

## **Workplace mediation case study**

### **Background**

Alison and Jim were not getting on. They led a small team in a remote office in the Scottish Highlands, head office was far away in Aberdeen. When Alison, the team manager, was seconded to Head Office for a few months, Jim stepped up to lead the team while she was away. During Alison's absence there were lots of issues with the team and staff raised complaints about both Alison and Jim. An investigation was launched which concluded that the accusations were unfounded.

Jim felt unsupported by Alison, he believed Alison thought he was no good at his job and was withholding information from him. Other staff members told Jim that Alison was undermining him, and not treating him with respect behind his back.

Alison found it hard to communicate with Jim. He kept himself to himself, didn't let her know when he went offsite, didn't seem to do tasks. She was anxious about holding him accountable for tasks, since she felt he became defensive when challenged. She believed that Jim had complained to Head Office about her. She felt betrayed and didn't trust him.

Alison and Jim were barely speaking to one another. This affected the functioning of their office. The Director came to speak with them both, when Alison returned, to help them rebuild their working relationship. HR listened to both parties and other staff members, and put in more active line manager support for Alison together with new structures and procedures to aid internal communication eg task logs and handover notes.

But neither Alison nor Jim felt comfortable at work and they did not trust each other. There was no way that they could lead the team whilst they were both feeling so anxious and uncomfortable. Both the senior manager and members of the HR team had been involved in listening to the staff complaints and in the investigation, so it was felt that independent mediation was required. HR could see that neither individual was to blame and that they really needed to work together and move on. HR asked Rowan Consultancy to provide workplace mediation to improve the working relationship between Alison and Jim.

### **The Mediation process**

First I met with Alison and Jim individually. Jim was desperate for a solution, he felt isolated and excluded at work, which was affecting his mental wellbeing. Alison didn't know what problem Jim had with her, she thought she treated him fairly but was annoyed that Jim didn't communicate

much or respond well. Both were convinced that the other disliked them, wanted them out of their job, and was deliberately making life unpleasant for them at work.

After the initial meetings, I wasn't sure whether they would both be willing to show any vulnerability by revealing their true thoughts and interpretations of each other's behaviour and whether they would be willing to hear the other person's point of view. After all, they had been entrenched in their own perception of reality for several months now.

I asked Alison and Jim to each prepare a statement saying how they saw their working relationship and how they would like it to be. I encouraged them to include anything they appreciated about each other and the impact this situation was having on them personally.

A week later we met as a three, in a neutral venue. I outlined the ground rules, and they each made their opening statements. Then we teased out the key issues, encouraging Jim and Alison to state their understanding of the other person's viewpoint. I admired that they were both able to own their own assumptions and imagine themselves in the other person's shoes and to admit that perhaps their own behaviour had some contribution to the current impasse. This didn't come easily – a mediation cannot be rushed, since it takes time to rebuild trust.

Result! Alison and Jim went through each of the issues that they had identified, and I supported them to co-create solutions. They were beginning to talk directly to one another now, rather than talking via me. They were also making more eye contact. These were good signs that rapport and trust were starting to be established. As ever, communication and trust were the key issues. I was able to spot some patterns of behaviour during the mediation, which they demonstrated at work – so we had live examples to look at and they could practice changing these behaviours during the mediation eg not interrupting, saying when they felt shut down, noticing when they felt attacked and were reacting defensively.

At the follow-up meeting 2 months later, I was delighted to hear from Jim and Alison that they were now working together, presenting a united front to team members and communicating with one another. They both said the mediation meeting had been a turning point, it was recognising each other's good intentions and beginning to rebuild the trust between them that had helped, as much as the actual mediation agreement points.

### **Key factors for success**

- The willingness of both parties to come to mediation, open to hearing the other person's point of view and to honestly sharing their own.

- The knowledge that they had to work together in future.
- Their shared commitment to making the branch function well.
- The organisation's commitment to supporting the branch by creating procedures to address some of the needs revealed by the investigation and interviews prior to mediation. This left the way clear for mediation to focus on improving the working relationship.
- The skills of the mediator in creating sufficient trust for the 2 parties to speak honestly and constructively to challenge their assumptions about each other's' behaviours and intentions and to co-create a way forward.