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Panel Discussion on Workplace Mediation
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Workplace Mediation & Coaching: Weaving two worlds

Welcome everyone. As the first panelist to present, I thought I would begin by talking about the approach I use in workplace disputes which combines workplace mediation and conflict management coaching.

I will talk about the difference between the two and then give you an example of how progressive organization utilize both to create a more collaborative and functioning workplace environment.

In my view, workplace mediation certainly has its place in alternative dispute resolution however it also has its limitations which I will discuss in more detail shortly. Conflict management coaching is a process that can be used to fill in where mediation ends. In other words, it fills a gap that becomes apparent after many workplace mediations.

But before I jump into what these comparisons are, I will share how I entered the world of conflict management coaching and it didn't begin in a workplace environment.

Rather, it began with stepfamilies!

As a Comprehensive Family Mediator, I have done my share of separation and divorce mediations. But as a stepmother, stepdaughter and stepsister, I had a special affinity with stepfamilies and knowing how challenging stepfamilies can be I focused my mediation practice to help these families stay together using the power of mediation.

For those of you who are mediators in this room, you can probably attest to the fact that the parties for the most part are on their best behaviour during mediation (or at least better behaviour). Well, it is no different for stepfamilies. They would come to mediation, discuss their issues and concerns, come to agreements and leave relatively happy. I even get hugs as they we say our goodbyes. Then two or three months later I would get a call to say they need more help in resolving another conflict.

I saw a pattern emerge and realized there was a gap in mediation. These couples who are in an interdependent relationship didn't have the tools to manage themselves effectively when they found themselves in a difficult conversation on their own.

They were given some communication tools before and during the mediation as I helped facilitate their discussion but mediation did not give them the time they needed to practice the skills they were being taught and most of the skills they were using during the mediation were forgotten within a few days.

Those of you in this room today who are part of a Step/Blended family understand the complexity of this family system and the challenges that come along with it!

To help these families, I started to give each of the couples independent one on one time to help them understand the conflict they were experiencing from various aspects such as the roles each played in the family and the expectations they had. I did this with conflict management coaching sessions and people utilized this process to help them prepare for a difficult discussion and they had coaching sessions during and after their private discussions.

I see workplace disputes as not being very different from stepfamily disputes. These people who spend more than half their waking hours together have interdependent relationships. When conflict occurs in the workplace it doesn't simply affect the parties involved, it can affect the entire organization financially as well as employee moral and engagement.

I have mediated a range of internal workplace disputes such as partnership, family run businesses, manager/employee and disputes amongst employees. I follow up on internal workplace mediations to see how the agreements are panning out because often what sounds like a good idea when put into practice doesn't go as smoothly as originally thought.

What I often heard was they were really happy with the outcome of the mediations but the relationship has suffered and it feels awkward. Some still have hurt feelings and don't know what to say or do to improve the situation. Others find that they feel like they are walking on eggshells when a new issue surfaces or they freeze not knowing the best way to approach the other person.

This is where conflict management coaching can help move that individual forward so they feel more confident in approaching people when conflict arises.

I will explain a few differences between workplace mediation and conflict management coaching and then I will share an example of how one company has integrated the two.

Difference #1

Conflict management coaching involves 1 on 1 private coaching

Workplace mediation involves two or more parties in joint discussion

Difference #2

Conflict management coaching is a longer process involving a number of coaching sessions either to prepare a person for mediation or to help individuals who wish to improve their communication and leadership skills during conflict. It starts by seeing what goal(s) that individual has regarding their current communication strengths, what they want to improve, how they want to improve and what do we put into place to help both of us measure their progress.

Mediation typically involves one pre-mediation session and then the joint mediation is scheduled for a specific number of hours or days depending on the complexity of the situation and parties involved. Before and during mediation, I work with the individuals to help them with their communications skills and often the parties make agreements on how they will communicate with one another after mediation sessions. However, mediation does not allow each party the ability to practising the skills associated with effective communication which means old habits of managing conflict often resurface.

Difference #3

As your conflict management coach I am your champion. I support you before/ during and after any mediation or difficult conversation. In other words - I am not impartial. I am however, impartial towards the other party involved in the dispute.

As a mediator I am impartial towards both parties in the dispute.

There are some other differences, however I think these give you a good idea of my role as a coach and as a mediator.

Although communication skills are the key to both processes, I separate my role when organizations are deciding what it is they want/need. For instance, I won't be a person's coach and then hop into the role as a mediator for that person and another party because I would not be coming from a place of neutrality.

I can however start out with mediating two or more parties and after the mediation session are completed, people choose to have conflict management coaching to work on improving their communication skills.

Now I will give you an example of weaving the two worlds of mediation and conflict management coaching and show you how it can serve your clients or your organization.

Example:

A company had requested I mediate a manager/employee dispute since it had escalated to a WorksafeBC investigation.

I conducted a pre-mediation intake with each person and then the next week we mediated for 7 hours and the parties were able to reach agreements on all of their issues.

That was a successful and tiring day!

As the HR manager and General Manager and I talked, I found out that this company will be going through some major transitions and they were concerned about the stress of their employees and how they were going to manage it.

Well, what better time than to bring up Conflict Management Coaching!

But in this case, rather than working one on one with individuals in the organization, I ran a group coaching program because these changes were coming up quick so time was of the essence. Employees ranging from warehouse workers to senior management took part and this has allowed them to learn and practice their conflict management skills together.

We have been able to show this company the areas most affected in their organization by conflict and provide additional live training session to the employees in these specific jobs and various positions.

Companies are interested in implementing mediation, coaching and training when they can be shown that it makes sense to invest their time, energy and money into something that addresses the current issues and assists workplace relationships.

This concludes my portion of the panel discussion on weaving two worlds of mediation and conflict management coaching.