

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

Notes

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THE COOPERATIVE RESOLUTION PROGRAM

Introduction

In today's fast-paced society, we are all trying to do as much as we can, both professionally and personally, without sacrificing quality. However, daily conflicts may prevent us from achieving our goals.

In the workplace, conflicts may stem from a lack of communication, misperceptions, or different expectations. Conflicts may also ignite feelings which may override reasonable interactions necessary to resolve a particular problem. We need to be cautious when feelings are strong.

It is how we deal with conflict that can make all the difference. If we were to look upon conflict as an opportunity to learn and grow, resolution would be easier to come by. Having an understanding of how someone sees and feels about an issue would certainly be valuable in addressing future conflicts.

Communication breakdown and conflict in the workplace often lead to negative consequences, such as poor morale, disciplinary problems, productivity problems, and formal grievances and complaints.

The Cooperative Resolution Program (CRP) is a tool that can help address conflicts by improving communication and working relationships. The result is a healthier work environment.

The program has two functions. First, we provide conflict management training upon request which we can modify to meet your specific issues/concerns. The training consists of identifying different working styles, identifying and discussing conflict management styles, and improving communication.

Second, we can provide mediation services. Mediation is a completely voluntary and confidential process that takes place in a nonadversarial setting. The mediator, as a neutral third party, does not serve to judge who is right or wrong or to make decisions but

facilitates the creation of a mutual understanding between the participants that creates a format on how to deal with future conflicts.

We encourage you to access our website, www.afm.ars.usda.gov/programs/coopres, for more details or contact us at coopres@ars.usda.gov to address any questions or concerns.

In this issue of Employee Relations Notes, we will present another method of communicating with employees . . . mediation.

What is mediation?

Mediation is a problem-solving process that focuses on the future. It is a process designed to assist individuals experiencing conflict with creating a mutually-satisfactory resolution of their differences before they get to the point of filing grievances and complaints. It is also effective in improving communication and building relationships. Mediation differs from litigation in that it is not designed to determine who is right or wrong. In mediation, the parties work to create their own agreement with the assistance of the mediator. Unlike litigation, where a third party imposes a decision, nothing is decided in mediation unless all parties agree to the terms. Mediation is a confidential process.

Why should a supervisor encourage use of mediation?

- Mediation offers parties an opportunity to communicate directly in a nonthreatening forum.
- Mediation offers a private place available to discuss issues.
- Emotional involvement in a conflict can cloud one's ability to think creatively and objectively; mediation can help parties move beyond the barriers

created by these emotions.

- Mediation can be healing. It offers an opportunity for participants to face each other and tell each other how the conflict has affected them personally; how they feel; how they have been hurt.

- Mediation is timely, cost effective, and efficient. Formal processes are lengthy, expensive, and may have an adverse affect on the relationship, the workplace, and the Agency as a whole.

Mediation seeks to find a workable solution to an issue rather than focusing on blame. If we can get the issue out on the table at the earliest possible stage (before sides are taken and lines are drawn), resolution to a situation is more likely to occur. As time passes and emotions build, we can see situations fester until there is a total breakdown in communication. Mediation will save all of us time, expense, and emotional distress from living with unsolved conflict in the workplace.

Who is a mediator?

A mediator is an unbiased, neutral third party who intervenes to assist parties in conflict. A mediator is someone who is trained in mediation skills and has no direct authority to impose a decision on the parties but assists in building an improved understanding of the situation, and how to jointly move into the future. We have a cadre of trained employees in various scientific and administrative positions in our Agency. These employees serve and support the CRP as co-lateral duty mediators.

What is the process?

Mediation is a multi-stage process designed to meet the needs of the participants. Jointly, it is an opportunity for both parties to state the issues as they see them. The mediator may meet with each party separately. Parties then come back together to begin to develop options or steps they may each take to resolve the issues.

How long does the mediation process take?

Once an individual contacts our office and indicates a willingness to engage in mediation, we contact the other party to gain concurrence within

48 hours. If both parties are willing to participate in mediation, our office arranges for a mediator and a facility at the first available timeframe to meet all parties schedules. Mediations are held away from the general workplace to ensure confidentiality. No records are kept other than the agreement. No records are put in an employee's or supervisor's personnel file. A mediation session may be from 2 to 3 hours to an all-day session depending on the complexity of the issues to be discussed.

Quality of communication is key

As a supervisor, communication is paramount. Good communication from a listener's perspective involves: *active listening, asking questions, paraphrasing, providing feedback, and empathizing*. It is important to be actively engaged when a person is speaking and indicating by an occasional sincere head nod or an "uh-huh." Let the person know that you heard what was said by paraphrasing (ex., What I heard you say. . .). To get clarification, ask open-ended questions. Be specific and use a positive approach. Where appropriate, provide some feedback by describing specific observations of a particular concern. Then allow the other party to respond. Continue by offering suggestions and expressing support. Remember, empathizing is identifying and understanding a person's feelings, situations, and motives. It does not mean that you agree.

Often it is how we say something and not what we say. Be aware of your tone of voice. Remember to use "I" language and be specific. Being open-minded and flexible in your approach provides an avenue for creative solutions.

In summary, it is important that we take the time to communicate. Frequent use of recent technologies (i.e., e-mail) have put even more pressure on personal communication and understanding. Conflict is inevitable. What makes conflict a problem is how we react to it. Turning conflict into collaboration ensures everyone wins.