to each other. When they did speak, there was tension and anger.

To address the problem, I met individually with all 13 team members and asked about their perceptions of the problem. There were several issues they felt were problems that needed to be addressed.

The first was that all but one felt that one particular team member was a big source of the conflict. Apparently this one member yelled a lot (they called him a “blow hard” who didn’t take constructive criticism about his work performance well.) Can you guess which team member didn’t give this response? Of course, it was the alleged “blow hard” that was unable to see his role in the conflict. His answer instead was, “I don’t know what the problem is. Everyone just seems to be mad at each other.” After talking to him, I was sure he really didn’t have a clue about the problems some of his behaviors were causing!

Another problem was that the agency had just gone through some major changes due to loss of funding (public agencies have to depend on money from local, state, and federal governments to operate their organization and pay employees). Two or three employees were laid off and those who remained were asked to take on additional work duties. Unfortunately, the director had not really clarified what he wanted each person to do. So either things did not get done, or some employees were perceived as trying to do the work of someone else in order to make that person “look bad.” I asked if there were any job descriptions, and there were none.

Another significant issue was that the agency had not had any staff meetings in over a year. When organizations go through change, they need to increase the number of their meetings, not reduce them! Communication between management and teams become so important during change. People get frightened when change occurs because they don’t know if they will be able to handle the change. Worse, they feel they may be in danger of losing their jobs. People need to stay informed during each step of the change and be allowed to help in making the changes.

To try and help this group, I made two suggestions. We could try mediation or I could do some training. Mediation requires that all parties to a conflict sit down at the same table

and talk about what they feel is the source of the conflict and then brainstorm some ideas on how to resolve the problems. None of these employees wanted to sit at the same table or in the same room with the problem employee. Apparently, because this team member was a physically big man with a tendency to act out, other people were intimidated by him and felt he would retaliate in some way. For that reason, mediation wasn't the best strategy.

So instead, everyone (including the director) participated in an all-day training session, which included role plays, on how to communicate to each other about perceptions of behavior. In this way, no one person was singled out; and during the role plays, we were able to talk about what were good communication behaviors and what kind of verbal or nonverbal communication could become a source of conflict. This gave the problem employee an opportunity to learn what behaviors he may have that was causing problems. I knew this training was successful when he spoke up after a role play and said, "*Hey, I do that sometimes. I didn't realize how intimidating that can be.*" You could just see the relief on the other team members' faces when he made this announcement!

Also discussed in this training was the importance of communicating information. I asked the team to share what were some of the things they thought was causing poor communication. They shared with the director that they were unsure of what their duties were and that they needed more guidance. We discussed the need for increased meetings and job descriptions. Together, the director and staff agreed to hold weekly staff meetings. In fact, they all took out their calendars and marked down the dates of meetings for the next six months! In addition, the director asked that all employees write down what they were currently doing and submit that information to him in two weeks. He planned to meet with each individual to go over that information and discuss whether or not they were expected to do those duties. After those individual meetings, the director agreed to develop written job descriptions based on what was discussed and agreed to.

I recently checked in with this agency and was happy to learn that things were going better. They had cut down their staff meetings to just once a month, but that was appropriate since things had settled down and changes were complete. Also, everyone had well-written job description that they could refer to. And, everyone seemed to be getting along better with the person they had first classified as a "problem."