The Case for Empathy – How empathy can and should be used in workplace conflict resolution

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The role of a mediator is to help parties in conflict try to resolve the conflict for themselves, in a way that best meets their needs and interests. A mediator does not impose an outcome on the parties but works with them to explore the underlying causes of conflict and their goals and interests.

The process of conflict resolution creates both the need and opportunity for parties to express their issues and fully explore their concerns. If a conflict (not just a dispute) is to be resolved, the underlying issues and interests need to be identified and explored. Parties who are in an ongoing relationship often need a chance to "vent" about their underlying issues if they are truly going to resolve the conflict. The exploration and identification of issues and concerns is a vital step in conflict resolution but the process of expressing feelings and fully exploring interests and concerns can be difficult, particularly where there is an ongoing relationship between the parties.

If parties in conflict are to be successful in identifying the sources of conflict and working through them to reach a resolution, they must have OR develop a level of trust and understanding between them. When the parties use a mediator or facilitator to assist in conflict resolution, they must build trust with that neutral third party as well.

There are many tools available to facilitators to assist parties through this process - I would argue a key tool for anyone facilitating conflict resolution, particularly in the context of an ongoing relationship, is empathy.

What is empathy?

Empathy is defined in many ways, but it is broadly understood as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Empathy is the ability to step into the shoes of another person to understand their feelings and perspective and use that understanding to guide their actions.[1]

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[1] "Six Habits of Highly Empathetic People" Roman Krznaric, November 27, 2012
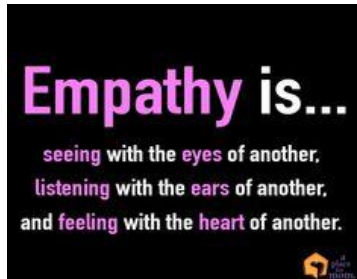
Empathy is not sympathy. Parissa Behnia, creator of the **Sixsense Empathy Model**, describes the difference. She states "*empathy worries about the drivers to how someone got to a point in time. Sympathy is me standing direclty in front of someone and just judging only what I see in front of me. Sympathy does not care about the steps someone took to get to that point -it only cares about the outcome in the moment. Empathy understands the outcome and how you got there.*"[2]

There are different types of empathy. Daniel Coleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, identifies three types of empathy: **Cognitive, Compassionate and Emotional.** Emotional empathy lets you feel what the other person feels. Compassionate empathy allows you to understand their and sharing their feelings and experiences. Cognitive empathy allows you to understand how a person thinks and feels.

According to Coleman, "***cognitive empathy" as "simply knowing how the other person feels and what they might be thinking… sometimes called perspective-taking."*** This type of empathy can be a useful and important tool in conflict management and resolution, particularly where there is an ongoing relationship such as in the workplace.

Empathy is recognized as an importance workplace value

According to the **2019 Businessolver State of Workplace Empathy Study**, 90% of all employees believe that empathy is important workpalce value. The report also found that 82% of employees report that they would consider leaving their employer to join a more empathetic workplace.

The Study concluded that "to succeed in today's highly competitive employment market, employers must make empathy not just priority, but a foundational value that is infused throughout the entire organizational culture."

There is a growing body of literature explaining how empathy is applied in leadership, and there are lessons that can be applied to to help parties work through conflict. In her 2019 book, *The Empathy Edge,* author Maria Ross sets out seven ways to train yourself to develop empathy to lead more effectively. Many of the skills and traits of empathetic leadership are equally useful in approaching conflict with empathy, including the ability to:

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[2] Quoted in *The Empathy Edge* (2019) Maria Ross

- **Practice Presence –** slow down, avoid distractions and ready yourself to consider others' perspectives
- **Listen More, Stay Humble** – use restraint when listening to other people's experiences, stories, and perspectives without offering opinion
- **Be Curious** – be eager to learn about the views of others and stay open to new perspectives
- **Explore with Your Imagination**- develop an understanding of diverse experiences and world views
- **Find Common Ground**- look for ways to connect including shared interests and goals

How do we find common ground using empathy?

Empathy in conflict resolution is really about the ability to **find common ground**. While empathy allows you to put yourself in someone else's shoes, Ross notes that empathy also extends to understanding where your circumstances may overlap. In conflict, empathy can help parties see where their interests and/or goals overlap, allowing them to come to a resolution.

