

Neutral Conflict Resolution

One university's approach to helping employees address and resolve interpersonal conflict at the ground floor

By Dimples Smith and Daniel Griffith

Think about the many different work styles, personality types, viewpoints and temperaments in your organization. Now add to that mix competing ideas, workplace stress, ego and pride, and it's easy to see how coworkers can butt heads. While many workplace disagreements are either intentionally resolved or simply fizzle out on their own over time, others can simmer for days, weeks, months ... even years. These unresolved conflicts often negatively affect productivity, morale and performance — not only for the individuals directly involved, but also for their coworkers, teams and colleagues.

In an effort to help employees address interpersonal conflict in a timely and productive manner, Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) implemented an informal, mediated conflict resolution process.

What It Is (and What It Isn't)

IPFW's neutral conflict resolution (NCR) program, created by and housed in the department of human resources and office of institutional equity (HR-OIE), is an avenue through which work-related disputes, differences and concerns can be resolved at the lowest and least invasive level. The program is designed to address issues including personality conflicts, long-standing disagreements, unprofessional conduct and the like in a controlled, structured, mediated setting.

NCR is not a substitute for IPFW's formal grievance process. Complaints including academic misconduct, allegations of fraud, physical or sexual assault, criminal behavior, discrimination, gross misconduct, sexual harassment, retaliation and other issues with potential legal ramifications cannot be addressed through the neutral conflict resolution program.

Why the Need

Several factors contributed to IPFW working to expand how workplace relationship issues were resolved. On the horizon was a revised staff grievance policy, which would

change how supervisor/employee disagreements and conflict were addressed and resolved. Renamed "alternative dispute resolution," the policy incorporated a framework of mediation as the first resolution step. The university also combined its HR and office of institutional equity units, revealing further the need to improve the mechanisms through which employees could resolve workplace disagreements.

A common perception among employees appeared to be that the only way to resolve a work-related disagreement was through the grievance process or the university's formal complaint process. Rightfully designed so that employees have a means through which issues that may have deeper implications can be addressed, these processes also involve a number of university resources, are time-driven, result in outcomes directed by the guidelines established under the policies and, for complaints returned unfounded, provide few avenues for repairing the work relationship. Additionally, many concerns vetted through these processes were disagreements that could have been better served had there been another resolution avenue.

To counter perceptions and in the interest of improving employee talent, the university implemented the neutral conflict resolution program. It was important for participation to be voluntary, confidential and for the outcome to rest in the hands of the parties. Providing a means where employees can work together to resolve concerns at the least invasive level increases the likelihood of ownership and accountability, as the participants themselves create the resolution. Helping employees work through workplace disagreements in a healthy way serves to further support an organizational culture of positive, collaborative work relationships.

Who Mediates?

Currently, 18 individuals at IPFW are designated as neutral conflict resolution representatives. These individuals volunteer their time and perform the role of NCR

representative in addition to their regular job duties. The role of the NCR representative is to facilitate and mediate — to help parties with the process of communicating and decision making so they can jointly explore and reconcile their differences. Representatives do not weigh in on substantive matters or advocate for any particular solution. They don't decide who is right or wrong, and they don't have the authority to impose a solution, resolution or decision on the parties.

How Are Mediators Qualified?

Before an individual can be designated as an NCR representative, he or she receives 40 hours of training provided by HR-OIE. This same training has been offered for many years at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) to address a similar need on that campus for informal mediation processes. The training includes a combination of instruction on mediation concepts, principles, skills and techniques and practice in role-plays to stimulate actual conflict and communication challenges that mediators might face. Though loosely modeled after training programs to qualify mediators in the legal system, IPFW/IUPUI training focuses on a facilitative model that teaches trainees to facilitate and support improved communication and relationship building among disputing parties (whereas training in the legal setting is more limited to mediating purely transactional outcomes).


Scheduled over two separate weeks (three days during one week and two days a couple of weeks later) to better accommodate participants' work schedules, no apologies are made for the length and intensity of the program. HR-OIE wants to ensure its mediators are deeply grounded and exposed to a broad range of potential mediation experiences before going into the field to help others resolve their conflicts. NCR representatives must also commit to serve in the role for two years and to engage in continued professional development in the areas of facilitation, mediation and conflict resolution.

How the Neutral Conflict Resolution Program Works

Employees initiate the neutral conflict resolution process by filling out a request form on the HR-OIE website. Once the request is received, and both parties involved agree to have the issue heard, HR will assign an NCR representative. The representative is required to reach out to the parties within three days of being assigned the case.

All parties involved must sign an agreement before the NCR process begins. The NCR representative then arranges and conducts individual meetings with the parties involved and arranges and conducts the NCR meeting(s). After the final meeting, the NCR representative provides a summary of the outcome as well as any signed agreements to HR-OIE. At the end of the process, all parties involved are asked to complete a confidential survey designed to gather information about the general nature of the dispute, whether a settlement was reached, and overall satisfaction with the process and with the NCR representative.

How It Helps

Neutral conflict resolution is an informal, structured, safe, equitable way to address interpersonal conflict at the lowest level, before it has a chance to escalate or to fester. This type of approach enables affected parties to control the outcome, helps employees develop problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills, improves communication, and helps preserve, repair and improve work relationships. NCR allows for creative engagement, empowers each party to create a mutually beneficial solution and helps facilitate understanding and appreciation of other perspectives. 

For additional resources on neutral conflict resolution and other informal conflict resolution approaches, visit the CUPA-HR Knowledge Center (www.cupahr.org/knowledgecenter).

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