Parties in conflict should use empathy to embrace, not avoid, disagreement and find common ground by:

- working towards finding common principles that guide both of you
- focusing on areas of agreement
- getting to their core truth
- focusing more on intent
- finding ways to help others 'save face'
- embracing disagreement, consider the merits and challenges raised by others as you work towards resolution
- thinking in terms of "yes…and" not "yes…but"

Today's workplaces face new and emerging challenges from increased diversity of perspectives in the workforce, the heightened impact of technology, increased virtual and mobile work increases and mounting external pressures and influences – including a global pandemic.

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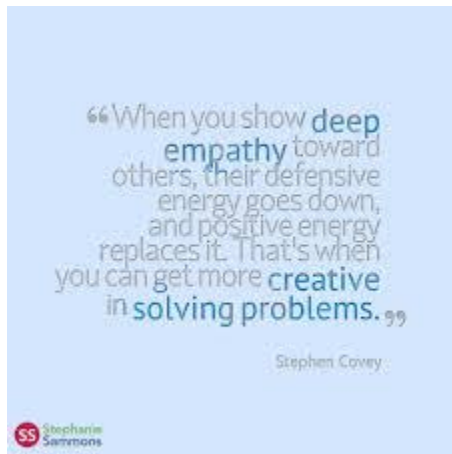
Most employers understand the need to address and manage the psychological health and safety of their employees, but this awareness should apply not only to day-to-day work but also to the way that conflict and disputes in the workplace are managed and resolved.

Traditional approaches to workplace conflict are often power-based and closed minded, with empathy having little if any role. As with leadership, the use of empathy in conflict resolution can foster more successful outcomes and healthy, more productive workplace relationships. According to Mary-Frances Winters, founder and president of the diversity, equity, and inclusion firm Winters Group, "as we develop the capacity for empathy for one another, our ability to trust each other increases." In her book, *We Can't Talk about That at Work*, Winters argues that "reciprocal empathy" – the ability to know what it is like to be the other person – is key to building trusting relationships.

What role can empathy play in conflict management and resolution?

While empathy is key to good leadership, it can also play an important role in how organizations manage and resolve conflict, allowing them to function more effectively. We know that each person in a conflict brings their own perspective, informed by their own values, experiences, and beliefs. Most people form an entrenched position which is highly subjective and often distorted and misinformed. Parties in conflict generally assume and maintain the position that the other party is at fault. Conflict cannot be resolved unless each party is able to challenge their position. This requires active listening and the ability to consider the issues in dipsute from the perspective of the other party.

When parties are in conflict, empathy can give them the willingness and ability to see, understand and to some degree feel the other party's perspective, and to use that information in working towards resolution.

Empathy – Trust – Resolution

For mediation to be effective and lead the parties to resolution, the parties must build trust with the mediator. Empathy can and should be used by mediators to help build that trust. It is not helpful for a mediator to be sympathetic, and a display of sympathy to one party may create an apprehension of bias by the other, undermining the ability of the mediator to maintain the necessary neutrality. Empathy allows the mediator to understand the conflict from the point of view of each party without creating a perception of bias towards one position or the other.

An effective mediator will encourage the use of empathy as the parties develop an understanding the conflict and its underlying issues, the needs of the other party as well as their own, and hopefully develop a willingness to come to a fair resolution.

In the end, a mediator's task is to help the parties bring their issues and interests to the surface, understand the positions and interests of the other party, and work towards resolution. Addressing underlying issues can be the difference between conflict management and resolution and merely resolving the immediate dispute at hand. As noted in **The Mediator's Handbook**, "when people have a chance to talk and vent about their conflict issues, they are ready to hear the other party speak as they will feel less threatened and will be able to think cognitively. This paves the way for an effective and sustainable resolution to be found."[3]

One final note – empathy is not weakness. It may go without saying but historically many people saw empahty as a sign of weakness. Thankfully, attitudes are evolving and empathy is being recognized as a leadership strength, and a key to healthy, respectful, productive relationships and organizations.

Hulton Workplace Resolutions offers a range of conflict management and resolution services. We can support managers and HR professionals to develop and implement stronger conflict resolution skills to address conflict where and when it happens.

Find us at: www.hultonworkplaceresolutions.ca

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[3] O'Sullivan, Gerry *The Mediator's Toolkit (*2018) New Society Publishers